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"I Opened the Gate": Benjy's Non-Understanding of Physical Causation

Kohei Sawabe

Ineke Bockting takes Benjy Compson's lack of understanding regarding transitive constructions in English, as evinced in that part of the text of the novel *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner that is supposedly a transcript of this thirty-three-year-old child's inner psyche, as an indication of his cognitive faculty's failing to comprehend the world around him in causal terms:

His[Benjy's] text suggests, through the virtual absence of transitive constructions, that Benjy does not completely understand the relations between objects, and between objects and their actions; his world is one of separate entities, actions and events without connections of, for instance, responsibility, participation, authority, incentive, submission, or cause and effect. (Bockting 45)

In the following scene, he is estimated to be between fifteen and sixteen years of age and the sister he loves and who loved him back has already left the home and one of his daily routines consists in chasing little schoolgirls on their way home by running parallel to them, he inside the fence, they out on the sidewalk. On this particular day, however, his conniving older brother Jason left the gate unlatched and Benjy as a result accidentally ends up getting out and grabbing at the girls, one of the less than unsavory consequences of which was his being castrated, for his act was deemed sexually motivated:

They came on. I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say. (SF 53)

In this excerpt, there are three sentences which ostensibly have Benjy's "I" as their subject pronoun. The reason we are interested in these sentences is that they seem to involve the notion of causation in some essential manner. The fact of Benjy's mental utterance of them, therefore, arguably implies his understanding causality, thus immediately contradicting Bockting's claim above, or so it appears.

Most, if not all, sentences with transitive verbs can be taken to have an underlying causal structure be it explicitly or less obviously: the subject is the cause and the object is the effect 'caused' by the activity named by the verb. To this extent there is a *prima facie* evidence against Bockting's position because the three sentences above are formally transitive. Furthermore, if we are acquainted with the dichotomy of physical versus mental causations, it would be a straightforward observation that 'I opened the gate' falls in the former kind while 'I was trying to say' into the latter. Without any expertise in causal theories, however, it is presumed that we should be able to intuitively appreciate the basic contrast between the two: *opening* of the gate is merely an event, and in itself there is nothing more to it; *trying to say*, on the other hand, presupposes the subject of conation and that of representation, as much as *speaking* is an act of representing one's cognitive content in a form accessible to others. For the reason mainly of space, however, we will not further investigate 'I was trying to say' in this paper.

Let us, then, consider 'I opened the gate.' One might, even while acceding to the argument in the previous paragraph that *opening of the gate* by and in itself does not commit us to anything more than the fact that the very event described happened

(without, to wit, implying anything about its doer or the doer's ontological status: the gate may sometimes open by itself, or whatever it is that opens it could be something very remote from ever bearing the kind of *mentality* required for by mental causation), still see in the completed phrase a definite sense of mental something because of the adjunct pronoun "I." And this is not without justification: we do from such sentences read off the intention of the "I" and attribute it back as the cause (of mental causation) of the act of opening the gate. This very natural intuition is, however, very much in doubt in the case of Benjy as we explain in due time.

We must however digress first and address the issue of first-person versus third-person dichotomy and what effect it has on the attribution of intention.

Let us take for instance a pair of sentences: 'I am trying to stand up straight' and 'He is trying to stand up straight.' In both cases we seem to attribute the respective subject the very same intention, the conative one of coordinating one's body core musculature in such a way to achieve a certain posture. Yet the very sameness of the attributum must not be allowed to conceal the fundamentally distinct nature of the processes by which we arrive at this attribution. In the former, when we say 'I am trying to stand up straight,' what grounds the truth of this statement is the very intention we have of holding that posture so and our introspective awareness of this same intention. Whether we may be deceived in believing that we have that intention and that we may be aware of it merely thanks to some malignant spirit as Descartes worried is not the point here: whether correctly or incorrectly, we do have and are aware of the intention and this fact warrants us in attributing to the first-person subject the intention identified. In case of the third-person subject sentence, we have no such recourse to introspection and the attribution of the

intention *to stand up straight*, or more precisely, the *trying* of standing up straight, is only presumptive, and in contrast to the first-person case, even without Descartes' malicious demon, it may very well be faulty: perhaps he (the third-person) is merely mocking us by pretending to be trying to stand up straight while in reality he needs no trying, he can stand up straight without any effort; or perhaps he is a mime practicing his routine; or he is attempting to win our sympathy for whatever unknown motives. Thus there is an unmistakable asymmetry between the first-person and the third-person attribution of intention, primarily due to the unbridgeable chasm separating the self's capacity for introspection and the others' mere guessing-work.

