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## **'Let the ideas fall where they may': Quine, Publicity, and Pre-Established Harmony**

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1. It is natural to think that Quine favoured the 'publicity' of meaning. The first sentence of the preface of Quine's *Word and Object* is 'Language is a social art' (1960, ix). Over and over he denied the cogency of a 'mentalist' theory of meaning—an account which consigns the crucial facts of meaning to a private mental realm. For example in the *Roots of Reference*:

Language, we are told, serves to convey ideas...Now how do we know that these ideas are the same? And, so far as communication is concerned, who cares? We have all learned to apply the word 'red' to blood, tomatoes, ripe apples, and boiled lobsters. The associated idea, the associated sensation, is as may be. (1974, 35)

Blood, tomatoes, ripe apples and boiled lobsters are quintessentially public things; we 'have all learned to apply the word[s]' to them.

Let us characterise the 'Publicity Requirement' as the demand that language not be described in terms of entities unamenable to intersubjective scrutiny; it must be described in terms of the intersubjective or third-person cognitive interaction with ordinary facts, objects, or events, of a sort that is jointly available to normal language-users. What is ruled out, most obviously, are schemes such as Russell's in 1910 that saw private sense-data as the things we fundamentally talk about. In 1952, though with an eye on epistemology rather than semantics, Quine writes:

I suggest that it is a mistake to seek an immediately evident reality, somehow more immediately evident than the realm of external objects. Unbemused by philosophy, we would all go along with Dr. Johnson, whose toe was his touchstone of reality. (1952, 225)

Further dimensions of Quine's observance of something like the Publicity Requirement are not far to seek. In 'Mind and Verbal Dispositions' of 1975, with at least one eye on semantics he repeats the point of *The Roots of Reference* quoted above:

... the fixed points are just the shared stimulus and the word; the ideas in between are as may be and may vary as they please, so long as the external stimulus in question stays paired up with the word in question for all concerned. The point is well dramatized by the familiar fantasy of complementary colour perception. Who knows but that I see things in colour opposite to those in which you see the thing? For communication it is a matter of indifference. (1975, 248<sup>1</sup>)

Quine connects this theme with behaviourism:

The behavioural level, in between [the mental and the physiological], is what we must settle for in our descriptions of language, in our formulations of semantical rules, and in our explications of semantical terms... These things need to explained, *if at all*, in behavioural terms.. (emphasis added; 1975, 248)

The relevant behavior is equated with the use of language. In 'Use and Its Place in Meaning',<sup>2</sup> Quine wrote:

Wittgenstein has stressed that the meaning of a word is to be sought in its use. This is where the empirical semanticist looks: to verbal behavior ... we can take the behavior, the use, and let the meaning go. (1981, 46).

The distinction between use and linguistic behavior might be thought to reside in the difference between a normative conception of use versus a purely descriptive conception of behaviour, but for my purposes I will set the normativity issue aside and accept Quine's assimilation. (Quine says elsewhere such things as that 'in linguistics one has no choice' but to accept behaviourism; 1992, 37; 1987, 341).

Quine considers mental phenomena generally—thinking, feeling, perceiving, and so on—as systematically behaviourally manifestable, even if in individual cases they exist when not actually manifested. Quine draws an analogy with diseases:

... we may do well to reflect on how we learn the mentalistic terms in the first place. All talk about one's mental life presupposes external reference. Introspect our mental states as we will, how do we know what to call them? How did we learn to call our anxieties anxieties, how dull aches dull aches, our joy joys, and our awareness awareness? Why do we suppose that what we call joys and anxieties are what other people call by those names? How we know what we talking about? Clearly the answer is that such terms are applied in the light of publicly observable symptoms. ... *I am not applying the terms to behavior.* A mental state is not always manifested in behavior. Physically construed, it is a state of nerves. We can say which state it is, however, and tell one from another, without knowing the neural mechanism. ... Mental states ... are like diseases. A disease may be diagnosed in light of observable signs though the guilty germs be still unknown to science. (1985, 323-4; Quine's emphasis)

