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Fodor's 'Guilty Passions': Representation as Hume's Ideas.

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Abstract

Jerry Fodor (1985) has joked that philosophers have always been prone to eccentric worries such as an anxiety about the existence of tables and chairs, but with the issue of mental representation they have found a problem that is real and crucial for progress in the cognitive sciences. However, given Fodor's 'methodological solipsism' of computational symbols and their 'formality condition', Jackendoff (1992) has facetiously asked "Why, if our understanding has no direct access to the real world, aren't we always bumping into things?" It is no accident that Jackendoff's parody recalls Samuel Johnson's famous retort to Berkeley's "ingenious sophistry" by kicking a stone. There is an acute irony in the fact that cognitive science has simply rediscovered the philosophers' traditional worry about tables and chairs. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Fodor's latest book *Hume Variations* endorses the classical Empiricist 'idea' idea of Locke, Berkeley and Hume. The paper explores Fodor's concept of ideas as mental objects in relation to its historical antecedents.

Precursors

For some time, Fodor (1978, 1998) has been making hints *en passant* comparing his favored theory of mind with that of early modern Empiricist philosophers. For example, in his *Concepts*, he said "To a first approximation ... the idea that there are mental representations is the idea that there are Ideas *minus* the idea that Ideas are images." "Hume taught that mental states are relations to mental representations, and so too does RTM" (Fodor 1998, p. 8,9). In this light, it is hardly surprising that modern problems might be simply the reinvention of old problems in a new guise. Now, with his *Hume Variations* (2003), Fodor has come out of the closet, admitting to having harbored something like a "guilty passion" for Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. Fodor's enthusiasm for Hume is based on his view that Hume's account of the mind "seems, in a number of respects, to anticipate the one that informs current work in cognitive science" (p. 2). Indeed, Fodor suggests "Hume's *Treatise* is the foundational document of cognitive science: it made explicit, for the first time, the project of constructing an empirical psychology on the basis of a representational theory of the mind; in effect, on the basis of the Theory of Ideas" (p. 134). More specifically, Fodor says, "it remains fully plausible that cognitive processes are constituted by causal interactions among mental representations, that is, among semantically evaluable mental particulars" (p. 135). Translated, this means an 'atomistic' account of concepts, of which he says, "To be sure, on this view, we're not after all so far from billiard balls" (p. 137). Fodor adds, "Either that, or we really are entirely in the dark". Indeed, there are

ample grounds to wonder about both the degree of current illumination and also Fodor's history.

Independently of his earlier *obiter dicta*, Fodor's formulations have always been evocative of traditional accounts of 'ideas' as the 'direct objects' of perception and understanding. This is the compelling conception according to which we don't perceive the objects of the world directly, but only indirectly as mediated by our mental representations or ideas of them. Fodor's analysis of 'propositional attitudes' as "relations between organisms and internal representations" has always suggested a tripartite, 'object' conception of concepts common to traditional and contemporary representative theories (Bechtel 1998, Slezak 2002):

world representation mind

Fodor protests that his view is a minority opinion but the problematic tripartite structure has always been dominant (see von Eckardt 1993, Slezak 2002), despite the periodic complaints of 'pragmatists', and 'direct perception' advocates such as Hume's critic Thomas Reid and his more recent counterparts such as Hilary Putnam (2000).

Fodor suggests that Hume's account not only anticipates current work in cognitive science but "thinking seriously about our theory of mind in relation to Hume's might help with the project" (p.2). Thus, Fodor's small book may be seen as an extended historical footnote or appendix to earlier work, particularly his *Concepts* (1998). By 'outing' himself as adherent of the classical 'idea' idea, Fodor illustrates an important approach to theorizing in cognitive science.

