Interlingvistikaj Kajeroj

Marcus Giaquinto at NYU on Knowing abstracta. Preliminary considerations

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A philosophical colloquium was held at the Department of Philosophy of the New York University on October 7th 2011: Marcus Giaquinto (University College London, Department of Philosophy) proposed the question: How can we know abstracta (properties, kinds, relations, roles, structures, and so on)? Giaquinto started recalling briefly the marks of abstractness and remarked that the distinction abstract/concrete is probably vague and seems to come in grades (for instance, the symmetries of a rectangle: horizontal and vertical, reflection and $180°$ rotation; the group of such symmetries under composition; and the Klein Four group; here it seems that we are going up in level of abstractness). But the main concern seems that abtracta are considered to be causally inert and, if so, how can we have any knowledge of them?

The talk was divided into two parts: 1) Is there really a problem? and 2) Russell's view (focusing on knowledge by acquaintance).

1) The first answer that we can meet is: (*a*) No, this is not a genuine problem. This is the case if there are not abstracta (cfr. Quine & Goodman, 1947). But this premise is based on a "philosophical intuition" and it is not clear what a "philosophical intuition" is. Is it a strong ungrounded inclination to believe or what else? In any case, others have the opposite philosophical intuition, so the problem cannot be dismissed easily.

There is also a moderate view, (*b*) according to which some putative kinds are real and others are not. Gianquinto claimed that this should be our default view (rational investigations outside philosophy, for example in the history of science, distinguish between alleged proprieties and kinds that are real and others that are not). But scientists' claims that such and such propriety, kind or condition is real are based on empirical evidence. But this is not the main problem.

According to Giaquinto, the serious argument is the following:

i) if our abstract singular terms really refer, we should know at least some of the references but such things, but

ii) such things would be beyond causal contact and hence they would be unknowable, so

iii) abstract singular terms have no real reference.

Another answer that we might meet is: (*c*) No, this is not a genuine problem because we *do* have causal contact with proprieties and kinds. In favour of this view, one could consider such expressions as "seeing the colour of the hair". But Giaquinto remarked that this use of the language does not imply that we really see the property: seeing the colour of the lemon could mean seeing how it is coloured, not seeing the colour as a kind. Finally, recalling the later Quine, Giaquinto considered the idea that we should accept the posits of our best testable clusters of theory and auxiliary beliefs, even if they are abstracta. But this is our commitment, not our knowledge. And similarly Putnam: quantification over mathematical entities is indispensable, although this commits us to accepting such entities. A turbo-charged version is: we know to be real the posits that are requested by our best theories. But what is meant by "best" here? More successful or equally successful but superior in other respects (such as simplicity)? And in any case this seems to be too lax: scientists seek relatively direct evidence for posits. We do not accept the decision of which of the theories is considered the best. Resisting those dismissive or quick responses, Giaquinto then argued that this is a problem worth taking seriously.

2) In the second part of the colloquium, Giaquinto considered Russell's view in Russellwtf: it is obvious that we are *acquainted* with universals. According to the speaker, Russell considers "acquainted with x" equivalent to "direct aware of x". Basically, this means that there is no intermediary. The contrast is with "knowledge by description", that is when the object to know is not *directly* known to us. But the problem here is that we could be directly aware of something we do *not* know at all. So, does Russell here use "knowing x" in a special sense? Gianquinto thinks that this is not the case and that Russell denies that in chapter V, when, talking about the knowledge of the table, Russell declares that we are acquainted with sense-data. Resisting the temptation to assign a special, weak meaning to "knowing x" in this case, the speaker also considered very quickly the possible distinction between "knowing x" and "knowing of x", where it seems involving knowledge by description. At any rate, Russell explicitly states that we have direct awareness of

i) sense data;

ii) remembered experiences;

iii) our own feelings, thoughts and so on;

iv) one's self;

v) universals.

Direct awareness occurs even it if takes time and involves complex processes, and there is acquaintance even where there is abstraction.

After the presentation of Russell's view, Giaquinto shared some final remarks and comments, focusing on:

(*a*) *knowledge by acquaintance* as such: should we accept Russell's account, given that we do not accept his view of perception? And direct awareness does not seem to be, in general, sufficient for knowing something. One suggestion here is that it might be not the process but its source what is to be considered in this case. And, finally, does the requirement that the source of knowing x is one's own experience of x rule out knowing a sensory quality by acquaintance? The answer depends on whether "experience of x" includes both perceiving x and perceiving instances of x. And it is also to be considered the stipulation of narrow and broad uses of knowledge by acquaintance;

(*b*) *abstraction*: Russell does not say what it is. Is it the formation of categories studied by the scientist? Or is this just a kind of abstraction? There may be cognitively distinct kinds of processes by which abstraction of this kind is achieved. And abstraction of this kind is not enough to know a sensory quality. The acquisition of a category gives us the capability to discriminate instances and non-instances, but in order to know a category we also have to be able to: recognize an instance as an instance, search for an instance, produce a sensory image for an instance. But what more beyond abstraction of this kind (just "having" the category) is needed for knowing a sensory quality? And what other kinds of abstraction are there? And, for each kind of abstract entity, what does it mean, to know an entity of that kind, and how do we get to know

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