

**SGEME 12: PROPOSAL FOR AN INTEGRATED SERIES OF ESSAYS:  
AN EXPERIMENT IN FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION**

At the Vancouver Conference of July 2010, several presenters raised questions that form, I believe, an integrated series of puzzles demanding collaborative efforts. This blog entry identifies those questions, indicates how they are related, suggests some basic conditions for answering them and invites responses from any SGEME members.

The conference questions, moving from the most basic to the more complex, were: What are data? What intentional acts are correlates of data? How are objects of experience recognized as unities? What is description?

How are these questions related? I believe the questions form a progressive series of puzzles moving from asking about the initial conditions for the data of experience to accounting for more complex objects and intentional operations. In the form of regressive analysis, an actual description presupposes an experience of something determinate (e.g. a unified object); in turn that kind of experience presupposes actual acts of attending to some determinate content of what initially is an indeterminate range of possible objects of attention, i.e. possible data; finally, if possible data are correlates of possible acts of attending, an adequate answer to the first question (What are data?) requires explanatory accounts of both the field of possible objects and the corresponding possible acts.

Let me offer a further rationale for thinking of these related questions as an opportunity for SGEME members to “get the show on the road.” The question about data reaches an impasse unless inquirers conceive of data and intentional acts as correlates. Making that simple point is one way of responding to the question of why generalized empirical method is methodologically defensible. Essays on the meaning of “data” can become opportunities to experiment with and to demonstrate GEM in practice.

How might functional specialization become part of this proposed experiment? I suspect it will be quickly obvious that answering any one of the four questions is a monumental task beyond the competence of any one individual inquirer. My own experience in studying acts of attending supports this suspicion. For those with any

doubts, consider how the third question (How are objects of experience recognized as unities?) has a history. Aristotle proposed the sensus communis as an answer to the question about the unity of any object of sense experience (this is the question contemporary neuroscience calls “the binding problem”). At least some commentators have suggested that Aquinas advanced beyond Aristotle in noting that the sensus communis has a prior and more fundamental task of providing a unity of subjective consciousness without which there could be no determinate object of experience. As far as I can tell, late twentieth and early twenty-first century neuroscientific literature on the “binding problem” has missed Aquinas’ insight; namely, recognition of experienced objects as unities presupposes a unified consciousness. So the inquiry broadens to puzzles about two types of unity and demands a practical division of labor.

My hope is that, as a few of us explore any one of these related questions, we will discover through periodic postings of our work that we are depending increasingly on what others are doing. Gradually we may single out just which functional specialty is “right” for us and then more deliberately focus our efforts and relations to others in the group effort. By these concrete, even if faltering, steps, we can begin to provide some proof that functional specialization is worth more attention. We will probably also be supplying ourselves with evidence for Phil’s recent claim that the “myth of maturity” needs to give way to a new “ethos of dawning.”

The first paragraph promised suggestions about some basic conditions for answering the four conference questions. In regard to the first question, I’ve already noted the explicit use of GEM will offer a way forward. Treating data and acts of attending as correlates is a minimal step, and without it an inquiry into the meaning of data will flounder.

To continue the practice of GEM with question two, I have found that reaching for an explanatory understanding of acts of attending can make progress if one assumes that correlations among key variables are the form that any acceptable answer will take. For example, modern neuroscientific studies of attention routinely cite the “selectivity” of acts of attending, i.e. focusing on something specific requires inattention to most everything else. But why are some data “selected” and others ignored? What I have found is that identifying and understanding correlations among basic categories (e.g.

orientation, sensitive presentations and three classes of possible responses) are ways of making progress in answering this question of selectivity.

Regarding the third question, a researcher could gather materials on the question ranging from Aristotle's remarks on the sensus communis to contemporary inquiries into the binding problem. The relevant texts are numerous. Interpreters could ask what differences are detectable in the understanding of the question. For a specialist in history the question in the foreground would be whether any of the changes or differences amounted to an advance and why. Should we expect anyone at first to "be up" to doing dialectic in regard to the preceding labors? Until those labors have produced results, how will anyone be enticed to make the effort?

Of the four questions, the puzzle about description is the most complex. Indeed, if the regressive analysis above was on target, to answer the fourth question presupposes some understanding of how to answer the first three. I suggest that a minimal condition for handling the fourth question is reaching an adequate understanding of "reference." My guess is that essays on the first three questions will assemble the requisite insights for an adequate theory of reference. To anticipate one general conclusion, we will have found that descriptions (declarative sentences or verbal formulations) do not refer immediately to objects or events but to acts of understanding of those objects or events. If this basic insight is missed (as it often has been), accounts of description will wander amid the old debates over concepts, data, ostensive definitions and intuitions of being.

So what are you willing to contribute? My hope is that postings relevant to the four questions will eventually "mature" through the group's efforts to "recycle" and improve our initial answers. But a first step is to identify those willing to take on some part of the broader task. What I ask willing contributors to do at this point is simply to respond to this posting by sending me their remarks on its content and any indication of what roles they are willing to play in this experiment.

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