With some important differences, Fodor's enterprise shares its approach and purpose with Chomsky's (1966) neglected *Cartesian Linguistics* which sought to understand the body of theoretical insight of the premodern period, to appraise their contemporary relevance and to find ways to exploit them for advancing contemporary inquiry. For his part, Chomsky offered no explicit analysis of the relation of Cartesian linguistics to current work on the grounds that the modern reader should have little difficulty in drawing these connections for himself (1966, p. 2). Chomsky was undoubtedly too optimistic in this regard, perhaps contributing to the neglect of this important contribution to both classical scholarship and contemporary cognitive science. By contrast, Fodor's book is weighted in the opposite direction with primary focus upon current theories of the mind.

As Fodor points out, Hume has suffered from a procrustean hindsight according to which most of what he

took to be important about his own philosophy has been dismissed as not philosophy at all, but empirical psychology (p. 5). As Fodor notes wryly, "Mastering the science of human nature doesn't sound a lot like analyzing concepts" (p. 5). The changed philosophical climate today has more or less effaced the distinction between philosophical inquiry and science, thereby permitting us to see Hume in a clearer light.

Of course, Fodor chooses Hume for this exercise because Hume "holds a fairly rudimentary and straightforward version of the sort of cognitive psychology that interests me" (p. 2). That is, Fodor has a partisan rather than purely exegetical purpose - namely, to use Hume as a vehicle for advertising the virtues of his own theory of mental representation. As far as it goes, this is an important and interesting exercise - not least, because the parallels and divergences help us to get a clearer picture of Fodor's own significant position on issues central to cognitive science today.

Fodor's book reveals something of the mutually illuminating connections between the disjoint literatures of cognitive science and the history of early modern philosophy. However, Fodor is not vindicated simply because he was anticipated by Hume. The 'Whig' approach to history cuts both ways, and Hume's neglected critic Reid derives a renewed interest precisely because of Fodor's project and its partisanship. Reid gets short shrift from Fodor, relegated with other 'pragmatists', direct-realists and Wittgensteinians to dismissive footnotes. However, a *Reid Variations* would tell a more compelling alternative story than Fodor allows.

As Fodor notes, Hume's representative Theory of Ideas (TOI) was itself derived from Descartes. Consequently, throughout the book Fodor refers to the doctrine he defends as 'Cartesian' though in this case the adjective is intended to modify 'representationalism' and not the more usual 'dualism'. However, Hume's conception of this representationalism was, in fact, closer to Malebranche's version than Descartes's own. Though a follower of Descartes, Malebranche held a distinctive and highly problematic conception of ideas as objects in the mind of God. Indeed, Descartes shared the 'pragmatism' and 'direct realism' of Malebranche's critic Arnauld and later Reid - the very doctrine that Fodor combats as "a main concern throughout this book" (p. 12). Fodor characterizes this pragmatist doctrine as "the defining catastrophe of analytic philosophy of language and philosophy of mind in the last half of the twentieth century" (p. 73,4). Accordingly, insisting on such issues of provenance and tracing the genealogy of ideas is no mere antiquarian pedantry or exegetical nicety. If we take Fodor's enterprise seriously, on his own account and example, the historical parallels can be very instructive about our current theoretical problems. In particular, the celebrated Malebranche-Arnauld debate and its subsequent re-enactments were anticipations of Fodor's polemic with his critics today. By focusing on Hume alone, Fodor obscures this broader picture, but the pattern of

recurrence is a striking fact whose significance deserves to be understood.

Curious & Melancholy Fact?

Despite Fodor's unfailing optimism, there is a kind of recurrence which deserves attention because it is a manifestation of deeper, and therefore specially illuminating, causes, - a chronic malaise that is symptomatic of deep pathology. Thus, Yolton (1984, p. 6) has noted that the burning question among philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is that of "objects present to the mind" - precisely Fodor's question of "concept possession" central to the recent book and his earlier *Concepts* (1998). Fodor suggests that in the intervening period since Hume the theory of ideas "seems to have made some modest progress" while acknowledging that it is, "to be sure, more modest than some have advertised" (p. 157). Although relegated to footnotes in Fodor's book, modern counterparts of Hume's critics are also prominent among leading theorists today. This looks a lot less like progress, however modest, than Fodor suggests. Thus, Putnam (2000) has recently defended Reid's "natural realism" and he also cites John Austin who, significantly, invokes yet earlier writers saying: "It is a curious and in some ways rather melancholy fact that the relative positions of Price and Ayer at this point turn out to be exactly the same as the relative positions of Locke and Berkeley, or Hume and Kant." (Austin 1962, p. 61)