Coming back to the problem of Benjy's use of the pronoun "I" in 'I opened the gate,' one reason why we must be cautious in considering it as conferring upon the sentence a sense of the first-person intention is the fact of its subject being the very one who is supposed to be the Other of the novel, somebody whose mind works differently than the rest of us, the one with unnatural abilities and/or disabilities (just think of his phenomenal echolalia talent to remember all that he recites in his head of what happened in the past three decades). In other words, how can we talk about intentions if the alleged intender is an idiot? Another perhaps much graver objection, however, is now at hand from the point raised in the above digressory paragraph. Combing carefully through the text, we discover that in it there is only one other instance where the verbal complex *open the gate* appears, and approximately three more fairly similar ones with *open the door*. In none of them, however, the subject is Benjy, that is, they are all third-person subject sentences (readers unfamiliar with the novel need reminding perhaps that the entire chapter in question is told in interior monologue where every instance of "I," which is not part of quoted sequences, formally

refers to Benjy). This is to say that all the instances and near instances of *open the gate* are the ones where the attribution of the subject's intention is at best *presumptive* and not definitive. This opens the way for a skeptic, a reductionist about Benjy's pseudo-intentions, let us say, to argue that the present case with the first pronoun "I" too can be explained in a manner not invoking the introspective mental activity inside Benjy's brain.

Summing up the arguments presented in the last three paragraphs, we first confirmed that *open the gate* by itself is non-committal as to its having a causer or not, nor is there entailed anything about its status, i.e., we might even be ignorant of whether it has a mind or not. Secondly, we acknowledged that the addition of the pronoun "I," however, seemingly promotes the neutral status of the verbal complex to one high enough to host a consciousness, or in any case something resembling *intentions*. Thirdly, this promotion, actually, appears to be in jeopardy for two reasons: first because he may be an idiot devoid of consciousness, and second, because all the other instances of the verbal complex (similar enough) are predicated of third-person pronouns and therefore our particular example at hand, happening to be a unique one, might be explained away as an exception.

Now we move on to consider what actually takes place when we say we identify and locate *intentions* in our actions, i.e., in our use of the first-person sentences to predicate of ourselves intentional states causing actions. Take the example of *open the door*. What is the role of *opened the door* in 'I opened the door and entered'? Or, if subscribing to Wittgensteinian notion of 'meaning is use,' what is its function? We claim that it has no robust meaning here; it is quasi-automatic to say 'I opened the door' when the door is shut and my intention is to enter. Differently put, in the context of a shut door and my intending to go in, we have no choice but to use the verb *open* in order

to sound neutral (*kicked open* or *blasted open* would introduce connotations not sought for): the choice of the verb to the object in the circumstance given, i.e., the pragmatics of collocation, is dictated and determined by the linguistic custom; it is a form of cliché, in a manner of speaking.

If the claim in the above paragraph is not too far off the mark, and *opened the door* does not have a robust meaning, what other meaning or intentions are there in *I opened the door and entered*? Obvious. The intention of going-in, of entering. We may, therefore, be justified in positing the following claim: in the context of where the intention to go beyond the door is present, and the door is shut (we might add quite innocuously also the condition that the door is easily open-able, i.e., no unusual effort nor attention is required to open it) and we are given the phrase '*I opened the door and . . .*' any amount of intention that may be presumed because of the pronoun "I" is located with the act of *going* beyond the door, *entering* for example, and the actual act of *opening the door* neither attracts intention nor carries any robust meaning. If we accept this claim, there seems to be no reason not to accept, *mutatis mutandis*, the corresponding claim about *I opened the gate*. And in the actual example we are considering, as we learned from the schoolgirl-accosting-scene excerpt, Benjy's intention was clearly to follow the girls as closely as possible, i.e., towards outside, beyond the fences. In this case, then, the phrase *opened the gate* literally carries no weight, it has no robust meaning in itself; it is rather an indicator or a marker keeping track of Benjy's path, to tell the reader that he got out of the yard through the gate (that we learn later was unlatched) and he did not jump over the fence nor broke through it. With this interpretation in mind, and supposing it justified, we may propose as its corollary the following rewriting of the sentence, using different verbs but arguably still capturing the