But there is a difficulty. The difficulty is that it is far from straightforward how to fit in detail Quine's view of language to the Publicity Requirement. In addition to its ban on mental or private entities playing a role in linguistic explanation, the Publicity Requirement also seems to rule out an 'internalist' or 'individualistic' conception of language, according to which the essential facts are not public in the requisite sense, even if they are not essentially or irreducibly mental or private. Yet as we'll see Quine's mature view is that at least some of those essential facts *are* internal or individual. And his view of whether *meaning* is public complicates matters further. In one sense of 'meaning', he holds that as a simple question of the significance or lack of it of linguistic items—whether a certain object or event, or kind of object or event, is meaningful in the first place—the matter is indeed settled by linguistic behaviour. But in another sense of the term his view is that the question carries a false assumption: that there is a well-grounded scientific answer to it. He denies the possibility of a scientific theory of meaning, in the sense of a rigorous, empirically adequate account of the particular meanings of sentences or statements. He was sceptical of the idea from the get-go but such is one of the most notable conclusions of his central book *Word and Object*.

Quine does think that there is a phenomenon ordinarily called 'meaning', even though it must be conceived in a revisionary way. As became explicit especially in Quine's work in the years after *Word and Object*, he thought it possible rigorously to describe the use of language, linguistic behaviour, so as to account for cognitive or referential use of language, in ways that are themselves scientific (as in *Roots of Reference*). It is possible to describe it in ways that do not go beyond the bounds of what

he termed his naturalism, but that does not add up to an account of meaning in the classical sense, of propositions and concepts. That phenomenon, one might think, is public, almost by definition. But there are further relevant complexities in Quine's views, and there is a crucial dimension that did not fully emerge until after *Word and Object*. These pull in opposite directions. The complexities concern the fact that, unlike the case with Davidson, there is the appearance, at least, that Quine was committed to a proximate rather than a distal conception of reference; he thus appears to substitute the privacy of one's own nerves for mentalistic privacy, thus contravening the Publicity Requirement. The crucial late-emerging dimension is the emergence of ideology, and not ontology, as central to the objectivity of language. This reinforces the idea that the public use of language— not its capacity to encode propositions or refer to objects—is the fundamental thing.

The upshot is that there simply isn't a straightforward relation between Quine's mature view and the Publicity Requirement.<sup>3</sup> His view, to misquote his 'Relativism and Absolutism', is that it 'involves both public and private strains' (1984, 319). My task is to identify these in more detail.

## 2.

That '[L]anguage is a social art' might seem to suggest that for meaning we should look beyond the individual to the linguistic community, that meaning in some sense resides out there, or that meaning is a feature of languages that have their being as sets of practices, norms or patterns of collective behavior. Another famous quotation from *Word and Object* runs:

Different persons growing up in the same language are like different bushes trimmed and trained to take the shape of identical elephants. The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fulfill the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the overall outward results are alike. (1960, 8)

But despite such remarks, and the occasional reference to pre-Chomskian thinkers such as Kenneth Pike or Benjamin Whorf, or indeed to Wittgenstein, Quine generally keeps his sights on the individual and does not propose anything like a systematic theory of language as a social institution. He continued to maintain the view expressed in 1978:

Cognitive equivalence for the individual ... is the prior notion conceptually ... Two occasion sentences are equivalent for him if he is disposed, on every occasion of query, to give them matching verdicts or, on doubtful occasions, no verdict. The summation over society comes afterward: the sentences are equivalent for the language if equivalent for each speaker taken separately. (1979 [1978], 4)

In this section I will largely follow him in this, returning to the way in which Quine does think of language as depending on the ways of the community near the end. I'll first identify the reasons that militate against thinking of him as accepting the Publicity Requirement as stated above. Two points, a short one and a longer one.

The short point is that at the level of observation sentences—and this is where the Publicity Requirement would seem to bite the hardest—there is no reference. Not intrinsically. In the spirit of the language-games of the early parts of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we might think of a possible creature conversant with 'red', 'Mama', 'rabbit', and so on—a creature who assents to

'rabbit?' when and only when a rabbit is manifest, and similarly with respect to other observation sentences (where 'rabbit' and the like are thought of as one-word sentences, roughly equivalent to 'There's a rabbit!' etc.), without commanding any other linguistic devices, and without properly referring to any objects at all. We ourselves approximated to such creatures when we first acquired language. It's only at a more sophisticated level, when quantifiers, pronouns, and more generally the 'apparatus of individuation' begin to enter in, that a creature—idealising tremendously of course—must be credited with the power to refer (see *Roots of Reference*, Quine 1973, 81-92). All reification, all objects, properly speaking, are in a this sense theoretical—there is a continuum from familiar 'posits' we gain the capacity to refer to as a matter of course such as ordinary bodies, to the more abstruse posits we refer to more deliberately such as quasars or quarks. They differ epistemologically only by degree. Indeed another way of denying the creature at this basic level the power of reference is to say that such a creature has no ontology at all (which is not to say the creature has no 'ideology'; see 'Ontology and Ideology Revisited' in which Quine speaks of 'perceptual ideology': 1983, 317).