In a riposte to Putnam (2000), Fodor (2000) asserts bluntly, "In fact, there is no direct realist theory of perception (or of anything else that's mental)". However, Fodor ignores Putnam's concern about representations as "interface" between mind and world, though this has been the classical source of discomfort about the 'veil of ideas' central to the Humean conception. Thus, Putnam and Reid are grouped with Gibson and McDowell as among those who "reject RTM entirely" in the sense that they hold "perception isn't mediated by mental representations." Fodor adds that this flies in the face of the evidence from the success of modern psychology. Referring specifically to Reid, Fodor suggests "but for the notion of mental representation, much of what the mind does would be miraculous. The miracle theory of mind is the natural alternative to the representational theory of mind" (Fodor 2000). Fodor's extravagant humour makes it hard to tell whether he is just exaggerating for effect or plain wrong in this characterization of the Reid/Putnam view. Of course, there have been accounts purporting to deny representations altogether (Brooks 1991, Freeman and Skarda 1990, Clark and Toribio 1994, Greeno 1989, van Gelder, 1998). However, even these views are not plausibly seen as a return to something like behaviorism since, strictly speaking, they do not reject internal representations at all (see Markman and Dietrich 2000). For his part, Putnam makes the point explicitly, seeking "to distinguish carefully between the activity of "representation" (as something in which we engage) and the idea of a "representation" as an *interface* between ourselves and what we think about, and to

understand that giving up the idea of representations as interfaces requiring a “semantics” is not the same thing as giving up on the whole idea of representation” (Putnam 2000, p. 59). Thus, Fodor’s appears to miss the more subtle views (not to mention explicit texts) which do not deny representations as such but only a certain notoriously problematic conception of them as mental objects with truth values. Furthermore, as Greco (1995) notes, “it is clear that Reid does not deny the existence of ideas if ideas are thought of as operations or acts of thought. Rather, Reid objects only to ideas as mental entities distinct from any operation or act” (1995, p. 283).

Jerry-mandering?

Fodor reproaches Putnam and cites Marr’s (1982) research as exemplary proof of the representational pudding. However, Marr’s differential equations, zero crossings and other formalisms are not obviously the widely individuated, semantically evaluable mental particulars that Fodor takes to be characteristic of representations. Marr is undoubtedly a counter-example to any theory that would deny representations altogether, but fails to address the concern with ‘object’ theories of Hume and Fodor. Thus, Fodor’s animadversions against miraculous theories are beside the point since the “direct” theories of interest are also “indirect” in Fodor’s uncontroversial sense, namely, in positing some internal, causal processes which are responsible for, and in this sense ‘mediate’, perception, belief and action. This way of putting the point will be agreed on all sides. Neither Putnam nor Reid would demur from this way of ‘jerry-mandering’ the issue since everyone is an indirect representationalist in this sense.

Granny & the Golden Mountain

Fodor’s hard-core *Malebranchisme* is further confirmed and illuminated by his un-selfconscious use of the most venerable argument for ideas as mediating objects of perception: Fodor asks how he could think about his Granny if he is in New York and she is in Ohio. Or, “How can I be in an unmediated relation to Ebbets Field (alas long since demolished); or to my erstwhile dentist, who passed away a year ago in August?” (Fodor 2000). This is, of course, just the notorious Argument from Illusion, and the rhetorical force of Fodor’s question relies upon the remoteness or non-existence of things we are supposed to be in a problematic “direct” relation to. Malebranche, too, remarks “it often happens that we perceive things that do not exist, and that even have never existed - thus our mind often has real ideas of things that have never existed. When, for example, a man imagines a golden mountain, it is absolutely necessary that the idea of this mountain really be present to his mind” (1712, p. 217). The classical conclusion, of course, is that we must be in a direct relation with something else - namely, an image, sense datum or ‘idea’. However, the “directness” of veridical perception (or memory) is not so easily defeated in this manner, since it need not rely on some occult relation to its objects as Fodor suggests. Of course, it is not obvious that Fodor’s causal theory is any better able to deal with distant or non-existent objects of

