

## PH355 – Philosophy of Education 2016

### Lecture V – Peters and Initiation/ Williams and the ‘courtesy’ of elders

#### I Why initiation?

Peters on the clash between traditionalist vs liberal education agendas: cf.

Content without criticism is blind, but criticism without content is empty  
(p.100)

So education is not merely the absorption of content (cp. Haldane 1995 for a traditionalist model of education and see Luntley ‘On Education and Initiation’ (2009) on website for further reference details on Haldane and others).

Initiation, because education is transformative, it requires acquiring the content of traditions but also the abilities to care for and about the critical scrutiny of this content; the value of caring about and critiquing the content of tradition means that the pupil is, in some important sense, *joining-in* a shared activity of sustaining, managing and, presumably, creating the culture that is to be passed on.

#### II Why is the concept of initiation problematic for Peters

On Peters conception, the initiate as not yet taken part in ‘worthwhile states of mind’ (p.98). He says that ‘no man is born with a mind’. The initiate is a novice with respect to the management and critical care for culture’s content. They lack the key mental abilities for critical care of culture.

He says that they start

..in the position of barbarians outside the gates. The problem is to get them inside the citadel of civilization so that they will understand and love what they see when they get there. (p.104)

Two problems:

Ethical: how do we get the initiate in, by deception, cajoling, trickery?

Epistemological: how does it so much as make sense to think that there is a method for getting them to join in?

The latter problem is, of course, the heart of Fodor’s paradox of learning. If any process of initiation is to be conceived as a process that involves an exchange between master and initiate where that exchange is to be modelled as an interaction of cognitive processes, then given the underlying model of cognitive processes as computational processes, it follows that the exchange is fundamentally an exchange mediated by language. But the assumption is that the initiate lacks the language of the master. No process (defined over a language) can express more than what is already capturable within the expressive power of the language that defines that process. There is, therefore, no such thing as a process of learning. We have no model for making sense of what Peters is talking about! The epistemological problem cannot be answered.

#### III Williams background issues re language

A key paper by Williams (‘The Significance of learning in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy’) is available on the module website. Williams finds a bootstrapping

problem in Wittgenstein's account of language learning and resolves it in way that is instructive. Her resolution deploys a form of social constructionism and reveals an key problem endemic to such accounts of learning. Note, in what follows, the discussion of Wittgenstein is mostly a discussion of Wittgenstein as interpreted by Williams. You should not assume that the problem and solution that Williams describes are Wittgenstein's.

### Ostensive definition

Consider the role of ostensive definition in teaching the meaning of words. Take the case of names. Let 'N' be the name to be taught. An ostensive definition is an explanation of the meaning of 'N' of the form:

This is N

or,

This so-and-so is N.

In the latter case, 'so-and-so' is the the sortal concept that identifies the type of thing that N is. E.g. if 'N' is a proper name for a person, then the second form would be:

This person is N

If the category of object is not explicit, it is assumed by the person offering the explanation that the hearer will know what sort of thing they are pointing at when they say, 'This is N.'

Suppose 'N' is a person's name. In order to understand the meaning of 'N' the pupil needs to know that the pointing is a pointing to a person, not to their shirt, the colour of their hair or any of the indefinitely many alternatives that might be pointed at.

Now, understanding the meaning of a name 'N' requires not just knowing that the object is called 'N', but that the word 'N' can be used in various regular ways that show that it stands for the right sort of thing. So if 'N' is the name of a person, it will make sense for 'N' to occur in sentences like

N is taller than Sally

but it would be odd to understand how it is supposed to work in

N is made by Crew in China

or,

N is darker than Andy's hair

Of course, if the pointing in the ostensive definition had been taken as a pointing at the colour of someone's hair or his shirt, then this latter sentences would make sense, but then the one about being taller than Sally would be odd. So understanding the meaning of a name involves knowing what object (including what type of object) it stands for and that means understanding something about the patterns of regular use for which it is fit – which sorts of sentences it could go in and which not.

If this is right, ostensive definition cannot be a fundamental means by which you learn the meaning of words, for it can only work if the pupil already understands the type of object being pointed at. That means that either the ostensive explanation is explicitly of the form:

This so-and-so is N

or it is of the form

This is N

and the pupil already grasps the type of thing being pointed at. But grasp of the type of thing being pointed at amounts to grasp of the sort of patterns of regular use that

the name 'N' is fit for. But grasping that is already to have grasped the key point about the meaning of a name. In short, ostensive definition only works for pupils who already know most that they need to know to understand a name; they must already understand the idea of naming, the idea of the appropriate kind of object, the idea of objects as things to be talked about, etc. All they lack is knowledge of which sound/word/label is to be the name of the object being pointed at. And that means that learning a name by ostensive definition is really like learning a word in a second language. The pupil already understands all the things needed for naming, they just don't know the name of *this thing here*.