The longer point is that in 'Propositional Objects' [1965], with considerably more detail in the *Roots of Reference* (1973), and in all subsequent writings which treat of the topic, it is quite clear that Quine thinks unequivocally of the stimulus meaning of an observation sentence as the stimulation of 'some subset of the subject's sensory receptors' (1990b, 370). It is not as clear in *Word and Object* of 1960, and one might take the view there to be that the stimulus meaning of 'red' is, roughly, a type of stimulation common to all occasions of use of the word by competent users. If users of the word are subject to the same stimulation of red light, then they will react with the same disposition—the disposition to assent to the question 'red?' if asked (hiving off the occasional counterexample and ignoring other complexities). But, as Quine came to emphasise in the 1965 piece—and in accord with the passage quoted above in 'Mind and Verbal Dispositions' of 1975, closely considered—he meant the neurological idea. And the 'same stimulation' cannot be the firing of each relevant person's sensory receptors on the relevant occasions, because that is to assume that every relevant person has an exactly or roughly similar layout of sensory receptors, which Quine explicitly acknowledged that they do not, and in any case the neural layout of the individual language-user should not matter for matters of meaning and translation. We ought for example to be able to translate a porpoise, if their squeaks do add up to language.

Accordingly Quine settled for a notion of stimulus meaning for observation sentences that is relativized to the individual user ('the stimulus meaning of s for A'), and counted a sentence as observational for a community just in case it is observational for each member and 'if each would agree in assenting to it, or dissenting, on witnessing the occasion of its utterance' (1992, 42—this addition is to avoid the drawback that a sentence could be observational for all concerned without the speakers' being disposed to assent to it in just the same situations; 1992, 43). From our point of view, the apparent trouble seems to be that whereas the presence of a rabbit is plainly a public event, the stimulation of one's sensory receptors is not, as Quine stressed from 1965 onwards. 'Rabbit' might be an observation sentence for one individual and also for another individual, and of the community containing the two, but why are these one-word sentences not merely accidental homonyms? Why is it that we do often get sameness of response when 'witnessing the occasion'? It's unlikely to be mere coincidence, but so far we have no insight into what brings about the concord. One who is impressed with Wittgenstein or even by the passages quoted at the outset by Quine himself might think it is essential that such sentences be shared amongst different people

more intimately. It has not really been explained *how* the Publicity Requirement is to be satisfied in Quine's scheme in cases where it *is* satisfied.

For some readers, in 1990-2 Quine made things more desperate by rejecting Davidson's suggestion that the relevant stimulations be identified with the common cause of our respective assents to the queried observation sentence—e.g. the presence of a rabbit. There are two reasons why he rejected it. First, Quine's treatment of this issue is motivated by his epistemological aim of describing how we go from stimulus—the relatively 'meagre stimuli' (1969b, 83) that one is actually subjected to—to science—to the 'torrential output' (ibid), the vastly complicated and interconnected linguistic dispositions in which one's scientific knowledge consists (see *Roots of Reference* pp. 2-3, *From Stimulus to Science* p. 16). Part of the epistemologist's project is to explain or to describe the finer structure of the ability to talk about distal objects, to describe the facts underlying the capacity for reference or for reification. It is out of the question for this purpose to simply assume it outright (1996, 475 and 1999, 159-61; also we refer to many objects without their being in the relevant way a cause of our linguistic behaviour—e.g. numbers, and objects which are very distant or very small).

Second, many observation sentences, such as 'It's raining' or 'It's cold', lack a suitable object such as a rabbit. To the idea that *situations* might be invoked for the purpose of interpreting these, Quine demurs on the grounds that '[T]hey are of a piece with facts and propositions', which Quine famously rejects for want of satisfactory criteria of identity (1993, 416; in *Pursuit of Truth* he wrote 'I am put off by the vagueness of shared situations', 1992, 42).

