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A principled basis for psychological research: Book review of Praetorius on Cognition-Action

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Praetorius' book advocates a healthy review and reform of the basic assumptions of much general theorising in psychology. Her central concern is to supply reasons of principle to demarcate the psychological and stave off reductionism. She seeks to derive these results from a handful of principles that she holds must be accepted since they form the very grounds for engaging in any inquiry at all. She employs these to good effect by showing that a number of prominent targets engaged in psychological theorising, including Gibson, Marr, Saussure, Stich and Fodor, are prey to deep-seated confusions about the general relation between language and the world. Similarly, she argues that social constructivists and relativists fall foul of the same oversight. I applaud her arguments against these figures and schools of thought.

Keywords

research, psychological, basis, principled, cognition, praetorius, review, book, action

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A PRINCIPLED BASIS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Book Review of Praetorius on Cognition-Action

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Abstract

Praetorius' book advocates a healthy review and reform of the basic assumptions of much general theorising in psychology. Her central concern is to supply reasons of principle to demarcate the psychological and stave off reductionism. She seeks to derive these results from a handful of principles that she holds must be accepted since they form the very grounds for engaging in any inquiry at all. She employs these to good effect by showing that a number of prominent targets engaged in psychological theorising, including Gibson, Marr, Saussure, Stich and Fodor, are prey to deep-seated confusions about the general relation between language and the world. Similarly, she argues that social constructivists and relativists fall foul of the same oversight. I applaud her arguments against these figures and schools of thought.

Keywords

Cognitive Science, Fictional Entities, History of Science, Naturalism, Psychology, Reductionism, Reality, Scientific Theorising, Truth, Wittgenstein

1. Praetorius' book advocates a healthy review and reform of the basic assumptions of much general theorising in psychology: an activity most psychologists would regard as peculiarly philosophical and hence strictly none of their business. Less kindly, many will scorn it as an unnecessary waste of time. Their motivating Lockean thought is that 'serious science' should lead the way of theorising and that philosophical

reflection only has legitimacy, if at all, in the service of this end. Thus 'naturalistic' philosophers hold that it is the job of philosophy to make its speculations fit with the conclusions of scientists, not the other way around. Goldman epitomises this type of attitude when he writes, "Philosophy also contributes to the project [of cognitive science], but it no longer has a privileged position...Since it is now clear that the most detailed and reliable information about the mind will emerge from the collective efforts of the cognitive sciences, philosophy should look to those sciences for relevant information and work hand in hand with them." (Goldman 1993: xi). Given that, as a psychologist, Praetorius fully appreciates the nature of psychological research, her work on this topic is both a rare and important contribution to the field. She sets the stage well for her project by asking the reader to reflect on how we ought to demarcate a 'science' in general and in the process revives Galileo's criteria, which sensibly bid us to hold that every science, physics and its sub-branches included, is concerned with a specialised and - hopefully - well defined area of interest. To accept this prompts questions about what defines the proper area of concern of psychology and whether it will remain autonomous and avoid absorption into some more basic, future science. It is at this point that she introduces her main concern of the book, which is to supply reasons of principle that would both demarcate the psychological and, simultaneously, stave off reductionism. Indeed, if her claim is correct, at best, the other, more basic, sciences will enable us to understand the necessary conditions that enable perception, cognition and action - but they will never provide explanations of these. She seeks to derive these results from a handful of principles that she holds must be accepted since they form the very grounds for engaging in any inquiry at all. These are:

1. The principle of the general correctness of language and knowledge;
2. The principle of the logical relation between concepts of language, knowledge, action and reality;
3. The principle of identity which states that we cannot say anything about anything without being able to say more about the same;
4. The principle of the logical relation between the notion of truth and the notion of 'others', or 'other persons'.

2. Some of these principles, or close cousins, will be familiar to philosophers (especially followers of Davidson). However, Praetorius enlists them in order to criticise the approaches of a number of prominent targets engaged in psychological theorising, including Gibson, Marr, Saussure, Stich and Fodor. She regards their work as being infected with deep-seated confusions stemming from a common source: All of these 'theorists' fail to recognise that there is a necessary relation between our descriptions of reality and reality itself. Thus, this illustrative cast of characters famously theorise about perception, language and cognition enlisting such posits as: directly perceived invariant information; computational rules and principles for generating images from impoverished stimuli; an independent system of signs; causally efficacious syntactical structures; and an internal language of thought. In postulating such things, each of them presupposes that there is a general divide between language and reality that can be sensibly drawn and stated - and then bridged by some means or other. In contrast, she maintains that this assumption is the root cause of the confusions that are rife in psychological theorising. Since she regards the very idea of such a general division as nonsensical, in each case their purported 'explanations' about how the gap is to be bridged are demonstrated to be viciously circular: they presuppose what they hope to explain. She employs this form of the *reductio ad absurdum* as her chief weapon, again and again, to good effect throughout.