So ostensive definition cannot be a basis of language learning.

#### Williams take on the above.

What I have called 'grasp of the patterns of regular use' is what lies behind Williams' point that the abilities to understand ostensive definition are normative abilities. The patterns of regular use are normative patterns. (There are issues about quite what this means and quite what sorts of norms are involved and to what they apply, but I shall ignore those.) Let's agree that to understand (learn from) an ostensive definition, you need already to understand a very great deal about language. Let's agree that the abilities that constitute that understanding are normative abilities. The conclusion is that ostensive definition cannot be a means for teaching someone the abilities involved in language use, for it presupposes that they already have them.

#### A simpler sort of instruction

If learning a language can be characterised, then it does not start with ostensive definition. There must be a simpler way of introducing someone into language. Wittgenstein makes a distinction between ostensive definition and ostensive training. The latter is simpler. (This distinction is accurate re what Wittgenstein says; he makes this distinction, though its debatable that he deploys it in the way that Williams does.)

Now, because Williams characterises the abilities required to understand ostensive definition as 'normative abilities' she thinks that the abilities required to understand ostensive training must be non-normative abilities. Note, if ostensive training is simpler than ostensive definition, it must require simpler abilities for learning from it.

So,

Ostensive definition (OD) requires abilities of the pupil that are already the abilities of a mature language user (Williams marks the sophistication of these abilities by saying that they are normative abilities – abilities to grasp the idea of normative patterns of regular word use)

In contrast,

Ostensive training (OT) requires of the pupil abilities that are weaker than those of a mature language user. (Williams marks the weaker character of these abilities by saying they are not normative abilities, they are not abilities to grasp the idea of normative patterns of regular word use. She says that responsiveness to OT requires only abilities conceived teleologically)

#### different kinds of abilities

Williams has constructed a situation re learning that mirrors the paradox that Peters saw in moral education. We have a picture of a pupil with a set of abilities characterisable in terms weaker than the set of abilities to be acquired by OT. To be responsive to OT requires possession of one set of abilities (teleological & non-normative), but the aim of OT is to equip the pupil with a different richer set of abilities (the abilities involved in understanding OD – normative abilities). That means that there is a bootstrapping problem – how does an intervention aimed at exercising teleological abilities generate possession of normative abilities? (cf. Williams, p.191)

Teleological abilities = responsiveness to causal conditioning; the training in OT is training conceived narrowly in terms of stimulus-response conditioning. So the bootstrapping problem is: how does exercise of abilities for responsiveness to stimulus-response conditioning give the pupil abilities to engage in normative patterns of regular word use? The training only engages abilities to use words in S-R conditioning, so how does lots of that equip the pupil with abilities to use words normatively?

#### **IV Williams' social constructionist solution to the bootstrapping problem.**

Note, Williams accepts that the word use of the pupil is different to that of the adult. She speaks of the judgments of the two as being quite different, for the word use of the pupil/child is just the word use of S-R conditioning; the word use of the adult/teacher is normative. (p.193)

So, for OT to produce the right output (normative use of words) there must be some 'stage-setting' (p.192). Given the starting point for the pupil has them equipped only with teleologically conceived abilities, the stage-setting cannot be supplied by the pupil. It is not their abilities that provide the stage-setting. The stage-setting has to be something that makes it the case that stimulation of the teleological abilities to respond to OT generates the normative abilities of mature language use.

Given the poverty of the conception of the pupil, Williams says the stage-setting lies in the social scaffolding of learning. This is the social constructivism of her reading of Wittgenstein. The thought is that what makes it the case that the stimulation of the pupil's teleological abilities produces learning of normative abilities is something to do with the social setting in which OT takes place. Here is what Williams says:

The status of the naïve learner's utterances (that, for example, they are taken as judgments or requests) is a function of the status extended to those utterances by masters of that practice. In other words, the initiate learner speaks, makes judgments, requests, and the like only by virtue of a courtesy extended to the learner by those who have already mastered the practice. What this position underscores is the linguistic and cognitive dependence that the initiate learner has on the teacher, and by extension the social environment. (p.194)

This is a key passage. The core phrase is the 'courtesy extended' by those already masters of language. In short this means that what is constitutive of the pupil acquiring normative abilities in place of the teleological abilities with which they began is that the teacher and others *treat them as having gained those abilities*. Possession of normative abilities is constituted by being treated as possessing them by those already masters of them. Isn't this odd!?!?!?

It is a very bold version of social constructionism, for it makes it clear that what it is to be a member of a social practice (mature language use) is to be treated as being a member by those who already are members. Membership of the set of those with these abilities is wholly ascribed; it is a matter of being treated as a member by others.