A likely reply to the first point is that the mere fact that a deeper analysis of the ability to refer is possible does not preclude that the notion be used in semantics. Thus Quine's argument for the inscrutability of reference looms large here (for 'ontological relativity'; Quine came to see the terms as equivalent). For reference cannot, according to the argument, play a substantive role in linguistic explanation, as a way of tying mind securely to objects. Although reference, one might think, is fundamental to any adequate account of language, and the reference of words is what provides the public anchor points of language, Quine finds serious fault with this story. Assume for simplicity that we can speak interchangeably of a theory or a language. If a person's theory consists of the sum total of the person's dispositions to assent or dissent with respect to the declarative sentences of his language, then the factuality of the theory cannot be explained in terms of the particular objects referred to. For there is no detectable difference between certain reference schemes which materially disagree on the extension of the reference relation. Begin with any scheme, select any 'proxy-function'—a permutation of the domain of the reference relation such as 'is the cosmic complement of'—re-interpret the predicates correspondingly so that for example '*Fa*' has the effect of 'The proxy of *a* is a proxy of an *F*'; then the truth-value of each sentence is unaffected. What is invariant through such transformations is the structure of the reference relation, not which objects are denoted by which terms. (Moreover, if the sense or meaning one is credited with depends only on the sum of one's linguistic dispositions then the argument shows that reference is not determined by sense or meaning; 1990a, 361).

Thus it looks as if Quine by 1992 in effect had rescinded any commitment he might have had to the Publicity Requirement as stated above. The epistemological project, as Quine then saw it, would not be stymied by what is in effect the privacy or rather the idiosyncrasy of stimulus meaning (since stimulations are in principle available to the third-person methods of science, even if in practice they

are unknown). In a section of *Pursuit of Truth* revealingly called 'To each his own', he writes 'The view that I have come to, regarding intersubjective likeness of stimulation, is ... that we can simply do without it.' (1992, 42).

3. Quine's position at this juncture, after this problem had rankled for thirty years, was as he recognised not altogether satisfactory (1999, 161). But after 1992, partly in consequence of an exchange with Garry Ebbs (2016), Quine came to think that a hero of naturalism in biology, Charles Darwin, could be invoked as showing a way round the problem of the idiosyncrasy of stimulus meaning.

In 'I, You and It' (1995) he conditionally defined sameness of interpersonal perceptual standards as follows (with intrapersonal similarity already defined): If a given outer event at different times produces neural events in X that are similar in X and likewise produces neural events in Y that are similar in Y, and the same result is repeated in other occasions, then that is evidence that the perceptual standards are shared between X and Y (1995, 486), despite the inevitable neurological differences between them. Experiments can confirm what is in any event obvious, that that state of affairs obtains, but Quine sees Darwin as offering a naturalistic explanation. Having natural needs and interests in common, and living as we do in a shared environment, our species has evolved habits of being responsive to certain things immediately in view rather than others. Thus you and I are programmed by natural selection to tend to attend to such things as a rabbit emerging into view, and not typically a random bit of sky, even though the precise anatomical details will differ between us. Fundamentally it's no different from the fact that despite our anatomical differences, we equally learn to walk, prefer the taste of sugar to that of turpentine, and recoil at loud noises.

This is what Quine, wilfully invoking Leibniz, called the 'pre-established harmony' of perception (1995b, 23-32; 1995c, 33-6; 1996, 473-6; 1999, 486-92; 2000a, 493-7; 1995a, 20-1). Although Quine does not make either of these points himself, this would help to account for the ease with which children learn language and the apparent inter-translatability of all human languages (abstracting from rhetorical and poetic differences). Quine says that it extends also to such stimulations as the vocalized phoneme 'Rain'; stimulations of that sort will also tend amongst humans—with qualifications of context and so on—to be grouped together as similar (1996, 475; 1999, 486; 1997a, 184; 1997b, 480). He was confident that despite the unedifying immensity and complexity of the task, the facts in which pre-established harmony consists are in principle explicable at the neural level and also at the genetic level; much of the philosophical value of Darwin's contribution is the erasure of any but ordinary causation in the explanation of biological phenomena. Natural selection was Darwin's great 'solvent of metaphysics' (1996, 475).

