'CHAMELEON-LINGUIST' AND THE REVIVAL OF CASUISTRY: AFTERTHOUGHTS ON A CONTROVERSIAL SUGGESTION BY FERNANDO TARALLO

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ABSTRACT: Este trabalho procura rediscutir a polêmica questão levantada por Fernando Tarallo a respeito de como adequar uma teoria lingüística às especificidades inesperadas que os casos concretos - os chamados 'fatos reais' - tendem a apresentar. A sugestão de Tarallo de que é preciso, nesses casos, usar uma boa dose de senso prático e ser, digamos, um 'lingüista-camaleão', é revista à luz da pesquisa realizada por Jonsen e Toulmin (1988). Segundo esses autores, a redescoberta do 'casuísmo' - livre das conotações negativas que a história de pensamento lhe conferiu - abre excelentes possibilidades de nos libertarmos do marasmo criado pelas teorias totalizantes com suas metas pretensamente universais que mal conseguem dar conta do recado quanto à obrigação de se adequar à experiência vivida. Ao mesmo tempo em que se procura na idéia lançada por Tarallo o germe de casuísmo (ainda que de forma não tencionada, nem de longe), argumenta-se também que a tese de Jonsen e Toulmin vem ao encontro dos anseios contemporâneos tematizados pela corrente que chamamos de 'pós-modernidade'.

The passage of time often opens up for us new perspectives on a problem that were unavailable in the midst of the excitement of the moment at which it originally came up for discussion. Armed with hindsight and the wisdom that accrued in the intervening years, one is thus frequently in a position to review an old case and discern in it fresh elements that reach out far beyond their originally projected range of application.

In what follows, I shall review one such issue, brought up by Fernando Tarallo and argue that, perhaps unbeknownst to him, he ended up suggesting a bold - and, to judge by the state of the art that

characterizes contemporary linguistics, indeed thoroughly unconventional and revolutionary - approach to a dilemma that researchers involved in the so-called 'field-work' as opposed to 'arm-chair research' come up against, alas, all too frequently.

On one of the few occasions when he directly addressed a question of meta-theoretical import, Tarallo (1986) grappled with the familiar problem of the embarrassing slip between the theoretical cup and the practical lip. What is a practical-minded researcher supposed to do when she discovers that the categories and types posited *in vacuo* by an arm-chair theoretician she is broadly in agreement with, fail to fit the kind of objects she actually comes across in her routine field-work? Should she simply throw the theory overboard and call it a day or, set about trying to find on the market an alternative theory or, if none exists that meets her requirements, to come up with one herself? Those among us who are given to getting sentimentally swept off the feet by all this talk about the scientist's need to be honest at least to herself, are wont to say an almost instinctive and enthusiastic "yea" to the second alternative. But then to our sheer dismay, pat pops up the ugly question: What guarantee is there that the newly elected theory will not fare equally badly in the face of the next bundle of raw data that awaits the analyst's scrutiny?

Now, before we recall Tarallo's recommendation on this question, let us note that the problem he called our attention to is by no means confined to linguistics. It is endemic to all branches of human inquiry that aspire to overarching, totalizing generalizations, while, at the same time, staking on their behalf the claim of some real-life relevance. No doubt, one is relatively safe (or, at the very least, blissfully ignorant of what is going on) so long as one is operating at the Olympian heights of "pure" theory. But down on the valley below, it is a different story. To illustrate the case by taking linguistics as an example, as soon as one goes into any of those hyphenated sub-areas such as socio-linguistics, psycho-linguistics, neuro-linguistics and the like - and, of course, not to forget the unhyphenated 'no-man's land' called 'applied linguistics' - one discovers one can no longer eschew the million-dollar question. And similarly in the case of applied mathematics, applied psychology, and applied what-have-you.

As a conscientious and thorough-going linguist concerned to treat raw data in a way rigorously faithful to the theory he had chosen to work with, Tarallo realized that he had to come to terms very early on in his lightning career with the quandary as to the persistent mis-match between the *types* posited by the theory and the *tokens* encountered in practice - or, as it would be more appropriate to say, the question as to which of the types provided by the theory he subscribed to were to be seen as the right candidates for the items encountered in real life to be tokens of. Of course, no theory ever comes with a guarantee that there will be a perfect fit; instead, in the normal run of things, the task is left to the more practical-minded among its new adherents. That is why all theories pose the same dilemma before anyone intent to test them on the anvil of real life experience.

