

The Name of Things

Thomas Gil

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Preface

Things have names because people refer to them using words to name them. Otherwise, they would exist, but they wouldn't have names. When human beings speak, they interact with other human beings, expressing their own intentions and plans, understanding the intentions and desires of other people, and referring to relevant aspects of a collectively shared world. When people speak, they utter sentences in which single words are meaningful. They learn to use such sentences in communities in which natural languages are spoken, and in which they have been socialized. Speaking natural languages, people learn to name things, to describe and to explain them. And they learn to do it in "practices" (Ludwig Wittgenstein spoke of "games") intrinsically connected to their own "form of life".

1. Thought

The term “thought” can refer to the contents or objects of thinking processes that are brought somehow before one’s mind. It can also be applied to a distinctive kind of activity, namely, the activity of thinking.

Contents of thought may be objects, classes, properties, states of affairs, non-existent objects, possible and necessary entities. All these things are entities thoughts are about, entities we can think about. Thoughts about all such things have their roots outside our heads, in the publicly accessible space of perception and action, or simply in the world. The process of thinking begins “in the open”, in confrontation with external objects and entities, becomes then internalized and thus hidden from the view of others so that individuals can keep their thoughts to themselves.

The activity of thinking, like every activity, is always situational and has contexts. In specific situations thinking individuals think. And, as a consequence of that, thoughts and ways of thinking may vary significantly. Groups and societies differ in the range of thoughts that are practically accessible to their members and in the preferred ways of thinking. Thus, even if the basic cognitive capacities of human beings are fundamentally unchanged from one setting to another, the single available thoughts and the concrete ways of thinking may differ significantly.

The thinking activity that was developed in the philosophical academies and at the public market-place in classical Greece differed substantially from the scholastic disputations that took place in monasteries and colleges in medieval Europe. And enlightened philosophers in England, France and Germany argued in saloons, coffee-shops, clubs and public societies in ways that can easily be contrasted with scientific reasoning in modern universities, research institutes and laboratories.

In all these places traditions of critical thinking were created and cultivated with their own specific contents and their own specific ways of “asking for and giving reasons”. Disputing and thinking individuals were thus situated, engaged, embedded in cultures of discussion and critical thinking in which many things were presupposed and shared by all participants. In such cultures of thinking heterogeneous conditions were implemented that made possible for something to count and be intelligible as something. What was pertinent or relevant as an argument was also subtly fixed so that all discussions and debates were guided by a set of more or less implicit shared implications, possible contradictions and potential confirmations.

2. Things

Greek philosophers believed that natural processes were governed by the same principles of structure and change. Those law-like principles on which the natural world runs were for them discoverable by the human mind.

In their effort to elaborate a theory of every existing thing, Greek philosophers posited certain substances as the basic constitutive elements of the natural world. Thales of Miletus posited only one fundamental substance: water. Anaximenes decided that air, not water, was primary. For Heraclitus, fire was the primary stuff. It was Empedocles, however, the philosopher who postulated the four elements that gained ascendancy in Western natural philosophy: water, air, fire and earth.

There were also philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato whose primary substance was no material stuff at all. For Pythagoras number was the primary substance. And Plato, who inclined also towards numerology, took as his primary substance not only mathematical abstractions but also super-sensible idealizations of classes of objects: “forms” or “ideas”. Aristotle’s ontological decision to take “substances” qua “individual things” as the basic stuff of reality was to become highly influential. He conceived of them as constituted by their “form” that was nothing else but the collection of their (essential and accidental) properties. Contrary to the Platonic forms, Aristotelian forms occur only in union with matter. Aristotelian substances are always formed material individual things or beings, the Aristotelian distinction between “form” and “matter” being always a mere conceptual (and not an ontological) distinction.

Aristotelian substances are individual material beings, not (as we would say today using modern terminology) “natural kinds”. The fundamental substances posited by the so-called presocratic philosophers are, however, “natural kinds”, that is, (not-individuated) continuous material stuff. Dividing up Aristotelian substances like tables, chairs and houses, you do not get tables, chairs and houses but parts of tables, chairs and houses. Separating material stuff like water into parts, you get more water or portions of water. That is actually the main difference between Aristotelian substances as “individual things” and “material stuff”. Nevertheless, individual things and material stuff have characteristic and “dispositional” properties.