But it looked like Williams had given a crisp and clear model of something that cashed out Peters' metaphor of the trajectory from courtyard to palace. The courtyard is the domain of those whose abilities are no more than teleological abilities (the abilities that we share with other animals). The palace is the domain of those with distinct normative abilities (those that are characteristic of language users). That sets up a paradox: How does stimulation of the courtyard abilities gain one entry to the palace (produce normative abilities)? And now the social constructivist answer looks to be just this:

What constitutes 'being in the palace' = being spoken of as being in the palace by the members of the palace!

That's the point of the 'courtesy' remark. Possession of normative abilities is wholly ascriptive – what it is to have them is to be said to have them by those who already have them. Same, presumably, applies to those who have them, otherwise the account is circular. So, in general, what it is to have these abilities is to be said to have them by others.

The thought that seems to be doing all the work is difficult to pin down, but seems to be something like this: normative abilities are fundamentally abilities re adapting behaviour to that of others. But that thought doesn't begin to get things right, unless the notion of 'adapting' is already conceived normatively rather than teleologically.

And here's the obvious question to put to this sort of social constructivism:

What makes a pupil apt to respond to the 'courtesy'?

That is key. If, as seems right, there are some subjects who fail to respond to the courtesy to come into the palace and some that do respond, surely the difference there must be a difference in their individual cognitive make up? But that means that possession of normative abilities cannot be constituted by what others say; it must have its basis in something about the individual initiate learner. That means that what Williams called 'stage-setting' must involve abilities of the individual, not the social.

Back to the drawing board.....

### **V where now...?**

In short, the epistemological problem asks,

\* How is it possible for a subject to engage X if the subject does not understand X (have representation for X) ?

All that 'engage X' means is 'experience X', whatever form of engagement is appropriate in educational exchanges, there are presumably engagements mediated by experience. But Fodor assumes that experience is mediated by representations, so it is not possible to experience X without that experience being mediated by a representation of X. But if experience of X is necessary to learn the concept X, then

it already requires that you possess a representation of X. So you've already got the concept.

In terms of Peters' imagery, should we deny the concept of the barbarian? But if so, what becomes of the idea of transformation?

Whatever initiation is, it can't be simply a case of talking to pupils, can't be understood on model of talk & listen, for 'listening' requires pupil possess a language (system of representation) apt for capturing what's on offer. But (Fodor again) that means they already have representations for what is on offer in the teacher's talk. So if not listening, what is the pupil doing where 'doing' better not be an activity analysable as a process defined over a system of representations that already includes representations for the content to be learnt, otherwise, there will be no such thing as learning.

## **VI methodology**

What do we want/need in response to Fodor?

A theoretical solution or a descriptive solution?

Theoretical – a model of transformation, the machinery of bootstrapping.....will return to this when looking at Carey (2009)

Descriptive – two notions of description:

(a) an ethnology of learning – a description of learning that makes no attempt to describe the repertoire of abilities required for an answer to \*

(b) a descriptive metaphysics – a detailed description of the repertoire of abilities that makes sense of an answer to \*, a description that is answerable to our best ongoing sense of what goes on in learning. 'description' because, at the end of the day, the correctness of the account consists in our recognising the details as true to the phenomenology of transformative learning.

## **VII one observation**

Question \* above is key, it's key in Fodor's own portrayal of the paradox of learning. It's the question that arises because it is assumed that for a subject to be able to engage X, the subject must have a representation for X. No engagement with things/properties in experience without representations for the things engaged. But representations are components in a system of representation – a language. So if it is not possible to engage X without a representation, it is not possible to engage X without already possessing a language in which X is represented. So it is impossible to have a process of transformation that equips you with a representation for X (concept) that you had previously lacked, for any such process would need to provide you with an experience of X, and it cannot do that unless you already have a representation for X.

What about accounts of experience that deny that for a subject to engage with X they have to have a representation of X?

What about accounts of experience that allow that consciousness itself can have a role to play in understanding what it is to have an experience of X? That is to say, to think of consciousness not as merely a 'window' on things that is filled out with the representations that makes things available to you; but a conception on which consciousness as such is the means by which things are made available to you in experience? The role of attention.

Recall from previous lecture

One issue – providing experiences on which to generate hypotheses

Engaging - figuring as part of personal-level experience

- (d) things available in experience for you
- (e) things available in experience in a way for you

If (d) requires (e), then you engage, e.g., blackness, only if you have ability to experience blackness (a way blackness is for you); but that is a concept, a component of a representational system. Only if you have that, can you then generated a hypothesis, e.g.: all things experienced in this way are called 'black'.

To suggest that we might need to consider the role that consciousness as such plays in an account of what it is to engage with X is to suggest that the above move from (d) to (e) is contentious. This would be one way to start thinking about how to block Fodor's paradox.

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