Tarallo's solution consisted in saying that the practical-minded researcher should not shy from resorting to the use of common sense every now and then. It is only by permitting herself some elbow room and right to use discretionary judgment that she can ever hope to bring the full weight of the theory to bear on the data. Not to recognize this would be to ignore the fact that no theory is meant to dovetail into real life without some chipping and chiselling. Such 'minor readjustments' are necessary to meet the exigencies of concrete situations. With his characteristic flair for drawing on analogies from all walks of life, Tarallo broached his topic by calling attention to 'Zelig' the silver-screen character portrayed by Woody Allen, whose distinguishing personality trait was instantaneous adaptation to every novel environment in which he would find himself. Zelig became, thus, the prototype for Tarallo's 'chameleon-linguist' and personified the opposite extreme to immutability and unresponsiveness to environmental variation. He had no self-same identity or, if you like, he had far too many of them to be credited with any single one as being his real, inalienable one. Zelig and the 'chameleon-linguist' were what could best be described as 'bundles of contingent features'.

I shall refrain from going into further ramifications of Tarallo's analogy, or details of the acrimonious debate his paper sparked off. I wish instead to focus on the very awkward hot-spot on which he put his bold finger. Although the particular interpretation I shall try to develop in the remainder of this paper will, for all I know, diverge significantly from what seems to me to have been Tarallo's own position at the time

he raised the issue, the kind of considerations I shall make in what follows, will, I hope, contribute to underscoring the enormous importance as well as the timeliness of his calling attention to the existence of the problem.

The problem that Tarallo called our attention to has a very long history indeed. This begins to become patent as soon as one recognizes that it is at bottom simply a variant of the ancient problem of universals vs. particulars. Granted, for the sake of the argument that there are such Platonic entities as universals, how do we actually go about identifying them? Do they *inhere*, or in some other mysterious sense, *inhabit* every sense-datum we seem to come across routinely, so that every time we look at a particular sense-datum, we are also *thereby* looking at a universal? Or, do they, instead, exist (or, if you like, *subsist*) as a class apart, so that every time you look at a particular, you can rest assured you are looking at anything but a universal?

The opposition between theory and practice too ultimately rests on the distinction between universals and particulars. Consequently, the way we conceive of the relation between theory and practice - or, as Tarallo narrowed the question down to, how a theory conceived in abstract (universal) terms can be made to square with concrete (particular) entities in real life - will depend, in the final analysis, on how we relate universals to particulars.

It is interesting to note at this juncture that historically the question has more often been posed the other way round. How can one theorize at all, given the hopelessly erratic and unprincipled and random behaviour of things in the phenomenal world? Plato's smug answer, as we know, was that one can theorize or, equivalently, begin to make sense of the phenomena (what else is a theory for?), just in case one concedes that the real world is that which constantly eludes us, which our deceptive senses prevent us from 'seeing'. Real knowledge (or, knowledge of the real world) can only arise as a result of our willingness to look beyond the 'veil of appearances'. For Plato, the really real world is, as all the paradox in the heavens would have it, the ideal world that we cannot really see, but only intuit (as some put it, only see with our 'mind's eye').

It is a platitude (but, all the same worth repeating, lest we should forget it) that the entire tradition of Western philosophy has been under the spell of Plato's inaugural gimmick.

The Platonic world of ideal forms is no doubt a theoretician's dream (no pun intended). Free from the nuisance of unruly particulars, she can theorize to her heart's content. And, as we have already noted, so long as she does not care to look from the Olympian heights upon the valley below, she can go on dreaming undisturbed (some pun intended, if you insist).

But that is just what researchers working in hyphenated sub-areas of most academic disciplines simply cannot afford to do. Because, whether or not they like it, the valley is where they belong and where they must do their work.

So much for a quick historical perspective on the problem posed by Tarallo. What is now interesting to note is that Tarallo's practical suggestion that we use discretion and common sense when it comes to making the theory directly accountable for practice has had an equally long history of vociferous opposition and indeed persecution at the hands of die-hard universalists, unwilling to make any sort of compromise on the applicability of their theories.

Most surprising as it might indeed seem, the suggestion made by Tarallo is nothing but an invitation to casuistry - or, at least, that is certainly how it would have been branded had it been put forward, say, in the last century. For most of us today, 'casuistry' is a dreaded curse-word, along with 'sophistry', 'wizardry' and the like (The list may be prolonged by adding such latter-day terms as 'behaviourism'). Nevertheless, what is seldom realized in regard to these contemporary four-letter words of academic jargon is that most of them were once upon a time normal words and denoted normal and often highly respected practices. And in most cases, their present pejorative connotations bear the mark of years and years, sometimes centuries, of systematic reviling they were subjected to.