essence of what is happening: 'I went out, the gate was in the way, I went through it.' Note that all the verbs used in this re-writing are intransitive; therefore Bockting, in any event, has one fewer reason to object to this, if she were to object to it at all.

Stepping back a little, we now glance at what fleshing-in can be done to one of the points made earlier that we should deny attributing any intentions to Benjy because he is an *idiot*, whatever semantic load this term may be carrying. There is a scene which may be instructive to this end, where there is a definite sense of uncertainty in the level of self-awareness Benjy might/or might not possess: at the least, he seems not to be in control of all of his actions, nor is he in touch with all of his perceptions as 'his,' apparently. It is when he burnt himself:

My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me. I could still hear the clock between my voice. Dilsey reached back and hit Luster on the head. My voice was going loud every time.

"Get that soda." Dilsey said. She took my hand out of my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back to my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud.
(SF 59)

We note here that his hand and voice are described as if acting on their own volition, independent of him. The control over his hand's movement still lies within his "I" in the first line: we see that it is "I" who puts the hand in 'my' mouth. That mastery, apparently, fades in the second paragraph as his voice begins to want to 'go loud' and his hand 'tries to go back' to his mouth. Besides Dilsey and Luster, here emerge three subjects apparent: Benjy, Benjy's voice and Benjy's burnt hand. Faced with such a picture, it may be tempting to reach the idiot-Benjy conclusion by arguing in the following manner:

Benjy's lack of speech and his apparent mental age (of a three-year old), coupled with what we easily observe in the scenes such as above, indicate quite a primitive state of consciousness and compound our suspicion that we may not actually have a referent for his use of "I," at least not in the normal way that pronoun is impregnated with the sense of self-aware ego which is aware that it is aware; a fortiori, therefore, no intentional states can be ascribed to him. (Hence may also originate the not-uncommon allusions to his near animal-like existence, both in the text and by the critics.)

Where this chain of argument may break down, its weakest link, as it were, is where the blanket denial of his ability to be ever intentional at all is issued from the fact that the normal and competent use of the pronoun "I" is inseparably the sine-qua-non of a self-aware subject of experience (see Lowe), the Self, the "I," or Ego, which Benjy evidently lacks, judging from the above quoted passage: if the subject of experience does not even recognize his voice or hand as his own, it is not really *the* subject of consciousness, it is only a subject of consciousness which is sick and, sadly, compromised.

One might object to this link, calling in question if it is indeed utterly impossible for someone or something with less than completely unified (comparable, perhaps to Kant's notion of apperception) sense of self to have any intentional states whatsoever. Thus formulated, the objection seems to command serious attention. We will not try to meet it, however, for the reasons first that there is a more threatening objection which we will address next. And secondly that the denying Benjy of all intentionalities is not the ultimate conclusion this paper arrives at in the end; as such it is a sweeping generalization too broad to successfully defend. The conclusion that will be actually defended, in contrast, is to deny Benjy only a specific form of intentionality,

the sort that is predicated on his comprehending causality.

A grave objection may be leveled against our, let us say, Benjy's-incompetence thesis by anyone who, having read the page preceding the very first excerpt we quoted from the text, noticed the following lines:

It was open when I touched it, and I held to it in the twilight. I wasn't crying, and I tried to stop, watching the girls coming along in the twilight. (SF 52)

The objector would argue as follows. First, the very first sentence up to the comma is tantamount to his confessing that he recognized that it was open. Second, for him to have recognized that it was open, naturally, he had to be able to know or understand what it is for it to be open. Thirdly, to know or understand what it is for it to be open is precisely to know / understand how it causally comes about to be open. And finally, from all of the above, therefore, Benjy understands the causal mechanism of how the gate opens.

