

Reviews

Christopher Gauker: *Words and Images. An Essay on the Origin of Ideas*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, xii + 302 pp.

Wilfrid Sellars, the teacher of the author of the present book, introduced a story which has become known as the *myth of Jones* (see Sellars 1956). This narrative was designed to illuminate the relationship between thought and language; in particular, Sellars used it to show that although, *prima facie*, language may appear to be secondary to thought, considering, the other way around, thought as secondary to language is not as far-fetched as it might seem. The 'myth' introduces our hypothetical ancestors who do not have thought in our current sense, but did come to have some linguistic practices, and who undergo a process (under the guidance of a genius called Jones) during which they come to think as we do. The process, roughly summarized, consists of three stages: in the first, members of the society achieve a 'semantic' categorization of the linguistic utterances of other members; in the second, the members start using the categories to classify the states of others even when the others make no utterances; and in the third, the members come to apply this newly extended categorization also to themselves.

Gauker, while not dismissing Sellars as being wholly off-track, thinks that the details of the story, as put forward by his teacher, are untenable. In particular, though he agrees that *conceptual* thought is conceivable only in connection with language and that human thought may have been wrought into its conceptual shape roughly along the lines of the celebrated, but controversial myth of Jones, he insists that for such a development to get off the ground at all there must have first been a rich non-conceptual – in particular "imagistic" – thought, which demands our prior attention. In his book he thus puts forwards and defends especially the following two theses:

Our conceptual thought is a matter of language; and

There is also non-conceptual, imagistic thought that is more important than is usually admitted; in particular most of our problem solving can be done in this mode of thought.

As he himself puts it in the Introduction:

A great deal of problem-solving can be achieved by means of a form of imagistic thinking that does not involve the application of concepts at all. Included in the kind of problem-solving that this non-

conceptual mode of cognition makes possible is language learning and word choice. In view of this fact, conceptual thought can be identified with the use of the very languages we speak, and concept formation can be equated with language acquisition. (p. 1)

The introductory part of the book is devoted to the analysis of the concept of concept. Gauker insists that his seeing a great deal of human thought as non-conceptual is not a matter of mere terminology; he argues that this mode of thought is not based upon *anything* that could sensibly count as concepts. Nor does he agree with those (Machery 2009; and others) who argue that the concept of concept is radically ambiguous, in particular that the concept usually employed by philosophers differs from that standardly used by psychologists. He starts from the criticism of the empiricist ('Lockean') theory of concepts as products of sensory abstraction. Against this notion of concept he places the 'Kantian' notion, according to which concepts are primarily the building blocks of judgments. Gauker embraces this approach to concepts (though he distances himself from many details of Kant's theory of concepts).

After rejecting another influential theory of concepts, the theory which takes concepts as tantamount to regions in some "similarity space", he turns to Sellarsian theories. He discusses Sellars' own views, with an emphasis on the myth of Jones, as mentioned above, and concludes that here too he finds plenty with which to disagree.

Our ancestors whom the myth of Jones invites us to imagine (Sellars calls them 'Rylean ancestors') begin with "a language of which the fundamental descriptive vocabulary speaks of public properties of public objects located in Space and enduring through Time", and which makes "subtle use not only of the elementary logical operations of conjunction, disjunction, negation, and quantification, but especially of the subjunctive conditional", but these people are "very puzzled indeed about how we learn to speak of inner episodes and immediate experiences". Sellars' questions at this point were "What resources would have to be added to the Rylean language of these animals in order that they might come to recognize each other and themselves as animals that think, observe, and have feelings and sensations, as we use these terms?" and "How could the addition of these resources be construed as reasonable?" (Quotations from Sellars 1956.)

Sellars' myth is to help us see how we could have *constructed* our minds (as we think of them today) – how we could have come to per-

ceive each other (and consequently ourselves) as having thoughts, impressions, concepts, etc., and in this sense to come to *have* them – by internalizing certain linguistic resources. This means that, according to the myth, we came to think in the way we do (which, for us, is what we usually call thinking *simpliciter*) only after we had a language with “descriptive vocabulary”, “logical operations”, “subjunctive conditionals”, etc. Did Sellars mean that we could come to have the language as non-thinking creatures? Hardly – such an idea would seem to fly in the face of reason. So our Rylean ancestors must have thought in *some way*, though not in our human, conceptual way. And Sellars does not tell us very much about this.