The Publicity Requirement therefore does not fit neatly into Quine's account, at least not in the way formulated at the beginning, but now we can see that it is not necessary directly to meet it. With the story laid out in full, the clamour for an unequivocal decision yea or nay on whether Quine advocates the fundamental publicity of meaning or language dies down. The public *environment* is presupposed by pre-established harmony, which is accounted for by natural selection. And pre-established harmony accounts for why the ordinary translator can 'blithely' assume the common public object, such as the rabbit, as the referent 'no questions asked' (1996, 474). But for Quine reference and meaning are a distraction from a more penetrating explanation. The 'Publicity of

Meaning' is partly a misleading slogan, a smokescreen, a diversion from the phenomenon it promises to elucidate. Once the environment is in place—with all its rabbits, states of the weather and other features, things which the Publicity Requirement insists upon as figuring in the fine-grained explanation of language—Quine's story deals primarily with proximate matters. Those matters are fundamentally individualistic, idiosyncratic or internal. Publicity is an initial way of characterising what language is, but it requires investigation to discover what it ultimately comes to. It is a ladder that is for the most part kicked away in the end—not a principle that is fundamental to the functioning of language that must remain intact as we dig deeper. If we dig deeper, we do not find anything literally shareable, or exactly similar in the way that would be required by the doctrine of common meanings. What emerges is the importance, for the functioning of language, of the pre-established harmony of perceptual standards, the fact that our species is wired up just so by the processes of natural selection. It is the existence of such facts that underlies our common language, of our common world, if by that phrase we mean the world of ideas, symbols, and theories.

4. I suggested earlier that a Quinean accommodation of the intersubjectivity of language, of objective communication, lies not in reference, not in ontology or in a shared ontology, but in 'ideology'—the 'logos of ideas'—which for Quine is the lexicographical or predicative structure of one's language or theory (Quine 1952, 1983). The objectivity or intersubjectivity of language does not hang on either its reference or on the stimulus meaning of observation sentences. Neither is up to the task. What does reflect its objectivity, what survives variations in reference and stimulus meaning, is the use of predicates or general terms—that where I say 'rabbit' you say something identifiable phonologically as the same as my 'rabbit'. It is where we began, with the use of language, with linguistic behaviour, despite the detour. Once again, the idiosyncrasy of stimulation enters in because even in the case of theoretical sentences, whether or not a hearer assents to it will depend partly on whether they hear the sound itself correctly, a matter of their capacity for phonological perception. And the exercise of that capacity generally presupposes that the speaker is a normal language-user and situated in a normal context, both linguistic and non-linguistic. In other words, objectivity itself presupposes the world to be more or less as we think, which is part and parcel of naturalism. There is no deeper fact underlying the objectivity of language. Language cannot explain objectivity or the availability of a common world so much as reflect it; that is itself a presupposition of naturalism.

However the question remains of what exactly determines a language-user's adoption of a particular ideology, of how they make their own a particular structure of predicates rather than some other. How much leeway is left for its being partly a matter of the specific linguistic environment? From early on Quine was influenced by the American structural linguists and behavioural linguists, who viewed the linguistic capacity as the result of the interaction between the individual and the linguistic community but accorded the lion's share to social facts of the linguistic community (with the more extreme view being represented by Whorf). But by the 1980's Quine tended to back away from any grand pronouncements in this area, and with the doctrine of pre-established harmony—this is speculation—the appeal of behavioural or structural linguistics must have subsided. What remains true is that although the learning of language is a social affair, the teacher teaches the pupil to acquire *their own* linguistic facility. In the case of teaching an observation sentence, for example, the teacher helps or guides the child—oftentimes merely by example—to acquire a stimulus meaning for the sentence by learning to associate phonemes with their own stimuli.<sup>4</sup>



Now describing Quine as holding that the essential facts of language are not fundamentally social or public might seem to set the stage for some reconciliation with Chomsky. The relation between Quine's philosophy of language and Chomsky-style linguistics, and to cognitive science generally, is a gigantic subject, but to close I think there is one point that I can briefly sketch. It has again to do with ideology.

