

Review on Nini Praetorius' 'Principles of Cognition, Language and Action'

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The book is a sort of epistemological version of the 'naked king' fable. The role of the king is played by the problem of the nature of mind (and therefore of language, meaning, truth). Current scientific or objective epistemology correspond to the esteemed burghers of the city pretending that the naked king was dressed in all his regal finery. Professor Nini Praetorius doesn't share all this admiration and develops an impressive attack on the principal strongholds and tenets of the current theories of mind, semantics and language. First she argues that the old division between materialism and idealism is still alive albeit disguised under the clothes of physicalism (naturalism) and constructivism. Yet, as she claims, even if "we had a much more detailed picture of the intermediate stages of the processes than Locke, we are still struggling with the problems which for Descartes' and Locke's critics were the stumbling block, namely how physico-chemical processes in the organism, no matter of what type, can possibly give rise to the experiences of the everyday world of objects which occur in our consciousness. (49)" Both materialism and constructivism commit the same mistake: implicitly they accept the Cartesian dualism and then try to reduce one domain to the other. Praetorius analyzes a large number of authors (from Marr and Gibson to Fodor and Wittgenstein) to find a common responsible for their failure in giving a convincing explanation of "how referentiality (or aboutness) and truth and thus the crucial logical properties of beliefs and linguistic propositions, arise out of physical phenomena and states, which do not have those properties. (16)". Pace Galileo, the big mistake is pretending to be able to approach a level of scientific description of reality which is more objective or true than our ordinary everyday description of it. For the second, the scientific level cannot be *determined* independently of the first, the everyday level. Indeed, a scientific description *depend* an ordinary everyday determination and description of reality, its objects and properties - "that it, to the extent that it is possible to maintain that it is this *same* reality, these same objects, existing in particular places at particular times etc., having been determined in an ordinary everyday way in these and those ways, which are the objects to which scientific descriptions apply" (176).

Against all mentioned authors (and many others) Praetorius uses repeatedly the same argument, and not because of lack of imagination but because all authors share the same original sin: the "Cartesian assumption of the possibility of a polar division of Mind and Matter into two separate "entities" or "realms", each of which may be talked about and characterized independently of referring to the other" (285). Nevertheless such an assumption is untenable both because of the paradoxes it produces and because it is contradictory in principle. Furthermore, every theory which assumes a domain of reality more objective than our everyday experience of it is doomed to have to explain the source of such privileged knowledge. Since the knowledge of the first rely on the second, it cannot be used to deny nor to explain the reality of the second.

Praetorius balances accurately its rationales against two opposed mainstreams of thought. Against naturalism, since it claims that there is an objective level of reality, which may

be determined and characterized independently of persons and language user who may have knowledge about and put forward true descriptions of it. Against constructivism since it claims that there is no reality independently of our knowledge of the world, and that all reality is just a by-product of our knowledge of it. Both approaches, Praetorius argues, miss the crucial point, i.e. we cannot talk consistently about reality and things in reality, what they are or are not, without presupposing that reality and these things exist as things we may have knowledge of and may put forward description about which may be true. Praetorius looks for a starting point. She finds it in what she defines the principle of the general correctness of cognition and language, called the "Correctness Principle". She claims that we have to presuppose, that we have knowledge of reality and a language which may be used to say something about reality - or of whatever we talk - which is true or correct. If we did not so presuppose, we would not know what we were talking about when we talk about reality, nor about description or propositions about reality which may be true or false. After all, this is a reasonable claim that corresponds to the classic reply against solipsism. If we could say nothing true about reality and ourselves, nor determine the correctness of what we say or know about reality and ourselves, we cannot say anything more, not even about what we do not know.

Apparently, it is not possible to say anything about the nature of the Correctness Principle or *necessary relation* between reality and our cognition and description of it apart from the fact that we could not claim to use language to say anything nor claim to know anything without conceding principle. It is a pity that, after having developed this impressive *pars destruens* against tradition, the author doesn't dare to go further by proposing an equally impressive *pars costruens*. In particular she could have taken into consideration authors like Whitehead or David Bohm that proposed an alternative approach to the dualistic standpoint (Bohm, 1990; Whitehead, 1927). Nevertheless, if we take a few modifications on Praetorius' terminology, it will be possible to outline a positive rationale. For, there is practically no difference between what Praetorius denotes with the word 'person' and what is elsewhere termed as 'individual conscious mind'.

Her claim that there must be a necessary relation between reality and our cognition and description of it is paradoxically Cartesian since it seems to entail an identity of some kind between representation and existence. For instance, according to Praetorius "It must be equally true that the existence of language and use of language logically presuppose that there is something to be talked about (307)". Yet this interpretation would be unfair. In fact she refutes over and over again such an identity. There is a "crucial asymmetry between existence of objects and description of objects (307)". The necessary relation is something more than a simple identity relation. It is a more fundamental principle in which representation, existence and being in relation, find their natural composition.

Traditionally philosophers and scientists struggled to explain how to observe in nature the same kind of relational phenomena that is responsible for their own experience as conscious observers. They were objectively observing causal relations in the world among objects. At the same time they were subjectively experiencing the world by means of some kind of 'intentional' relation with those objects. How could they bridge the gap between the two kinds of relations? Are they different in nature? Are they the same? Somehow the 'necessary relation' envisaged by Praetorius seems to be a good candidate. It has an ontological as well an epistemic role (as the old *cogito* had). If "a necessary relation exists between experience of things and the actual things (425)", even if "the

relation which exists between language and reality is unanalyzable (110)”, it seems still possible to look for some kind of necessary and a priori structure which is entailed by our experience of reality. In fact, “the assumptions of the inter-relatedness between language and reality, and between knowledge and reality, are necessary in the same sense and for the same reasons as are the principles of formal logic (40).” A possible solution could be to turn upside down the classic approach. Instead of trying to explain the necessary relation on the basis of a fixed ontology or epistemology, a solution could be to put the necessary relation as the foundation of reality (Manzotti and Tagliasco, 2000, 2001). This is an approach that seems to be the logical conclusion of the brilliant Praetorius’ book.

References

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