7.E: the ***Philosophyldeas*** overview of

Categories

Whatever our attitude to existence and reality, we find ourselves needing to categorise it, in order to think about it, and cope with it. Some categories are short-term and trivial, such as which items should go in the dishwasher, but philosophers are interested in categories that seem fundamental. Some may qualify as 'natural kinds' – real and stable family groupings seen in nature, but categories can also be much more general and universal, such as the category of 'object' or 'concept'. It might be claimed that all of language is a sort of categorisation, since most words cover collections of particular things, so again it is the most basic categories that seem philosophically interesting.

Nothing stops us from introducing utterly bizarre or amusing categories for the world, so the two constraints on a good system are that it should be useful to us, and map the actual divisions of reality quite well. The latter assumes, of course, that reality actually contains divisions, and optimists talk of their categories 'cutting nature at the joints', but critics say that we are inventing these joints, because nature is actually continuous. Since our thought and language are fairly successful in dealing with the world, we can assume that our normal category system should be accepted, even if it needs refining by experts. However, this is made trickier by the findings of anthropologists, revealing peoples who successfully categorise the world rather differently from us. If their categories are different, but work, that undermines confidence in the correctness of our own system. Philosophers can either search for a deep system of categories that seems to be universal, or they can design an improved system of categories, and recommend its adoption.

The most common approach to categorisation, at least in western cultures, is to see the world as constituted mainly by objects which have properties. Seeing the world as made up of basic processes or events would imply a very different approach. If we are seeing the world as full of things with features, we can approach categorisation by the things (inferring them from their features), or by the features (and infer things from their combinations). The most obvious aspect of our environment is 'clusters' of features and things, and we can infer the natures and causal powers of the clusters. The capacity to generalise these observations produces our normal system, and degrees of generalisation imply a hierarchy of categories. It seems acceptable that some categories contain others, but we try to avoid overlaps. Some categories are so general that they are of little use – it is no help to categorise something as part of 'everything', and 'could you fetch the thing?' is a frustrating request. It would be nice if the categories precisely fitted our words, but some words are ambiguous, or synonymous with other words, and they tend to lack clear boundaries. We happily classify things as 'mountains', but the outer boundary of a mountain is notoriously vague. We may wonder whether every item in reality belongs in a category, but this invites the question of how fine-grained the categories should be. If each individual ended up in its own private category (labelled by a proper name), that would seem to defeat the object of the enterprise, which was to express useful generalisations.

There is plenty of evidence that small children, and even simple animals, categorise what they encounter, and brain damage can remove whole categories of thought, so our categories seem to be innate, to at least some degree. Culture, language and the authority of experts then get to work, and the categorisation of an educated adult may diverge considerably from its starting point. There also seems to be a difference between the instant categorisation of some newly encountered thing, and the way it is categorised after examination and reflection. The drive to categorise certainly seems deep rooted, and is seen in our desire to divide up a homogenous expanse, such as the sea, into labelled areas that we can refer to more easily.

A few brave philosophers have proposed systems of basic categorisation for human understanding. The categories are usually small in number (between about four and twelve), and are often related to systems of formal logic, since structured reasoning needs generalised categories for its rules, definitions and models. An example of an ancient system proposes that reality contains things, quantities, qualities, relations, places, times, locations, passivity, activity and being affected. Another early suggestion was to whittle it down to four: substrate, quality, disposition, and relation. These were offered as categories of reality, but in recent times categories have often been applied to how we think about reality, describing our mental filing system, rather than the world. Modern categories often arise directly from standard logic, giving us objects and sets of objects, possibly expanding to add properties and relations, and even elaborate categories such as possible worlds. A key issue is whether universals are to be included, and austere systems of categories aim to 'reduce' relations and properties to sets of objects.

The most important question for philosophers is whether such categories can point accurately towards the structure of reality. If that were so, then we might hope that clear and careful thought could give us a secure general basis for understanding the world, which would enhance the sciences, and our ordinary lives. This optimistic programme would presumably start at both ends. In reality, we would look for the causal patterns and distinct structural features that compose the world, seeking a clear and economical way to record their general features. In the mind, we would examine the innate and acquired psychology that focuses on aspects of the world that concern us, and comb through our languages looking for the efficient terminology which can best bridge mind and world.

Pessimists say this is an absurd daydream. There seem to be so many variables and areas of doubt in the categorisation process. Some parts of the world seem to divide up neatly, with clear 'joints', such as planets or large animals, but other parts, such as oceans or undifferentiated stuff (like sugar), or big vague entities like ecological systems, don't seem to fall conveniently into place. Languages vary greatly from one another in their structure and ontological framework, and there isn't even one settled system of logic. Attempts at stating the categories of our thinking tend to rely on introspection, about which it is hard to find agreement, and neuroscience seems a long way from offering authoritative accounts of the brain's categorisations.

The pessimist seems to win this argument, but it is absurd to attempt thinking without categorisation, and philosophers can hardly abandon their work on tidying up and clarifying the way we divide reality, given its enormous importance.