thought, as Putnam has pointed out. Conceptual or inferential role theories offer an alternative conception in the spirit of Arnauld and Reid. Moreover, as just noted, both direct and indirect theories of perception are equally committed to causal intermediaries which will explain Fodor’s relation to Ebbets Field, his granny and his late dentist.

Fodor’s deployment of what is in effect the Argument from Illusion suggests that he may be open to the kind of charge Putnam makes against Dummett, namely, “that his picture ... is closer to the ‘cognitive science’ version of the Cartesian cum materialist picture than he himself may realize” (Putnam 2000, p. 58). By this Putnam means the ‘Cartesian Theatre’ conception minus dualism that Dennett, too, has characterized as ‘Cartesian Materialism’. Despite its centrality in the tradition of ideas, Fodor nowhere attempts to escape or even address this potential difficulty, perhaps on the grounds that modern computational, symbolic accounts of representation are automatically immune from the objection. On the contrary, however, statements by Newell (1986, p.33) and others articulating the foundational symbol-system paradigm characteristically assimilate external and internal symbols in such a way as to encourage just such suspicions (see also Bechtel 1998, Lloyd 2003). It is striking that the earliest complaints in the 17th century were precisely about taking things outside the mind as a model for the things inside (Slezak 2002).

Why God Bothered

There is particular irony in the fact that the problem for resembling ideas may be, at a deeper level, the problem shared by Fodor’s RTM as well. It is not only resemblance that creates difficulties for ideas or representations. Another manifestation of the same problem may be an ‘externalist’ conception of representations as semantically evaluable - the claim that mental processes tend to preserve semantic properties like truth. Fodor (1994, p. 9) has said that this is “the most important fact we know about minds; no doubt it’s why God bothered to give us any” (1994, p. 9). However, Fodor has seen a dilemma arising from the fact that mental content doesn’t appear to supervene on mental processes and, therefore, perhaps “semantics isn’t part of psychology” (Fodor 1994, p. 38). This dilemma seems to arise from the fact that semantic evaluability of representations, or old-fashioned ‘veridicality’ of ideas, like resemblance, depends on being able to make a comparison between ideas and what they purportedly refer to. In Berkeley’s idealist response to this problem we can see the precursor and analog to Fodor’s (1980) methodological solipsism. In view of these parallels, it is striking, though perhaps not surprising, that Fodor (1994) sees a deep puzzle about how misrepresentation could arise if any causal or correlational theory were true. I have suggested (Slezak 2002, 2004) that the modern problem of misrepresentation is a unnoticed variant of the classical ‘Argument from Illusion’ and so it should not be surprising that we saw Fodor give an explicit endorsement to just this form of

argument. Fodor argues that if ideas are caused directly by external objects, we can't have misrepresentations (i.e. illusions), whereas the classical argument concludes from the fact that we have illusions, our ideas can't be directly caused by external objects.