3. Similarly, social constructivists and relativists fall foul of the same oversight in a different way when they suppose that it makes sense to think that our descriptions, in general, relate only to other descriptions as opposed to things in reality itself. I would not wish to question her four principles - since I accept them. Indeed I applaud her arguments against the figures and schools of thought mentioned above. However, I am less happy with her rejection of Wittgenstein's views about agreement (and his related views on forms of life), which she criticises in the final chapters. Her critique is based in part on associating Wittgenstein's remarks with relativistic and constructivist views, so in one sense my complaint may look as if it is merely a concern over how to read Wittgenstein correctly. However, as I hope to indicate below, the matter is deeper than this since we must presuppose some kind of agreement in responses that underpins our ability to develop a conception of things in the first place. Throughout her book Praetorius defends the idea that our capacity to identify objects and situations is a point of departure for more advanced scientific inquiries. As such she regards our ordinary descriptions of things as having equal legitimacy with scientific ones. For example, she rightly holds that the same notion of truth operates in both contexts. Read simply, therefore

the principle of the correctness of language seems to follow from the fact that anything we talk about 'truly' must exist as described.

4. Of course, this raises problems about such classes of things as fictional entities for it seems we can talk sensibly about these, indeed that we can make true claims about them, despite our knowing that they don't exist. Therefore it is possible to talk sensibly and correctly about fictional objects without such items even existing in reality. This being so it would seem possible to drive a wedge between our correct use of an entire class of terms and reality itself. It is not surprising therefore that Praetorius provides a treatment of fictional entities according to which she denies that a different notion of truth is operative in such cases. She claims, "...the relation between beliefs about things and the things they concern, be they real or fictitious, is a necessary relation" (p. 246). However there are important differences in the way we regard fictional entities in that, being aware of their nature, we are able to make a contrast between them and what exists. In particular she singles out the, "...differences concerning procedures for determining the truth and correct applications of descriptions and assertions of real versus fictitious things" (p. 245). These differences emerge because, unlike our dealings with real things, dealing with fictions, "...relies entirely on conventions amongst persons" (p. 246). But this raises difficult issues about hard cases in which it is not stipulated in advance, but only retrospectively, that we have been talking about fictions. Thus, it is instructive to consider situations in which we have simply been wrong about the existence of certain things, despite our being able to talk 'about them' sensibly and despite the fact that we employ the very same 'procedures for determining truth and correct applications', as we do in cases involving real objects. The history of science is replete with examples of apparent reference to such non-existent things. These appear to be cases in which our descriptions of reality are incorrect - despite having been, at the time, within the canons of correct usage. Are these also to be treated as cases in which we are dealing not with reality but with our own conventions?

5. Praetorius does not give much attention to this question, but I suspect she would treat such cases as particular instances in which language and reality have come apart and that these conditions do not, indeed could not, hold generally. Yet these are the kinds of scenario that she must handle in order to discourage the claim that all 'realities' are constructed and the associated idea that truth is based on conventions, both of which she rightly rejects.

6. Moreover to deal with them sensitively raises important questions about whether we could classify descriptions by type so as to determine which are more likely to go awry. These epistemological questions can be asked even if we accept Praetorius' principles. And, although it would be impossible to say much without looking at the details of each case, considerations such as those above may give us reason to doubt the idea that our ordinary and scientific descriptions are on a par - even though they both operate with the same notion of truth. That is to say it looks as if the former are more secure. For not only do our ordinary descriptions act as point of departure, they also act as point of retreat in cases in which our scientific theorising goes awry due to its risky and hypothetical nature. Finding an agreed common ground is a much a necessary condition for enabling experiments to be conducted as it is for evaluating theories and enabling us to make sense of the situations when they are in distress. This being so, it would appear, that our quotidian descriptions have an epistemic stability that needs to be recognised. Indeed, I hold that their security rests, in turn, on more basic agreements in the way we respond to things. To accept this is to hold that there are agreements in responses that make our conceptions possible and that they underpin our ability to make and evaluate judgements. However, these are not in anyway conventional agreements nor do they result in a relativised notion of truth.

7. Finally, there is one other issue that warrants further investigation in connection with the points made above. Praetorius writes:

...the existence of language and the use of language logically presupposes that there is something to be talked about, something which we may use language to refer to and something, therefore, which exists independently of language and as something about which true statements may be put forward in language (p. 307)

I agree entirely with this statement. In the chapter in which it appears, she employs the principle of the general correctness of language and knowledge in order to reject Puntam's metaphor of the dough (reality-in-itself) and the cookie cutter (language) and in doing so attacks the infamous scheme/content divide. This

is in effect to dispose of the idea that it is sensible to postulate 'reality-in-itself' as something that is beyond possible description. Her reasons for caution here are sound ones. There is always a great danger of falling into philosophical nonsense in this territory.

8. However, Praetorius, wisely in my book, also maintains that our descriptions of things will never succeed in exhausting reality. In light of the above rejection, we might ask what is the principled basis for this claim? Unless it is accepted at least some aspects of reality are beyond description, on what grounds can it be advanced? It follows logically that the possibility of re-identification must exist if we are to identify something as being the same (in accord with her third principle). Hence it must be the case that every identifiable thing will have more than one correct description. However, I can see nothing in her four main principles alone that rules out the possibility of something being completely or exhaustively described by a number of different descriptions, reality included.

9. I too hold that reality cannot be exhausted by our descriptions even though our many different descriptions of it may be true and correct in particular contexts. Indeed, in this sense and this sense alone, I believe that it is legitimate to use the term 'reality' to refer to that which is beyond description (and not something that is merely, as yet, undescribed). Accepting this seems necessary if one wishes to claim that in the end reality cannot be fully characterised. Though this should not worry Praetorius, since I see no reason to think that acceptance of this should result in our having to deny that we can describe aspects of it truly in our encounters with it within particular contexts. As far as I can see such a claim is not at odds with her four principles, since it is only within the appropriate contexts in which we talk about things in reality.

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