In a book-length treatment of the phenomenon of casuistry and its centuries-long history, Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin (1988) argue that, in ethics, casuistry is as old as universalistic moral reasoning and

that the condemnation of casuistry as old as at least Plato. But then the authors also show that all along history there have been long spells when casuistry was not only accepted as a valid form of reasoning but also held in high esteem. As it turns out, the tussle between casuistry and mainstream moral reasoning, as meticulously researched and recorded by Jonsen and Toulmin can throw a flood of light on the problem posed by Tarallo and his own proposed solution.

Just as Platonic ontology posited as the only real things such entities as are thoroughly unaffected by spatio-temporal specificities, and the corresponding epistemology of the Greek savant stipulated awareness of such entities as the only true knowledge as opposed to mere beliefs, the mainstream ethical reasoning emanating from the Platonic tradition incorporated the central idea of there being absolutely immutable moral laws, valid for all times, places, and cultures. Needless to say, such a universal, rigorously all-or-nothing, code of moral conduct is bound to raise more problems than it can solve, when asked to confront specific issues arising at historically given moments. This is so because the universal ethical principles were formulated in total disregard of the specificities of those historical moments (If only for the reason that, had they been so framed as to attend to all those specificities, they would no longer be universal in the required sense).

Examples are legion in the sphere of moral philosophy. Sweeping condemnation of abortion, for instance, raises the question of its applicability to say, victims of rape, or expectant mothers who are known well in advance to be carrying hopelessly deformed off-springs owing to some natural or man-made disaster, and so on. The growing challenge to existing legal systems and religious orthodoxies all over the world amply demonstrates the contemporary relevance of the age-old dispute between Platonism and casuistry.

True to its guiding principles of the absolute inviolability of universal laws, the moral philosophy inspired on Platonic thought invariably condemned all talk of the specificity of a local problem, and insisted on ethics being a body of principles totally insensitive to the peculiar circumstances attending on individual cases.

Now, alternatives to Platonism are as old as Plato himself if not older. An early challenge came from his own disciple Aristotle who, in

his *Nicomachean Ethics*, sought to base moral judgments on the three-fold starting premiss of (a) the absence of 'essences' from the world of human affairs, (b) the 'opportune character' of all timely choices and actions, and (c) the 'circumstantial' appreciation of the details of the particular case in question. (Cf. Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 67).

Now, lest there should be any misunderstanding on this matter, let us make it clear right away that, in its radical form, the tension between a universal law and the demand that the way we handle an actually occurring instance take into account circumstances not anticipated by that law is not one that can be dismissed casually (as seems to be the standard ploy) by saying that the application of the law simply involves, *in addition to* the law stated in universal terms, a handful of local rules of adaptation. To argue thus would be to claim that every conceivable particular moment is a universal moment with an aditional marker of particularity (This is nothing but one of the several transcendental arguments for the existence of universals, stated in the reverse order.).

Casuistry poses a major challenge to the pretensions of universal laws in its fundamental claim that the very application or not of the universal law is a matter of the peculiar circumstances attending on the particular moment, an argument that effectively undermines the claims of the universal law to be an inviolable rule, valid for all times. On the interpretation based on transcendental reasoning, the application of the universal law is guaranteed under all circumstances, the only uncertainty if any being simply a matter of what peculiarities of the particular case in hand should be brought to bear on the outcome of the unfailing application of the universal law.

For all its boldness and eagerness to break the gridlock of dogmatism, however, the Aristotelian alternative was but a rather timid challenge to Platonism, although in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he did take his opposition very close to a decisive break with the prevailing orthodoxy.

No doubt, it was Aristotle's great merit to have seen that the demands of justice by far exceed the stipulations of the universal law and the potential circumstances foreseen by it. *Nomos* or rule-governed law alone cannot guarantee justice; there is an additional need for *epieikeia* or 'equity' or a practical application of general rules - "the interpretation of a law in a case that the legislator did not foresee."

(Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 116). But, alas, the Stagyrite innovator was too much under the spell of his teacher to perceive that, in so formulating his case, he was actually giving in to Platonic metaphysics, even as he was trying to extricate himself from its clutches. This is so, because, instead of asking for a revision of Platonism at the grass roots level as seems to have been his intent, he in effect bolstered it up by pleading for some additional rules or rules of extension. Here is a quotation that proves the point:

> A law is always a general statement, yet there are cases which it is not possible to cover in a general statement...
> This does not make [the general statement] a *wrong* law: the error is not in the law, nor in the legislator, but in the nature of the case, the stuff of practical conduct being essentially variable. (Aristotle, *apud* Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 68).

