

Meaning in a Deterministic Universe (final debate post)

By "Socrastein" from the Philosophy Forums

Anyone who has ever taken a speech course in high school is probably familiar with the various steps of communication. I will outline these steps, and parallel them with an example from the animal kingdom, which I believe will be a perfect way to demonstrate meaningful communication in a deterministic universe (Let's make the assumption that many lesser animals do not possess free will, if there even is such a thing, and I doubt that this is a difficult assumption to make)

1. Stimulus: Something has to stimulate the speaker into making a statement.

A small monkey high in the trees sees a leopard approaching through the bush.

2. Encoding: The speaker must turn their thoughts into an understandable message.

The monkey is instinctually equipped to turn thoughts of approaching danger into loud screams and jumping up and down, while pointing in the direction of the danger.

3. Transmission: Having been stimulated and having a form of encoding the message into an understandable message, the message is actually transmitted through some sort of medium, be it letters, sign language, typing, speaking, what have you.

The monkey begins screaming loudly while jumping up and down on the branches, and points at the approaching leopard.

4. Decoding: Anyone who receives the transmitted message must have the ability to decode the statement in order for communication to be established, and the decoding often serves as the stimulus to loop the process back again for continued communication.

Monkeys are also instinctually equipped to interpret a fellow monkey frantically jumping up and down while screaming and pointing to mean that there is danger in that direction.

5. Feedback: While this step is not necessary, for a message can be transmitted and received without any response from the receiver, feedback further establishes the existence of meaningful communication by showing that the message was received, understood, and is either responded to or acted upon.

The monkeys flee in the opposite direction of the warnings!

Not a single one of these steps require "free will" or belief, but meaningful communication is certainly occurring. This is all communication consists of, and though these steps could probably be broken down further, that is not necessary, for these simple 5 are enough to fully explain what happens when communication is taking place. Even if all of these steps are "forced" that does not disrupt the fact that communication is still taking place. I used monkeys for an example because all 5 of those steps are completely instinctual, but they are still communicating.

Now, to tie this into truth. When that monkey is jumping up and down after seeing the leopard, he is making a statement. More specifically, he is making a statement that affirms something - danger. So he is making a proposition! Not only is he making a proposition, but this proposition is completely forced by the causality of his environment (Approaching leopard) and his instincts. To translate into English, that monkey jumping up and down while pointing and screaming is saying "Look out fellow monkeys, there is danger that way!". The monkeys who see him doing this and which way he is pointing, understand instinctually (As in it is completely deterministic understanding) that there is danger in that direction, and thusly they instinctually run away in the opposite direction.

All of this can fit within a deterministic framework and lose absolutely nothing whatsoever. You still have communication, you still have statements and propositions, you still have 2nd party listeners who understand these propositions, and most importantly, **you have propositions that correspond to reality!**

The monkey makes the proposition "There is danger over there" and if there is indeed a leopard ready to slaughter all those helpless little monkeys, then there is truth! Even monkeys are capable of truth! If monkeys are capable of truth with their instinctual communication, then there's every reason to assume that humans are also capable of communication, on even higher levels, with abstract ideas and what not.

My opponent's argument is far too reductionistic. He says that since everything is determined, it's all just belches. But this is nonsense. Sure, on a small scale everything is just colliding matter and interacting energy, but you can't focus on that to the exclusion of the bigger picture - that on large, complicated, and wonderful scales these simple interactions produce things like living organisms capable of communication! Saying that statements are just "secretions" is like saying Unreal Tournament 2004 is just 0's and 1's. The reductionism is destroying an important essence when you take it too far. There's no reason to equate statements with fruit - just because both are causally determined, doesn't mean they're both the same thing. Diamonds and coal are both made of nothing but carbon, but does that mean that there is no difference between them? Absolutely not. That monkey jumping up and down, communicating danger to other monkeys, and apples forming on a tree: sure, they're both causally determined, but that does not mean that there isn't a difference between them. One is a statement, one is a fruit. One DOES communicate meaning, while one does not. One CAN create truth, while the other cannot. Sure, you can't say an apple is true, or a banana is false, but you can very well say that the monkey's warning of danger is true or false.

And my opponent says that in a deterministic universe you can't tell that a statement means what it says. I do not see the point in this point. Even if that monkey, for some asinine reason, means "Boy I wish I had some bananas right now", the fact is that he is still making the statement "There's danger over there!" and it will be understood that way. If someone says to me "Bush is president" and they meant to say "Oranges are delicious", in some huge Freudian slip or something, they've stated truth nonetheless. They transmitted a message, despite the fact that the encoding produced a different message than intended, and it was decoded by me to mean something other than what they meant to say. That doesn't matter, all that matters is that a meaningful proposition was made, and in it there is truth. As for falsehood, I still have yet to see how it is relevant. If a monkey hears a twig snap and mistakenly thinks there is danger, and starts jumping around and screaming, his proposition is a false one. So what? He's wrong, big deal. Communication took place, and the transmitted proposition didn't happen to correspond with reality. Or let's say the monkey jumps around, and for some reason another monkey sits down calmly and softly coos, communicating that there is no danger. If a leopard is coming toward them, then this monkey is clearly wrong, while the frantic monkey is right. So what? I see no problem here. Shit happens.

So, would it be denied that communication takes place in the way I mentioned? How else can one possibly explain communication? There need be no more and no less steps to wholly explain the process of meaningful communication.

So, would it be denied that deterministic beings are capable of such communication? There's no reason whatsoever why every one of those steps can't take place in a completely causal reality, and I even paralleled every step with an example that is dictated by instinct!

So, would it be denied that truth is conformity to fact, or that a proposition is a statement that affirms or denies something? My opponent already agreed to these definitions, so this is just as undeniable as the previous two points.

Or would it rather simply be accepted that communication can take place in a deterministic universe, and as such propositions can be causally made, and because these propositions will sometimes conform to fact, there is indeed truth in a deterministic universe.

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