

Week 3b Friday April 17 Seminar Questions on Savage-Rumbaugh, et. al. II

Focus on the questions Q1-Q5 in small groups. We will discuss questions Q6 and Q7 and any questions generated by the small groups in the full seminar.

Q1 Background: Chapter 2 as we found on Tuesday argues from the history of philosophy that Cartesian bifurcation lies behind both Chomskyan mentalism and behaviorism surrounding debates about ape language research. Chapter 3 examines the same issue from what the prime author of the chapter (Taylor) considers the “rhetorical” perspective. In doing so, he is attacking Descartes (not from the perspective of the Cartesian mind/body distinction but from another Cartesian perspective). Descartes attempted to battle skepticism by seeking a firm foundation for (scientific) knowledge. It is this Cartesian foundationalism that lies behind Taylor approach in chapter 3.

Question 1: Taylor begins by discussing second-order (that is, what he calls “meta-linguistic”) questions (p.142). He explores the situation by the analogy of evaluating children’s swimming ability (p. 143) What use does he make of this analysis? At the end of first section (p 146), he distinguishes the epistemological from the rhetorical. In order to get clear about the argument consider first some of the concepts that are introduced. The term “epistemological” comes from a Greek word meaning “knowledge”. (Remember Descartes tried to find foundations for *knowledge*.) What does Taylor seem to mean by rhetoric (p.147)? Exactly what does Taylor mean when he distinguishes a rhetorical and the epistemological approach?

Q2. Taylor characterizes two versions of the epistemological approach: methodological reductivism and methodological operationalism. What, according to Taylor, is the reductive method of evaluation (p. 157 ff)? He introduces the distinction between the *de dicto* (literally *of the word*) and the *de re* (*of the thing*) (p. 148). How does he use this distinction in this section? What exactly is the argument against using a reductive method of evaluation in claims about ape understanding (p 159-160)? In particular how does the author (Taylor) use the parallel between what we want to say about the human case to reach a conclusion about the ape case?

Q3. What is the operational version of epistemological approach? What do you suppose he means when he distinguishes the deductive-explanatory explanation of the operational approach from the *inductive-evidential* approach of the reductivist (p. 164)? How does it relate to the notion of “inference to the best explanation” in ape language research (164-5) How does it apply to arguments about Kanzi (p. 168-9)? (OPTIONAL EXTENTION) *How might the operationalist alternative introduce psychologically real (de re), theoretical “objects”?* *When a psychologist talks about short term memory and long term and relates them to various test operations do you think that they are postulating the existence de re of some theoretical state, process. When a physicist talks about quarks as physically real things in subatomic physics, by relating them to experiments which might (indirectly) be explained by them, might they be following the operational version of the epistemological approach to science.*

Q4. Taylor argues that the operational version of the epistemological approach to ape research (also) leads to a dead end (cul-de-sac). What reasons does he give? Do you accept his argument (first paragraph p. 174)? Given that both versions of the epistemological approach are faulty, he suggests that the problem lies in the epistemological approach itself. His rhetorical approach is put forward as an alternative (that will escape the Cartesian bifurcation discussed by Shanker in chapter 2). What is the alternative p. 174ff)? Does it strike you as a plausible approach to the issue of ape language? If so, in what sense does it seem to be “scientific”?

Q5. Early on in chapter 4, the authors distinguish wholistic intelligence from hierarchical intelligence. (p 187-189). How do they use this distinction (p. 190-193) to raise doubts about formal approaches to language?

Q6. The authors consider alternative ways to study language given what they see as the problem posed by Kanzi. Discuss these alternatives, and their defense of the fourth alternative. (p 194). What do you take them as meaning when they call this social constructivism? (p198). Do you agree that this is the most plausible alternative? Do you see any other options not listed here?

Q7. On p. 213, reread the paragraph that begins “They learned our language.” Having read the whole text, do you agree with the summary in this paragraph, and the further claim that “What these facts reveal, in a rather unequivocal manner, is that language is not innate in any meaningful sense of the word “innate.” What conclusions do you draw from the book overall about how the study of language should be shaped by the results of ape language research?

Formulate a question for further discussion—either at the end of the seminar or at the beginning of the afternoon session. Write it down and be prepared to read it. But you don’t have to put it on the board.