

On Unclear and Indistinct Ideas*
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...for it is scarcely conceivable that we can make a judgment or entertain a supposition without knowing what it is we are judging or supposing about....the meaning we attach to our words must be something with which we are acquainted...[but] Julius Caesar is not himself before our minds. (Russell, The problems of Philosophy, p. 58.)

The difficulty with Russell's Principle has always been to explain what it means. (Gareth Evans, The varieties of Reference, p.89)

Introduction

Evans believed that there should be a way of explaining "what Russell's Principle means" that makes it come out true. To this end, he vigorously reinterpreted the notion "acquaintance," but his analysis of the varieties of this relation bears scant resemblance to anything in Russell. I will argue that under a very plausible interpretation which, I fancy, is considerably closer in one way to Russell and in another way to Evans than either is to the other, knowing what one is judging about turns out to be a matter of degree. The lowest degree may indeed be necessary for having thought at all, but the highest degree is never realized. As Evans saw, grasping the identity of the object of one's thought requires having a concept of that object, which requires, in turn, conforming to what Evans called the "generality constraint" (1982, p. 100). But a concept is an ability, a knowhow, and unlike either know-thats or dispositions, knowhows come in degrees. One can know how but still fail. Indeed, it is common actually to be mistaken about the object of one's thought.

But there is, on the other hand, a tendency for the object of one's thought to become whatever one takes it to be. The result is that thought can easily become equivocal. Misidentifying the object of one's thought is not, in central cases, an innocent act of false judgment, but an act that muddies the very content of the thought involved, corrupting the inner representational system. Reciprocally, the development and maintenance of relatively clear and distinct ideas is a substantive ongoing activity indispensable to the progress of thought. Descartes went astray only in failing to see how much more this activity involves than mere armchair reflection.

A brief remark on methodology before the plunge. I will embrace without argument the Sellarsian thesis (Sellars 1956) that theories about the nature of thought are theories. Minimally, they are not mere descriptions, certainly not descriptions or "analyses" of concepts, but constructions. Hence I will not tolerate arguments of the form, "[i]nsistence on such cases involves an overthrow of our notion of what it is to possess a concept" (Evans

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