

HORNSBY ON GENDER AND THE PHENOMENO- LOGY OF SPEECH

AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER HORNSBY

By Monica Roland

Jennifer Hornsby is Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is also one of the eight members of the core group of the new Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN) at the University in Oslo, and the external Co-Director of its rational agency section. Her main fields of interests lie within the philosophy of action, mind, and language. She also works in and teaches subjects like metaphysics and areas of feminist philosophy.

In a previous interview with Filosofisk supplement one of our senior scientific officers, Tove Pettersen, calls attention to the fact that women engaged in philosophy often get the question “What is it like to be a female philosopher?” or “How is it to be a woman within philosophy?”¹ She claims that a strategy for some women has been, or is, to pretend being men or without gender, and to distance themselves from feminism and everything that can be labelled “female philosopher”. On the other hand she points out that, for the women who do not deny their sex, almost everything they do is gendered. Pettersen is asking for a “happy medium” between being caught within gender and denying that one has one. It seems to me that you have succeeded with that. You have been involved with feminist philosophy, you have written on the topic, but you are also engaged in other areas of philosophy and have gained great renown and recognition for it without being caught in the “gender-trap”. Any comments?

Gosh! So the two possibilities from this point of

view are pretending to be a man and doing everything in a gendered way?

Yes.

But the way you put it, it seems as though one couldn't for instance advance some feminist views unless one was doing everything in a gendered way. I mean it seems to me that you need a distinction between the manner in which one conducts oneself and the views one expresses. I'd be very happy with the thought that I've found a happy mean between two extremes. I certainly don't think I've ever pretended to be a man or thought it helpful to make progress in my career to behave more as if I were a man. Nor have I thought it actually unhelpful to be involved in questions about gender and feminism, and no doubt the interest of these questions for me is connected with my being a woman.

But have you ever felt that being a woman is an obstacle when it comes to pursuing an academic carrier within philosophy? I mean have you ever experienced prejudice or even been treated differently?

I think there are obstacles for women. I think that when it comes to questions about how to organize things, for instance, men are apt to get their own way. And there may then be circumstances in which women can only intervene effectively by be-

having more like men would. I think personally I haven't suffered too much and that's partly because of the course my career has taken. I taught for a long time in Oxford where as a teacher one has a lot of independence: You're in a particular college with particular students and you just make of it what you will. So you don't have to do much in the way of organizing with others at all. You are pretty autonomous as a teacher and that's helpful. Then since I moved to Birkbeck, which I did thirteen years ago, I've been in a department with plenty of women. When I first arrived it was half women in the department. In a typical U.K. department, it's unlikely that you'll have significantly more than one woman in the department. To have half is definitely different.

So do you think that has influenced you in any way? I mean did it make any difference first being on your own, so to speak, and then being in a department where half the staff were women?

Well, I don't think it made any actual difference. But then again, obstacles that some people encounter I haven't encountered because in both contexts I got lucky. In one case, things aren't done on a departmental basis, and the other, where they are done on such a basis, half my colleagues are women anyway.

Petterson thinks men should be asked the same question: "What is it like to be a male philosopher?" or "What significance has being a man had to your work?" I take it that she obviously wants to make the point that women do get these kinds of questions, but I also take it to mean that she thinks gender does play a role when it comes to perspectives. Do you think that the gender perspective is important in areas of philosophy of language, mind and action? Does it have any relevance here?

I think there are specific questions where it clearly does have relevance, but I think there are lots of questions of a metaphysical kind about language where it doesn't have any immediate relevance. But it's not that one could demarcate fields of philosophy and say that gender is going to be relevant here but not here. Potentially there will be questions in almost any area where it has some relevance. Any area of philosophy may have been adversely affected by the fact that its practitioners historically have all, or very nearly all, been men.

It seems to me that women in philosophy tend to have to do with some specific areas of philosophy, like for instance areas within moral philosophy, and not too much with areas like philosophy of language.

Yes, I'm sure this can be accounted for by gender factors, but I don't think they are factors having to do with the relevance of gender questions within philosophy. If you look at subjects outside philosophy, you'll find many more women do literature and many fewer women do physics. And speaking very roughly, one might say that ethics is more like literature and philosophical logic and some philosophy of language are more like physics. So I mean I'm sure that the differentiation between fields of men and women is related to gender—to how men and women have been brought up to think about themselves and so on. But it's not philosophy-specific.

Now, I want to leave the gender questions and talk more specifically about some of your work within philosophy of action and language. Much of your work has been influenced by Anscombe, especially her notion of "knowledge without observation". In for instance "Basic Action and Teleology" and also later on in "Semantic Knowledge and Practical Knowledge" you are talking about what you call basic action which is tightly connected to the notion of practical knowledge. Could you say something about what you take basic action to be and its connection with practical knowledge?

Right. I need to backtrack a bit, however, because I think I am nowadays deeply influenced by Anscombe, but I don't think I was when I first thought about basic action. To the detriment of some of my thinking, I didn't take some of the points that Anscombe made. What is true, though, is that I gave a definition of so-called teleologically basic action back in 1980, and brought the notion of knowledge into the definition, which I think was unusual. I now see that as connected with my finding something right in Anscombe. But it's only recently that I've come to see a close connection between the idea of basic action and an idea of knowledge without observation. I wasn't working with the idea of knowledge without observation back in 1980 when I gave the account.