Upon closer inspection, there are several instances of faulty inference and shortcuts in the above line of reasoning. Before we start to unearth those mistakes, however, we should note a small and perhaps trivial looking point which in fact is quite crucial and cannot be conceded to our opponents. It is that the sentence 'It was open when I touched it' allows only one possible interpretation in the given context in so far as the question of how he came to know the gate's being open is concerned: by touch, namely. It is through his tactual perception (or more precisely, through his prioperception, more on this below) that he came to know that the gate was open. And it cannot be otherwise: for example, by his visually registering that the bolt of the latch was not in, or by simply noticing that the gate was ajar, etc. The former possibility is excluded because if he understands the

mechanism of the latching to such an extent, then he should be able to go out of the yard whenever he so wished. The latter possibility is unlikely because if so (and this point in fact applies to the former possibility as well) it would mean that he visually registered the aperture between the gate and the rest of the fences, implying that his attention at least for that moment was directed away from the girls outside to whom his entranced gaze was supposed to be glued. This is a much less attractive interpretation than the one where he, following the movement of the girls passing-by by sliding himself sideways while holding onto and unceasingly looking through the fence, realizes the gate was open because it starts to give way due to his body weight. Perhaps, a quick way to summarize is that when we use the adverbial phrase *when I touched it* in such circumstances we do so simply in order to imply that that (by touch) is how we came to learn that it was open.

As is obvious from the more attractive interpretation elaborated on in the last paragraph, this tactual perceiving of the gate's unlatched state can be a little more exactly described as prioperceptively coming to find out something, that is, by momentarily losing balance (because that portion of the fence which is movable, the gate, gave way) his body recognized that the kind of resistance it was used to (from the innumerable times when he cried holding onto the un-budging fence) is no longer present, and that thus it can lunge forward towards the open space where the girls are.

One way to describe the sequence, making explicit the interpretation put forward above, may be the following: 'It started to open when I leaned on it.' In comparing this to the original, 'It was open when I touched it,' it may be feared that we would introduce a substantial non-justifiable change by replacing the description of a state (that it was open) by that of a movement (of

starting to open). Such worries are misplaced, however, if we carefully examine what is really involved. First of all, we already ascertained that it is not the case that the gate was ajar nor does Benji mean by *it was open* that he observed visually that it was unlocked. All that is implied by the original description is that it was unlatched which can be detected if you put weight onto it. Secondly, though perhaps a minor point, but the fact of his choice of the verb *touch* should not be overemphasized; it is not that he warily pricked at the gate with his little finger to see what happens, it was rather a momentary grabbing of the pale with his hands as an instantaneous prelude to the ensuing motion of his body's barging through the gate. In this spirit, therefore, substituting *leaning* for *touching* cannot be faulted for being too arbitrary or unjustified. Thirdly and most importantly, the state versus movement dichotomy may be deceptively misleading when looked at only superficially. What is really the issue is a state of possessing a particular property named by the adjective *open*. But as the analysis so far should have made it amply clear, this particular instance of the use of this adjective denotes in fact not a categorical property but a dispositional one (see Mumford or Molnar). Dispositions are, in contrast to categorical ones, a kind of properties the possession of which by their host substance cannot be indisputably confirmed till the critical moment of its actual manifestation, after which point the substance may very well lose that very disposition. Examples are such as fragility possessed by a wineglass and solubility of salt: we cannot be one hundred percent certain that that particular glass will break when dropped because for all we know it is a very carefully crafted fake made of unbreakable plastic. The only way to be certain that it indeed possesses the fragility we hypothesize it has is to actually drop it. After it hits the floor and really shatters into pieces, there is no longer that particular fragility because the

glass itself no longer exists. Similarly with salt: we do not know definitively that it will dissolve (it may be some non-water-soluble powder similar in appearance to salt) until we put it into water. (In this case, however, after evaporating water away, salt will regain its solubility.) The property Benjy ascribes to the gate (which he describes by using the adjective *open*) is one example of such dispositional properties. As repeatedly noted above, the *open-ness* of the gate was for Benjy not something visually ascertainable. The function of *when I touched it* is precisely what the conditional clause does in the paraphrasing of a dispositional property using conditional sentences, namely, stating the condition which triggers the manifestation of the dispositional property. The unlatched gate had the disposition to open when leant on by someone and it manifested this disposition when indeed Benjy leaned on it. When this formal framework of translating dispositional properties in non-dispositional terms is seen to be adequate, we should have little worries left as to the plausibility of the rewriting proposed earlier in this paragraph.