In this regard, Fodor's latest discussions raise questions that were central to his seminal book *The Language of Thought* (1975). Dennett (1977) noted:

Hume wisely shunned the notion of an inner self that would intelligently manipulate the ideas and impressions, but this left him with the necessity of getting the ideas to 'think for themselves'. ... Fodor's analogous problem is to get the internal representations to 'understand themselves' ... If there is any future for internal systems of representation it will not be for languages of thought that 'represent our beliefs to us', except in the most strained sense. (Dennett 1977, p. 274, 5)

Fodor acknowledges that Putnam is aware that nowadays representational theories are formulated so that there is no "user" or exempt agent as undischarged homunculus, but suggests that he fails to acknowledge that perception is direct under these accounts. Fodor asserts that, like telephone conversations with his wife, perception is mediated in all sorts of ways, but "still, it is my wife that I talk to". However, it is here that we see where the debate seems to have become derailed. Direct realists would entirely agree with Fodor's way of making this last point. It is emphatically not the "mediation" of causal processes in all sorts of ways that constitutes the potential problem for representational theories. The problem arises only from *some* of the ways that the mediating causal processes may be conceived. For example, it is not their mediation as such that makes pictures problematic as internal representations subserving imagery. Fodor's account of what makes perception (or talking on the telephone) "direct" is exactly the kind that Putnam, Austin and Reid, *inter alia*, would endorse.

Gallstones or Headaches?

Fodor suggests that until recently it was generally supposed that explaining having a concept is dependent on explaining what a concept is. That is, the explanation of concept possession should be parasitic on the explanation of concept individuation (Fodor 1998, p. 2). Fodor laments the reversal of this assumption about priority and the direction of explanatory dependence. Fodor's particular target in *Hume Variations* is the one identified in *Concepts*, namely, pragmatists and dispositionalists who hold that having a concept is a matter of some kind of capacity, a matter of what you are able to do as a kind of epistemic 'know how' (Fodor 1998, p. 3). Of particular concern for Fodor, and the reason for Hume's appeal, is their shared opposition to such theories:

... an account that renders having concepts as having capacities is intended to preclude and account that renders concepts as species of mental particulars: capacities aren't kinds

of *things*; a fortiori, they aren't kinds of *mental* things. (Fodor 1998, p. 3)

Thus, Fodor insisted that "understanding what a thing is, is invariably prior to understanding how we know what it is" (1998, p. 5). He says "epistemic capacities don't *constitute* concepts, but merely *presuppose* them." (p. 20).

It is worth remarking that Yolton (2000) notes that the "pervasive notion" throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been that of "presence to the mind" - precisely Fodor's question of concept possession.

Thus, Fodor takes it to be a truism about the possession conditions for concepts that "If concept tokens are mental particulars, then having a concept is being in a relation to a mental particular" (1998, p. 3 fn 1). However, such talk of "possession conditions" is a framework that biases our theory towards an object-account of concepts since "possession" is itself, like "mental object" a metaphor with misleading connotations when we are concerned with states of the mind-brain. The old-fashioned term 'presence to the mind' is preferable in this regard. Colloquially, we may speak of "having a headache", or "having little patience", but talk of "possession conditions" in such cases is not obviously as appropriate as for tables and chairs. For example, having a headache is more like having indigestion or being sunburnt than owning something. By contrast, having gallstones is undeniably object possession but likely to be a poor model for psychological states. Less figuratively, the question is whether we should adopt a Malebranchian-Lockean-Humean object theory or an Arnauldian-Cartesian-Reidian process, act theory. At the very least, object implications of colloquial idioms in folk-psychology propositional attitude talk should not prejudice the issue.

These foregoing remarks have a distinctly Rylean flavour, and it is perhaps not surprising that Ryle is among the culprits in Fodor's plot. Fodor suggests that "Mid-century philosophy of mind consisted largely of confusing these issues by endorsing pragmatism as a remedy for dualism" (p. 24) and Fodor regards Ryle's (1949) *Concept of Mind* is the *locus classicus* for this confusion.

However, this analysis is to misread Ryle in a revealing manner. Ryle was concerned, in the first instance, to give a remedy for certain spurious views about our mental life. That is, the conceptual confusions of interest may encourage dualism but are independent of it. For Ryle, dualism is a *consequence* of holding certain mistaken views about our mental life and not identical with these views. Thus, Ryle's criticism of the "intellectualist legend" and the distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' have nothing to do with dualism. Further, Ryle's criticism of the doctrine of the 'mind's eye' anticipates Pylyshyn's polemic against pictorial theories concluding that "imaging occurs, but images are not seen" (1949, p. 247). Exactly as Pylyshyn would argue a generation later, Ryle said that someone imagining a scene "is not being a spectator of resemblance ... but he is resembling a spectator" (1949, p. 248). Thus, for Ryle pragmatism was primarily a remedy for certain

doctrines that may lead to dualism, but may equally lead to bad theories within a purely physicalist framework.