In other words, says Aristotle, it is the defective particular that is to blame, not the universal which is, by definition, perfect. To be sure, it is Plato who has the last laugh here.

As Jonsen and Toulmin (1988: 69 ff) argue, however, Aristotle did pave the way for the rise of casuistic reasoning by emphasizing the importance of the *practical* over the *theoretical*. But again, unfortunately, Aristotle was probably responsible for the rift between *episteme* and *phronesis*, between theory or intellectual grasp and practice or technical skill. Hardened defenders of a permanent epistemological gap between theory and practice seldom pause to think they are in fact giving in to the long legacy of a Platonic prejudice that glorified pure theory at the expense of its practical consequences. The situation remains unaltered, even when some of them oppose Platonism with a view to inverting the priorites because, as we shall see shortly, simply turning a hierarchy upside down does not resolve the problem if what we are concerned to rectify is the very question of differential valuation.

Anyhow, Platonism has reigned supreme in the Western world down through the centuries although, as Jonsen and Toulmin (1988) point out, there also have been fairly long spells, notably in the 15th and

16th centuries, when casuistry flourished in its historically most hospitable host environment viz., Ethics. Indeed, it might strike one today as quite surprising that even the Church found it perfectly normal that casuistic reasoning should be freely resorted to in tackling practical issues involving moral judgment. But, starting with the 17th century, attempts at stamping out all challenges to nomologistic reasoning were also on the increase. Many of these efforts were actually misdirected and as in the case of Blaise Pascal's vitriolic lampooning of the Jesuit moral teaching as involved in the on-going Jansenist-Jesuit controversy, were, not infrequently, spurred on by a desire to settle private scores (Cf. Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988:235 - "The issue of laxist moral teaching had been on the periphery of the Jansenist-Jesuit debate for some years."). And, as irony would have it, many of these highly successful attempts such as Pascal's gained all their effectiveness from the clever and opportune exploitation of what were at best secondary or tertiary issues at stake, in precisely those ways in which casuistry itself had all along been accused of freely indulging in. A detailed examination of this issue is far beyond the scope of this paper. The interested reader will find highly illuminating material in the chapter entitled 'Casuistry confounded: Pascal's critique' of Jonsen and Toulmin (1988).

In our own century, some remarkable new developments have been in the making. In an important paper entitled 'Are there *a priori* concepts?', which is, for reasons we can only speculate about, nevertheless regarded as only marginal to his overall philosophical outlook (Cf. Warnock, 1989: 32), J.L. Austin (by the way, a life-long admirer of *Nicomachean Ethics*) categorically asserted that the so-called universals "were calculated into existence ... not long ago"(Austin, 1939:3), adding that sober reasoning would do much better without them.

But Austin was careful not simply to turn the tables and make it an excuse for the affirmation and glorification of the particular, the ephemeral and the opportune against the universal, the timeless, and the necessary. As he said himself elsewhere, it "is essential ... to abandon old habits of *Gleichschaltung*, the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies" (Austin, 1962: 3). Austin perceived, that is to say, that the moment you call into question one member of a dichotomously opposed pair, the other member too is automatically rendered suspect. Therefore it is senseless to quarrel with universals, and go on talking of particulars

as though these were perfectly in order. Questioning one of the two entities that result from a dichotomy is tantamount to questioning the whole dichotomy, destabilizing the very logic that sustains that dichotomy.

   Wondering, as Tarallo did, how on earth a theory conceived in the abstract can guarantee immediate and ready application to concrete elements in the researcher's work-a-day experience would seem to lead, inevitably, to either of these conclusions: (a) a sense of complacency that somehow or the other the fatal encounter does take place, so why worry about exactly *how* it comes about (Most of us who consider ourselves 'scientifically minded' are quite happy with this, leaving any further question to the 'philosophers of science' and the like) (b) the startling realization that that which meets with practice is not what started off as the abstract theory, nor is what the theory in fact meets with what is claimed to be the raw, concrete experience. In other words, the theory and the corresponding data are so inextricably intertwined that it is pointless and, if you come to think of it, impossible to contemplate them in isolation. Just as there are no data-free theories, there are no theory-free data either. This is the fundamental insight behind the so-called incommensurability thesis advocated by Kuhn (1970;1976) and Quine (1961), among others.