One of the main goals of Gauker’s book is to fill this lacuna in the Sellarsian story. What kind of thought (if any) did we have prior to achieving our present, conceptual kind (which, Gauker admits, may have got ‘constructed’ roughly along the lines of the *myth of Jones*)? Gauker tries to solve this by elaborating on his idea of imagistic thinking. He claims that this art of thinking rests on three pillars: perceptions being structured into *perceptual similarity space*; our ability to *track objects* across the visual field; our ability to enhance the innate similarity space by new, *acquired dimensions*; and, thirdly, our ability to perceive certain events in our visual field as cases of *imagistic causation*. Gauker stresses that while none of these establishes foundations for anything that could reasonably be termed concepts, this mode of thinking is nevertheless quite powerful, even being sufficient for most of our ordinary problem solving. Let me quote one of his examples at length:

Suppose I need to replace a rubber washer in the hot water valve in my bathroom sink. Here is what I have to do. First, I unscrew the cap labeled “H” on the handle. Then I stick a screwdriver into the cylinder inside the handle and unscrew the screw at the bottom. Then I lift the handle out of its seat. [...] What I have just described is the procedure by which I replace a washer. In order to generate the description, I did not actually replace any washers. I merely *imagined* the process. I found words to describe what I imagined, including some words (“escutcheon cap”) that are recent additions to my vocabulary. But I could just as well, it seems to me, have imagined the operation without using any words. Likewise, if I were to actually perform the operation, I would be guided by my imagination. At each stage, I would *picture* the next step of the operation. Since I do have concepts that apply to some of the parts (*handle, stem, escutch-*

eon cap), I can apply concepts to the parts as I think myself through the process. The use of these concepts is entirely incidental, important only when I look for words to describe the process to others. In sum, I have an imaginative understanding of *how things go together*. (pp. 149-150)

In the penultimate chapter of the book, which is called *Cooperation by means of words*, Gauker rejects what, he claims, has been an almost univocal view of Western philosophy, namely that "communication is a matter of a speaker's conveying thoughts to a hearer" (p. 217). Although I would argue that there have been more philosophical dissenters from this view than Gauker's formulation would suggest, I totally agree with the author that this view is misguided. Instead of this conception of language, Gauker suggests a *cooperative conception*. According to him, "linguistic communication interlocutors strive, through speaking, to create a shared representation of a conversational *context*" (p. 218). And here it seems to me that the otherwise thrilling story about how we humans have come to think as we do, which Gauker presents, comes to contain a regrettable gap. The point is that the concept of context Gauker talks about is based on *propositions*, represented by *sentences*. However, how does a mind operating in the "imagistic mode" come to entertain propositions, and hence concepts, which are their building blocks?

Gauker offers something of an answer: by being taught a language, especially being taught how to assert sentences. This is, I do not doubt, true; but this only explains how an individual mind reaches the conceptual stage when there are plenty of other minds around already in that stage. But how did "imagistic minds" reach the conceptual stage in the first place? Gauker explicitly admits the existence of the gap in his exposition (p. 232): "[T]he account cannot pretend to explain how language arises in a world that does not contain any." A pity, I would say; for in this way the emergence of propositions and concepts remains somewhat mysterious.

In the book's final chapter, Gauker explains how the reader should understand his identification of 'the conceptual' with 'the linguistic'. Here again he does a wonderful job of challenging what, in certain circles, has come to be taken as an unquestioned received wisdom, namely that the idea that we think in words is simply absurd (see, e.g., Pinker 1994). (Though the reader should keep in mind that Gauker is far from claims that the entirety of human thinking is carried out in

words – it is only conceptual thinking, the centrality of which Gauker has compromised earlier in the book.)

Gauker's complex exposition of human thought wanders far from the territories of general philosophical mainstream, but without fitting into the mainstream of post-Sellarsian philosophy either. Thus Gauker is pursuing his long-term maverick wrestling with questions of human mind, human language and human knowledge, the earlier results of which are already published (Gauker 1994; 2003; 2005). His new book offers a mind-boggling effort to overthrow many philosophical orthodoxies and received wisdoms. What is remarkable is his interlinking of the 'Wittgensteinian' pragmatist conception of language with a 'Cartesian' reliance on certain tools of formal semantics (though, again, used somewhat unorthodoxly). Gauker's latest book is also noteworthy for the broad scope of problems covered, and for the huge amount of literature (both philosophical and scientific) to which he refers (and in many cases takes issue with). It is a book definitely worth reading, and despite the gap in the story I mentioned and regretted (the jump from purely imagistic thinking to the constitution of a linguistic one), I have to admire both the author's zeal and his versatile erudite.

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References

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