Aristotelian “substances” are individual material beings. They are things to which we can refer by use of a demonstrative phrase of the form “this so-and-so”. “This so-and-so”

translates the Greek “*tode ti*”. They are things that can be picked out, identified, individuated. They do not need other things or beings to exist. They are not parasitic upon other things. They are separable items, things whose existence is not a matter of some other things being modified in some way or other. Socrates is such an individual material being, a substance, not his paleness or his wisdom. Socrates can exist without his wisdom but Socrates’ wisdom cannot exist without Socrates. Socrates is separable from his wisdom. Socrates’ wisdom is not separable from Socrates. We can ask various types of questions about Socrates. What is he? What are his qualities? How large is he? How is he related to other things? Where is he? All these questions are answered appropriately by different types of predicate: predicates of quantity, predicates of relation, predicates of place, and so on. These predicates refer to properties that are parasitic. They are beings that need some other being they qualify, whose properties they are. Aristotle’s view of existing things is robust and commonsensical. Existing beings are, according to such a view, individual things like animals and plants, the sun, the moon, the stars, tables and chairs, pots and pans, and (in general) perceptible things: middle-sized material objects. Such objects are the primary furniture of Aristotle’s world, that is, the basic realities and the things with which science principally concerns itself.

Strictly speaking, science is not concerned with Aristotelian substances. Science is concerned with real things: existing individual things and things that happen, that is, events. Determining what existing things are, we can agree with Aristotle or may be disposed to go his categorial way, affirming that “individual things” represent a sort of being which is neither “said-of” nor “in” something else. All other things are either “said of” primary substances, which are their subjects, or are “in” them as subjects. “Primary substances” are primary because other things depend upon them whereas they do not depend upon other things. We do not share, however, Aristotle’s conception of substantiality any more.

The material individual things that interest modern science have properties and qualities we try to analyse. Precisely due to such properties and qualities things happen in the world. Material individual things exist always in constellations in which they are connected or related to other individual things. And in such constellations their causal powers and potentialities are actualized.

Some properties and qualities of individual things merely characterize them. Others, however, are in specific contexts and constellations, in which they become manifest, causally efficacious. Merely characterizing properties are called “categorical”, causally potent properties and qualities “dispositional”.

Dispositional properties and qualities help us explain why and how things happen in the world. Dispositions are properties which play causal roles in the interactions of individual things and the world. Events are interpreted by dispositionalists as manifestations of dispositions such as the passing of sugar from a solid to a dissolved state.

Based on Aristotle and going beyond him, we could say that the world is made out of existing individual material beings and events, that is, of existing and persisting things and things that happen.

Things that happen or events like single marriages, deaths, births, fires, floodings, examinations, rings of the bell, wars, and eclipses of the moon are particulars and can be (like particular material objects) easily individuated. They can be counted as easily as pencils, pots, pans, cars, elephants, cats, dogs, and people. Donald Davidson's proposal to individuate events is known as the "sameness of causal relations"-approach. Events are according to Davidson identical if and only if they have exactly the same causes and effects. In other words: the identity of events can be defined in terms of causes and effects. Davidson puts forward his proposal in "The Individuation of Events": "What I do want to propose is that the causal nexus provides for events a 'comprehensive and continuously usable framework' for the identification and description of events analogous in many ways to the space-time coordinate system for material objects" (Davidson, 180).

3. Linguistic Competence

Based on a specific physiological constitution, human beings are able to participate in interaction situations in which other human beings express intentions, concentrate their attention upon aspects of a commonly shared world, and are receptive to what other participants may say to them. Participating in such interaction situations, small children learn verbs and verbal phrases that can be considered to be (in Michael Tomasello's own words) "the major point in children's transition to adultlike grammatical competence" (Tomasello, 7). The verb "give", for example, is used to designate an event involving at least three entities with well-defined roles: giver, given thing, and the person given to. Because roles such as these are an integral part of verb meaning, the conceptual situations underlying verbs can be seen as providing a kind of "frame" for structuring larger linguistic expressions. Learning verbs and verbal phrases is, therefore, a cognitive and social-cognitive activity indispensable for human interaction in complex communicative situations children will be confronted with in later life.

Michael Tomasello distinguishes two main kinds of verbs: change of state verbs that refer to situations in which an object or event undergoes some change of state or transformation, and activity verbs that refer to actions people (or other animate beings) perform such as seeing, running, throwing, waving, and crying. More complex linguistic structures will later emerge from these "first verbs" and "first verbal phrases" so that accounts of the language development of small children and higher order accounts of cognitive linguistics concerned with the complexities of adult grammar (like "there" constructions, "transitivity", question formation, complement constructions, "let alone" constructions, and other more specific discourse phenomena) can be developmentally linked.

