RULE-FOLLOWING, RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE AND ANTI-REPRESENTATIONAL REALISM

by

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ABSTRACT (482 words + references)

This paper examines what kind of response-dependence the so-called social solution (understood widely to include, e.g., Bloor (1997), Brandom (1994), Kripke (1982), Kusch (1999) and Pettit (1993)) to Wittgenstein’s rule-following problem actually commits us and, moreover, what implications the commitment to response-dependence has for realism.

The social solution argues (i) that we resolve the so-called Infinity Problem of rule-following by appealing to blind dispositions to continue a sequence in a certain way and (ii) that we resolve the Normativity Problem of rule-following by introducing a social process that monitors and harmonises the individual dispositions.

Realism combines the metaphysical thesis that the external world exists independently of us with the epistemological thesis that we have an epistemic access to the mind-independent world. While the social solution does not challenge the metaphysical thesis, it does seem to imply that our empirical judgements do not represent how things are in the external world independently of us. Rather, our empirical judgements depend on the way we respond to the world.

Thus, the social solution seems to imply that the strongest form of realism we can defend is some sort of internal realism, where we can know the world only as it appears to us, not as it is as such. My paper argues that this line of thought is based on a debatable reading of the nature of the social solution.

In my view we should pay more attention to Brandom and Kripke’s insistence that the core of Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations is Wittgenstein’s categorical rejection of representational or fact-based (truth-conditional) semantics. The search for the meaning of a concept is not a search for truth conditions but for normative assertability conditions. From this anti-representational perspective much of the debate on response-dependence that proceeds in terms of formulations of the type “object x is C iff it looks C to competent observers in favourable conditions” (including the related task of specifying “favourable conditions”) looks somewhat misplaced.

Semantics building on normative assertibility conditions amounts, I argue, to a holistic view in Quine’s (1951) sense. However, as Davidson (1983) and McDowell (1994) argue, Quinean holism appears to lead to anti-realist coherentism, for the causal processes of the external world seem unable to set a rational constraint on language constituted by normative relations. The way the world is appears to be irrelevant for our beliefs about the world, challenging again the epistemic aspect of realism.

My paper argues that this is precisely why Kripke and Brandom emphasise that Quinean holism must be combined with social holism. Within social practices non-normative, causal responses can be assigned a normative status in virtue of which they can set normative constraints on beliefs. Thus, I argue, Brandom and Kripke’s anti-representational reading of the rule-following considerations shows that far from challenging the epistemic aspect of realism, response-dependence rescues it. Such anti-representational realism is direct realism – there is no epistemic intermediary between us and the world.
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