   The thesis of incommensurability has been shown to be riddled with problems of its own (Cf. Bernstein, 1992: 57-78). As Davidson has argued, if it is true at all, no sense can be made of it - so that there is an urgent need to restate it in some other terms. In his own words, "Conceptual relativism is a heady and exotic doctrine, or would be if we could make good sense of it. The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement." (Davidson, 1973: 129). Quine, like Aristotle before him, does not quite rid himself of the metaphysical paraphernalia that go together with the entities and distinctions he wants to throw overboard - so that, for all his revolutionary zeal, he remains wedded to the absolute distinction between theoretical statements and observational statements, a feature Davidson has ironically christened 'the third dogma'(Cf. Kraut, 1986).

   Where do we go from here? At least one of the authors of the book we have examined at some length in this paper, viz., Stephen Toulmin, is a scholar groomed in the great Oxford tradition called

'Ordinary Language Philosophy' and, in particular, very much influenced by the philosophy of J.L.Austin (An earlier book of his, *The Uses of Argument* (Toulmin, 1958) relies heavily on the thought of Austin and others in order to propose a logic of everyday reasoning). As the concluding chapters of the book demonstrate, he and his co-author are hopeful that the ressurgence of casuistry will, if properly pursued, free us from the intellectual quagmire we find ourselves in. "Of course, our wish is to rehabilitate not the *word* causistry but rather the *art* to which it disparagingly refers."(Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 13). "When properly conceived (we claim), casuistry redresses the excessive emphasis placed on universal rules and invariant principles by moral philosophers and political preachers alike.: (*id.ibid*) And, as their statements elsewhere in the book make it clear, what is at stake is the overwhelming, awe-inspiring prestige that abstract theories conceived in ivory towers have enjoyed among both scientists and laymen.

Jonsen and Toulmin estimate that the winds of change started blowing some time during the 1960s. "The historical reasons for this change are complex and still partly obscure, but they had less to do with developments within philosopy than with the challenges to authority and expertise that were evident in many other areas of life at this time. " (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 304). "As in the days of Ciceronian and Christian casuistry, a feeling for the features of moral experience that led Aristotle to put ethics in the realm of *praxis* and *phronesis*, not *theoria* and *episteme* - the specificity of moral issues, the particularity of cases and circumstances, and the concreteness of the stakes for those individual human beings who are involved in them - has reentered the moral debate."(p.306).

When properly understood, then, casuistry is the *art* of making sense of our work-a-day life experiences, not in terms of totalizing laws provided by some grand theory, but by contemplating them locally and piecemeal. In so doing, it challenges our very concept of 'understanding'. According to the paradigm it outrightly rejects, understanding is a matter of making sure that no particular is left out, unattended to by a universal law - a practice technically known as 'scientific explanation'. Casuistry teaches us, on the other hand, that it is the quest, the craving for universal and all-encompassing laws that has made us incapable of appreciating the individuality of the particulars.

Thus characterized, casuistry is clearly a symptom of what has broadly been referred to as the 'postmodern consciousness'. Small wonder, therefore, that the recent surge of interest in postmodernity and its implications for all the multifarious branches of human inquiry has had its origins traced back by scholarly opinion (Cf. Wakefield, 1990; Best and Kellner: 1991; Cooke:1990) to the 1960s - the same momentous period in the recent history of the Western world in which Jonsen and Toulmin believe modern interest in casuistry began.

Postmodernity is by no means a novel phenomenon, despite the strong tendency to read the prefix 'post-' as a chronological marker (Cf. Heller and Fehér, 1988: 1). As a matter of fact, the distinctive attributes that characterize the postmodern attitude such as the distrust of totalizing drive and grand narratives and a concomitant preference for the local and the contingent (or, as it would be more appropriate to say, the universality of the local and the necessity of the contingent - reminiscent of Nietzsche's famous "profundity of the superficial"(Cf. Koelb, 1990)) have accompanied the mainstream philosophy with the same doggedness with which the shadow follows the object.

To round off our discussion, then, to Tarallo we owe the debt for having awakened us to the existence of the problem and the urgent need to face up to it, rather than pretend it didn't exist. No doubt, he would most probably have balked at the idea I have developed in this paper that his own solution to the problem was an invitation to casuistry, especially in view of the unsavoury connotations that have come to be attached to the term owing, as we have already seen, to centuries of reviling.

NOTE

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