As for what a basic action is ... Ordinarily when we do anything we actually do lots of things. That is just a way of stating a view about individual



ILLUSTRATION: LENE HAUGE

tion of action, which Anscombe holds and which Davidson in a way made more precise. So there is one action, but you are doing several things, because you are doing one by doing another, and you are doing the other by doing a third, and so on. The thought then is that if for each thing you did there had to be a new piece of knowledge how to do that thing, then you'd never get anything done. There'd be a regress, if each thing you did was such that you needed a piece of knowledge about how to do it. So here I am relating the notion of basic action to knowledge. It is ordinarily defined as that which is not done by means of doing anything else. But what's missing from that simple account is the fact that it's only the things that we intentionally do that ought to get ranked for basicness. Or at least if we want a teleological notion of basicness, we should include only the things we intentionally do. So what one should say is that one thing is more basic than another if you are apt intentionally to do the other by doing the one. So flipping the switch is more basic than turning on the light because you turn on the light by flipping the switch. Now inasmuch as it is intentionally that you flip the switch and intentionally that you turn on the light, there will be knowledge on your part that flipping that switch is the way to get the light on. Such knowledge is in the background of your action.

Right, so it's like you say then in "Semantic Knowledge and Practical Knowledge" that practical knowledge is what enables us to get started.

Yes. But you see there could be a disagreement. I mean there might be philosophers who thought that you need to know in what way you need to move your finger to flip the switch in order to be able to flip the switch, and they're likely to think that when you flip the switch you intentionally move your finger muscles, and other philosophers might say "No, we just know how to flip switches, we don't have to learn how our fingers move in order to be able to flip switches". I don't know if that's a very plausible thing to say, but depending on your views about what knowledge we exercise in action you're going to have one or another view about what's basic. So if doing a basic thing is thought of as doing something such that knowledge how to do it runs out, then people are going to have different views about basicness, because they have different views about what we know.

In that paper you oppose the view that semantic knowledge consists in knowledge of a compositional semantic theory. Your phenomenological claim or observation is rather that when we speak, it seems that we directly voice our thoughts. Could you say something about what you take "directly" to mean? Does it mean, as Jason Stanley seems to think, that we are not aware of the sentences we use in voicing them?²²

No, that isn't what I mean. On one view there's an inference to be made by a speaker or a hearer, an inference from which words are uttered to what

thought is voiced. I don't hold that view. I think no such inference is made in the course of ordinary communication. We hear people as saying what they do, and as speakers we can directly say what we do. But this has no tendency to show that we aren't aware of the words we use. As if we might as well speak silently as it were.

One reason why I think Stanley didn't see what I was up to is that he often in his paper, and even more at the conference at which he presented his reply, talked about belief. I do think we believe most of the things we know, but belief is not the concept you need to understand what I was trying to say. And the fact that he resorts to that concept seems like a failure to understand what I was trying to say.

Stanley seems to think that I must think we're not consciously aware of producing words if I think that voicing thoughts is basic. But I just reject his inference there. Of course in order to voice thoughts, I have to produce words and probably I have to be consciously aware of what words I'm producing. But that doesn't mean that the object of my intention need be those words as opposed to the thought content that I'm putting across. The idea that my thoughts are voiced directly is the idea that the words themselves don't belong in my intention.

At the beginning of the paper you seem to start out with a strong claim that whenever we speak we directly voice our thoughts.

No, not whenever we speak, but whenever we are using a language which we are perfectly familiar with. And I suppose I should qualify also to say: provided we are using an indicative sentence.

Right. But towards the end you seem to end up with a weaker claim. It seems as if you admit that we do have a kind of semantic knowledge, but that we ordinarily make no use of it, so that sometimes when we voice our thoughts we do not do so directly but via procedural knowledge. You say: "Indeed whatever disposes someone to understand some sentence s will dispose them equally to recognize the truth of a statement which uses their language to record what can be used to say [...]" Thus you can be shown to have a procedural knowledge, of a kind a semantic theory may be supposed to yield, in respect of any sentence you understand. The fact that we have such knowledge may be an obstacle to our appreciating that we ordinarily make no use of it.³ So we can have procedural

semantic knowledge?

Yes. I mean, as soon as one's got an explicit concept of truth one can have a sort of knowledge which might be thought of as procedural semantic knowledge. If I say to anyone "Do you think that 'snow is white' is true just in the circumstances in which snow is white", they'll say, "Yes". They've got the concept of truth and even if I'm heavy with the quotation marks they will sort of see the point – that there is semantic ascent and descent. The thought that I'm trying to express in the bit you quote from me is that because it can be made fairly obvious that people do know these things (they assent to them when they are asked), it is then supposed that the knowledge that they manifest in their assent is knowledge which they use when they speak. But it isn't. I'm saying that the sheer fact that we possess the knowledge at issue (which is certainly semantic, and I suppose could be used procedurally), is an obstacle for seeing that in the ordinary course of things we don't actually use it.

I want to round off this interview by asking you about the new centre: the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature. What are your hopes for the centre? And what is your role in it?

Well, I hope the Centre will be a place where a lot of good philosophy is done, and where people in Oslo who don't actually belong to the Centre can benefit from that philosophy being done. The Centre will surely raise the profile of the study of philosophy in Norway.

My own role is mainly to be involved in organizing conferences and workshops and joining in these, and helping with making appointments (of visiting Fellows and Professors, and of Post-doc and Doctoral Fellowships) so that such good work will be done. I'm trying to bring it about that I have less to do in London so that I can actually do more research which will be connected with projects in the centre. But that's hard because when you've been in a job for a while people sort of expect you to do stuff, so that my colleagues in the Birkbeck Department somewhat naturally don't take my role in CSMN into account.

NOTES

¹ *Filosofisk supplement* 4/2006.

² Stanley, J. 2005. "Hornsby on the Phenomenology of Speech". *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 79:1, s. 140.

³ Hornsby, J. 2005. "Semantic Knowledge and Practical Knowledge". *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 79:1, s. 128.