In Fodor we see the preference for a conception of representation which reverses the trend discernable in the seventeenth century. Yolton points out:

... in the writings of the main figures (Descartes, Arnauld, Malebranche, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant), we can follow a gradual emergence of a clear translation or transformation of the old ontological language of presence to the mind into an epistemic presence. (Yolton 2000)

Propositional attitudes are explicated in a now-standard fashion by means of the inner box metaphor. In case anyone had doubts, Fodor (1998, p. 8) makes it clear that talk of belief boxes is a little joke which can be translated into harmless functional terms. However, even when stripped of its whimsical features, the metaphor and its implications are by no means so innocent as generally assumed. Specifically, the locution encourages Fodor's objectified ontological analysis and the priority he gives to questions of what concepts *are* as opposed to how they might be "possessed" or known. Arnauld's book *On True and False Ideas* was precisely a response to this conception in Malebranche's *The Search for Truth*. Given such a conception, it is not surprising that Fodor prefers an atomistic rather than holistic account of meaning, though he notes that the two issues are strictly distinct, since he says current fashion "tends to favor mental objects that are defined by (perhaps all) of their interrelations (p. 12). Nevertheless, propositions conceived as mental atoms are more readily seen as objects having their meanings individually and a holism of a more radical variety would dispense with mental objects altogether in favour of acts, processes or dispositions. It is perhaps not implausible to see a relevant parallel with Locke's project in his *Essay* which Jolley (1999, p. 39) suggests is "self-consciously modeled on the corpuscularian theory of matter". It may be helpful to see that Fodor is true to his avowed Empiricist progenitors even to the extent of such analogous commitments. Remarkably and more directly relevant, Reid, too, captures Fodor's corpuscularism in his attack on Hume's 'ideas' "which, like Epicurus's atoms, dance about in emptiness" (Reid 1985/1997, p. 22).

Fodor considers Stroud's (1977) criticism of Hume's mental atomism and quotes the following passage:

The Theory of Ideas restricts [Hume] because it represents thinking of having an idea as fundamentally a matter of contemplating or viewing an 'object' - a mental atom that can come and go in the mind ... (Stroud 1977, p. 225,6; quoted in Fodor 2003, p. 11).

What is remarkable about this passage is what Fodor *fails* to comment upon (though the same remarks are quoted again at p. 21), namely, Stroud's concern with having an idea as *contemplating or viewing* an object. Fodor's complete neglect of this point is especially surprising because, as already noted, it has been central to the long tradition of criticism of the 'idea' idea. Of course, Fodor (2000) is right

that the causal mediation of representational theories doesn't mean that we perceive the representations themselves, but this is only to identify the problem and not to show that particular accounts actually avoid it. In his new book, Fodor's off-hand treatment of critics of representationalism suggests an insensitivity to this concern explicitly raised by Stroud which, like Putnam's concern, arises from the inherent features of a classical tri-partite conception of ideas. Rorty (1980) too was centrally concerned with what he describes as "the original sin of epistemology" (1980, p. 60), namely, the kind of representationalism originating with Descartes. Rorty describes this as "the Cartesian image of the Eye of the Mind - the very image which has often been accused of leading to the 'veil of ideas' and to solipsism" (1980, p. 94). Fodor's new book does not address such concerns although, of course, he appreciates the way that traditional scepticism arose for the reasons just noted, and he says with mild sarcasm that it led "either to the view that 'strictly speaking' nobody ever saw a piano, or to the view that 'strictly speaking' pianos are mental" (Fodor 2000). With this oblique allusion to Berkeleyan idealism, Fodor suggests that, by contrast, the representational theory "doesn't need to say anything like that now" since it has abandoned its pretensions to being epistemology, content with being only a psychology of perception. In this form representational theories hold that "Causal processes involving mental representations mediate these perceptual relations, but you don't (typically) perceive the representations themselves either directly or otherwise" (Fodor 2000).

