

Do I Want to Be Like You?

Notes by David Large

Thoughts arising from David Glass Ensemble's 'The Chimp that Spoke'

Science and philosophy are both questioning.

Where the questioning of science is progressive, the questioning of philosophy is sceptical.

Thomas Nagel - "What's it like to be a bat?" in his collection *Mortal Questions*

Compare the life of a bat with the life of a human.

They are very different.

Big message:

The difference is not biological it is metaphysical.

Message for scientists:

You cannot account for the subjective in terms of the objective.

You cannot account for 'what it's like-ness' in terms of science.

No amount of genetic research will tell what it's like to be a such and such.

Ludwig Wittgenstein - *Forms of life*, in his *Philosophical Investigations*

There is a qualitative gulf between different forms of life.

Not a species gap (not necessarily drawn along species lines), not a question of genetic similarity or difference, but a metaphysical gap.

Chimps (and, indeed, Bonobos)

The life of chimp is much more like the life of a human than the life of a bat.

The gulf does not seem so wide - chimps use tools, learn sign language etc.

But they are still very different forms of life.

The metaphysical gap remains.

The only question is how much this metaphysical gap means.

What difference does it make?

Language

Ludwig Wittgenstein - *Philosophical Investigations*, p.223

If a lion could speak, we would not understand it (My translation)

It's not that lions cannot have language.

It's not that we cannot understand lions because we cannot translate their language.

It's that humans and lions are different forms of life.

Again, this is a metaphysical difference, not a biological or genetic one.

Chimp Language

Are human languages and chimp 'languages' different enough to maintain a noteworthy metaphysical gap between forms of life?

Maybe we can recognise the metaphysical distinction and carry on regardless?!

Willard Van Orman Quine - *Word and Object*, esp Chapter 2

Indeterminacy of meaning (Illustrated by the 'Gavagai' example).

Stimulus meaning and a reluctant appeal to the Principle of Charity.

Translation Manual with appropriate empirical constraints.
Translating human languages is an art not a science.
It can never be done with 100% certainty.

Donald Davidson - "Radical Interpretation" in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*
Takes up Quine's challenge.

Not empirical but semantic constraint.

The Principle of Charity applies throughout.

Translation possible where we have a language that is semantically well constrained.

Roughly this means that each sentence of the language can be put into symbolic logic with only one possible formulation.

But what about cases where no such semantic constraint is possible?

Do we have to rely on empirical constraints alone?

Isn't Chimp language a case like this?

However

Sign language, as strictly symbolic, is clearly semantically well constrained.

But is this really a language? Is it semantically rich enough?

Also

The deaf community regard sign language as a proper, uninterpretable, language in its own right. If so then it is not semantically well constrained.

So either sign language is semantically well constrained but does not pass muster as a language, or it does pass muster as a language but is not semantically well constrained.

Moral

If we can't translate human languages to other human languages with certainty then, at the very least, it's going to be so much harder to translate chimp languages to human languages. Worse, the metaphysical concerns cannot be ignored.

The metaphysical gap, expressed in whatever way, makes understanding chimps and translating chimp language so much more difficult, if not impossible.

So what are Washoe et al doing?

a) Communication - signs and signals, or

b) Language - grammar and speech, or

c) Both communication and language.

Are they signing, speaking or even translating from chimp to sign language and settling for communication. (Are they ahead of the humans on these questions?)

What sort of understanding is going on here? Surely they are doing more than manipulating signs and symbols? (Surely the Chinese Room argument does not apply here?)

Questions to decide

Is the difference between communication and language qualitative or quantitative?

Is the difference between communication and language a difference without any distinction?

Is there a difference at all? Are they simply degrees of the same thing?

Maybe the different sorts of understanding needed for communication and language can make the distinction we are looking for here.

Whatever your view:

If, as philosophy seems to hold, the difference between communication and language is qualitative then there is an unbridgeable gap between our forms of life.

This means we can never say that we understand animal 'language', or even say that animals, including chimps, have a language in any meaningful use of the word.

Conceptual arguments aside, even given the empirical evidence, there seems to be something to be said for this view, or a moderated form of this view.

But do we really believe this?

Clearly bat life is nothing like human life.

Equally clearly it is not clear that chimp life is so very different to human life.

Add in the nurture factor, such as similar learning mechanisms for chimp and human infants, and the waters become very muddy.

If, as science seems to hold (at least through its research programmes), the difference between communication and language is quantitative, then when and where does communication become language?

Is there a meaningful distinction between communication and language at all?

Add in the philosophical perspective and it is not clear that there is a clearly defined research programme here at all. Is it right to ignore the numerous metaphysical distinctions here?

To recognise the metaphysical gap is not to accept the existence of any ethereal substance, or endorse any religious belief. It is not a straightforward choice between scientific materialism and Cartesian Dualism, or ignorance (however blissful). No philosopher has thought this, at least not for hundreds of years.

Philosophers are often horrified by scientists naively assuming that any encroachment on the widespread, and ever growing, remit of scientific explanation is the assertion of some form of Cartesian Dualism or religious mysticism. It is not. No philosopher would make this mistake. That said, the reaction of philosophers to the imperialist ignorance of scientists is often arrogant and sometimes just as ignorant.

Historically, and continuing through the present, everyone seems to have terrible trouble either finding a line between communication and language, or showing genuine instances of animal language use. (This may not be surprise but it is, nevertheless, true.)

If the research programmes fail then it will look very much like the difference between communication and language is qualitative after all, and Washoe and the other chimps (like all the animal kingdom) will stand forever on the other side of a linguistic and semantic divide from their human cousins.

So do they want to be like us? If only they could tell us ...