4. Reference

In the communities into which they are socialized, individuals learn to talk about the world and its objects. Stimulated through their senses, they react to sensory input or sense impressions using the referential apparatus their natural languages provide. The referential apparatus of a language contains nouns and pronouns, verbs and adverbs, quantifiers and many more linguistic tools that facilitate the task of bracing and holding firmly together in a public language what would otherwise be elusive sense qualities deriving from the mere impacts of rays and particles on our surfaces and receptors.

The referential apparatus of our natural languages helps us accomplish a fundamental function that is the function of “reification”. The “positing” of individual material beings as the objects of our reference, such positing or reification proved indispensable in connecting loose ends of raw sense experience to produce the beginnings of a structured system of the world.

Reification became quite sophisticated when accompanied and supported by logical particles, relative clauses, past and future tense, and diachronic individuation of bodies. Reification continued beyond bodies and substances adding new sorts of objects and new quantified conditionals. Atoms and further abstract objects entered ontology in easy analogy to the primordial bodies. Once the ice was broken, further abstract objects flooded in.

Reified individual objects (concrete or abstract) accomplished a double function. They made possible intersubjective agreement, and they contributed to the coming about of consistent recurring discourses about the world as neutral nodes in a logical structure.

Intersubjective agreement was established in primary cases by ostension, and indirectly in other cases by reduction to those primary cases through causal chains established or conjectured in growing science.

The referential apparatus of our natural languages is not to be conceived of as an objective substantial mediator. It allows a direct and immediate relation between mind and entities outside the mind, i.e. the objects of the world.

With observation sentences and utterances we react to the impingement of energy on our sensory surfaces learning in our linguistic communities which are the circumstances that make our sentences true. With terms we learn to speak about the objects of the world. A “term” (medieval thinkers would have said) “supponit pro”, has “suppositio” for, “stat pro”, stands for one or more objects, and with Quine we have to add: and this is only possible in the

context provided by an utterance (utterances and sentences being for Quine as for Frege the primary vehicle of meaning).

Reference is, therefore, not a relation between names and objects but rather a relation between sentences and sensory stimulations, or (to put it more precisely) a relation of sentences to stimulations and to other sentences.

Ontogenetically expressed, in our transactions with reality we learn to use particles in sentences, and sentences with sentences, letting a coherent pattern of usage evolve that matches the one established in society.

5. Vagueness

The distinction between vagueness and precision applies only to representations or concepts. The things of the world are not vague. They simply are. But they can be vaguely represented. We can doubt whether something is a mountain or a rocky hill. But from our doubt it does not follow that reality itself is vague. The terms “mountain” and “hill” may be relatively vague. “Water” and “mud” are also in many contexts of daily life vague. We leave unsettled, to take one of Quine’s examples, where to withhold “muddy water” in favour of “wet mud”.

Indeterminacies and irregularities of reference pervade our languages and linguistic usages. Vagueness seems to be a natural consequence of the mechanism of language learning. There is, indeed, an inevitability of vagueness on the part of terms and expressions learned in the primitive way, and it tends to carry over to other terms and expressions defined on the basis of these.

But in daily life we are accustomed to paraphrase our sentences under the stress or threat of failure of communication. And in scientific discussions vagueness can be an aid in coping with the linearity of discourse so that an expositor may state A vaguely, proceed to B, and afterwards touch up A, without ever having to call upon his reader to learn or unlearn any outright falsehood in the preliminary statement of A.

Vagueness does not seem to perturb always the truth values of our usual sentences in which vague terms occur. Sometimes, vague terms in our sentences cause pressure for a new verbal convention or changed trend of usage. But, most of the time, we cope quite well with a certain degree of vagueness in terms, sentences, and descriptions.

Our linguistic ways of referring to what there is, our possible representations of it may be vague. Existing things, material individual objects and events, however, are not vague. They simply are what they are, that is, existing beings.

There are two traditional ways of substantiating the claim that only representations can be vague: a) the facts or the things of the world may be held to be perfectly “precise”, so that vagueness can only be a feature of representations; b) to apply the concept of vagueness to anything other than representations may be treated as a category mistake, on the grounds that vagueness is simply a mode of representing. These two ways, however, are not completely flawless as Timothy Williamson’s precise analysis of their implications and consequences could convincingly show (Williamson, 249ff.).

It seems sensible, for the moment, to use the term “vagueness” as a concept that refers exclusively to the qualities and degrees of precision of our linguistic representations of what there is.

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