Quine is deeply sceptical about the Chomskian project, especially about the depth and level of explanation achievable in linguistics. In various ways, Chomsky strenuously rebuts Quine's criticisms as well as the philosophical positions he takes to be behind them, as is more than evident in Chomsky's various articles from 1969 to the 2000's which discuss Quine (e.g. Chomsky 1969, 2000). Most centrally, he continues to maintain his view that behind human linguistic ability is a cognitive, mental, innate, language-specific apparatus that is presupposed by that competence, and which makes it possible for children to learn a first language so rapidly. The word 'mental' is not supposed to be anything but an informal marker of the sorts of phenomena meant. To puzzle out the structure of this innate mental endowment, this 'organ', is a central task of the science of linguistics; the development of the internal linguistic organ is more properly characterized as a matter of growth than learning or acquisition from the environment. So it is to elucidate the core linguistic capacity of a mature speaker, his 'I-language' ('internal language'), as distinct from the relatively accidental or ancillary 'E-language' ('external language'), confined to the morphology, phonology and superficial syntax of particular languages such as Japanese. The models linguists develop are abstract, but they are intended as real descriptions of mental equipment, which need not ever be items of explicit awareness on the part of the subject.

There are many points at which Quine criticized the programme. But still, as described above, Quine recognised the need to posit a significant amount of innate structure (like any serious modern empiricist or behaviourist, in his estimation). Indeed in 'Linguistics and Philosophy' (1968, 56-8)—*before* he formulated the doctrine of pre-established harmony—Quine stresses his agreement with Chomsky's celebration of rationalism; it's in 'no conflict with latter-day attitudes that are associated with the name of empiricism, or behaviorism' (p. 56). 'This qualitative spacing of stimulations must therefore be recognized as an innate structure needed in accounting for any learning, and hence, in particular, language-learning' (p. 57), especially the 'inductive instinct': Even Watson and Skinner saw that the inductive instinct—the Humean tendency to expect like to follow like—is presupposed by the ability to learn and therefore cannot itself be learned. Therefore, since both theorists accept the existence of a substantive innate endowment, is there not some meeting of minds? Are they not both private, internal, or individualistic theorists, in the sense described earlier? Is not the reason we can communicate that we each have roughly the same cognitive hardware, not the other way round?

Not for Quine, because for him there is still plenty of room for the requisite cognitive capacities to be learned from the environment rather than innate, and for language to be 'socially inculcated and controlled' (1969, 81). The Quinean story I've told is consistent with the rampant historical contingency of the structure of language. As Quine formulates it, the role of pre-established harmony of perception might not extend beyond obvious things like thunder or the presence of rabbits. And it does not automatically extend to language as such; in particular not to grammar or syntax, even if it does presumably extend to phonology. For such things, it is not ruled out that linguistic experience figures much more centrally in accounting for linguistic competence than it ever

could for Chomsky. It is not ruled out that the general or non-domain specific inductive instinct, together with relatively generic innate quality spaces, are for Quine adequate for learning the ways of language. Thus it is not ruled out that language—in its ideological aspect—remains public or cultural, propagated though time as a collection of memes.

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<sup>1</sup> Quine does not deny the existence of private sensations. In 'Meaning in Linguistics' his position is merely that private colour sensations—an example of what came to be called 'qualia'—are neither here nor there for the meanings of colour terms; the meaning of those is public.

<sup>2</sup> 'Use and Its Place in Meaning' 43-54 (this is the version in *Theories and Things* – not the *Erkenntnis* version or the version that appears in a volume edited by Margalit 1979).

<sup>3</sup> It's pointed out in detail in my *Quine versus Davidson* (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Can we not show the Publicity Requirement to be satisfied by appealing to the importance in Quine's account of *empathy* in the *learning* of language? Quine did say in *Pursuit of Truth*:

Empathy dominates the learning of language, both by child and by field linguist. In the child's case it is the parent's empathy... We all have an uncanny knack for empathizing another's perceptual situation, however ignorant of the physiological or optical mechanism of his perception. (p. 42)

But for one thing, the possession of language is, so to speak, logically independent of the details of how it is in fact acquired. Learning a skill is not the same as possessing the skill. For another, we would have the same problem as we had with the intersubjectivity of stimulus meaning: The 'physiological or optical mechanism' of its perception surely varies, irrelevantly, from individual to individual.