First, it is undeniable that an explanatory scientific psychology "doesn't need to say anything like that now", but requiring mental particulars to be semantically evaluable seems to invoke precisely the sorts of problems of veridicality arising for an epistemology concerned with knowledge as true belief. However, be that as it may, the problems of concern do not arise only if the enterprise is conceived as epistemology, as the imagery debate has amply demonstrated. The problem may arise as an unnoticed consequence of certain ways of conceiving the representations, typically when they are modeled too closely on externally perceivable objects. Thus, in a frequently cited overview of the traditional theory of ideas, McRae (1965) pointed to the central notion of an idea as the immediate object of perception or thought that can be traced back to Descartes. McRae suggests that ideas make their appearance in Descartes as immediately present objects for looking at or "contemplating".

What remains basic for the earlier Descartes, for the later Descartes, for Malebranche and for Locke, is that ideas are the immediate objects of perception, that all knowing reduces to seeing, and that seeing (however intellectual it may be) is the sole operation of which the understanding is capable. It is of secondary importance for their conceptions of what knowing is whether these immediate objects or ideas are in the brain, in the mind, or in God. (McRae 1965, p. 179)

We may add that it is of secondary importance whether these immediate objects are pictures, propositions or other mental particulars *à la* Fodor. He writes:

... the questions with which theories of meaning are primarily concerned are metaphysical rather than epistemic. This is as it should be; understanding what a thing is, is invariably prior to understanding how we know what it is. (1998, p. 5)

However, Fodor's impeccable principle giving priority to the question of "what a thing is" rather than "how we know what it is" does not obviously apply as well to *knowledge* as to tables and chairs. Arguably, it is exactly in the case of forms of knowledge that the epistemic questions must take precedence. Take the case of grammar which Chomsky insists has no other reality than the knowledge of a speaker-hearer: Here the question of "what a thing is" collapses into the question of "how we know what it is". Grammar is *constituted* by being a form of knowledge and, therefore, *how we know it* counts as an answer to the question of *what it is*. Similarly, in the case of meanings and concepts, unlike the case of tables and chairs, the question of "what a thing is" is plausibly construed as the question of what we know.

These critics represent the various pragmatic or dispositional views that Fodor excoriates. It is no accident that Gibson's similarly motivated 'ecological' approach dismissed by Fodor, like the closely related 'situated cognition', are theories of direct realism which have been proposed as alternatives to the representationalism of modern computational theories. This is merely one form in which the Malebranche-Arnauld (or Hume-Reid) debate is being rehearsed today.

Le plus séduisant cartésien?

We may better understand Fodor and Hume through their antecedents and their critics. Thus, I have emphasized Malebranche here in part to correct Fodor's misleading allusions to 'Cartesianism' as the provenance of Humean views of representation. Fodor's reference to Hume's Cartesianism needs to be qualified to reflect these nuances and is correct only if we understand it as reference to Malebranche's version of *la pensée cartésienne* and not that of Arnauld or Descartes himself who shared precisely the pragmatism that Fodor is battling. If the interest and relevance of Malebranche's theory today is surprising, this is because its theological trappings and overtones of mysticism have, in Nicolas Jolley's words, "so effectively concealed the seventeenth-century debate from the view of contemporary philosophers" (Jolley 1990, p. 201). Nevertheless, it is not without reason that Malebranche was characterised by a 17th Century author, as we might say of Fodor too, *En un mot, c'est le plus séduisant cartésien que je connaisse* - in a word, the most seductive Cartesian that I know (quoted in Moreau 1999, p.9).

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