Now we can finally go back to the questionable line of argumentation we wanted to dissect earlier. For the convenience of reference, we cite it again below slightly abridged:

First, 'It was open when I touched it' is tantamount to his confessing that he recognized that it was open. Second, to recognize that it was open, he should be able to understand what it is for it to be open. Thirdly, to understand what it is for the gate to be open is precisely to know how it causally comes about to be open. And finally, therefore, Benjy understands the causal mechanism of how the gate opens.

To start with, the first point is rather ambiguous; if the recognition it mentions is the sort implicitly presumed throughout the long paragraph above, it is acceptable, i. e., recognition through

tactual / prioperceptive senses of the fact that the gate had possessed a dispositional property which by the very act of his discovering it has already been lost (the gate has already opened itself: the disposition to open itself is lost when it becomes open). If, on the contrary, something more is implied by his recognition, we have failed to see the evidence for it so far; hence a very likely non-sequitur. Next, the second point is either trivial or contentious; if the latter, we feel again suspicious of non-sequitur though not certain exactly how because the point is once again rather vaguely put. The former possibility has nothing to object to except that it is rather trivial, saying in effect that for Benjy to be able to recognize it to be open, he should know it to be open when it is open. As far as we know, there is no evidence that he cannot do this: in him, there is no gap between recognition and knowledge. With this trivial interpretation in mind, the third point above is a blatant non-sequitur: to know the gate to be open when it is open does not in any way entail knowing the causal process by which the gate opens: to know *open* is to know the gate to be un-shut, in other words, it is *understanding* the particular state the gate can be in; to know the causal mechanism of opening is something properly beyond mere understanding of particular states. The two states of *open* and *shut* are merely points in the four dimensional event ontology, but the causal relation that connects the two are the line conjoining those points and even something more, something that explains and causally makes sense of the two events which otherwise are isolated, disjoint and not made sense of. In short, one may understand the states which may happen to be causes or effects in isolation, by themselves, without knowing anything about the causal relation that may obtain between them and connect them. And finally, since the fourth and final point depends crucially on the previous steps, it itself now appears seriously

wanting in plausibility. It is thus hoped that we are now less easily moved by arguments of the form as in the last paragraph, alleging to establish Benjy's causal understanding.

Taking the implication of the dispositional analysis to heart, we must not underestimate the point that Benjy's noticing of the dispositional property concerned is after the fact, that is, by the time his mind registers it, the said property is already lost. One suggestive way to capture this aspect of the dynamic involved, dealing with the fleeting reality, is to call Benjy's statements concerning his *touching and opening the gate* post-hoc, post-actum confirmatory observational statements, in other words, assertions made after the fact, merely confirming or recording what has preceding-ly transpired. There does not entail from this that he shows much understanding of the causal mechanism involved in opening the gate nor what it means as an act for someone to open the gate except for, in his case, that it is a part of the impediment that is in the way between him and the schoolgirls, i.e., the fence.

Finally, we quote from David Hume who in an appealing way explains how our mind, facing the external reality, develops the picture of a causally connected world:

The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse, as by the shock of two billiard-balls, he would not pronounce that the one event was *connected*; but only that it was *conjoined* with the other. After he has observed several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them *connected*. What alteration has happened to give rise to this new idea of *connexion*? Nothing but that he now *feels* these events to be *connected* in his imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other. When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in thought,

and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other's existence. (*Enquiry* 75-76)

What he means may cautiously be interpreted as a recognition of the indispensable role that repetition plays in elevating what was initially a mere conjunction to a connexion, and this connexion is what our human mind perceives as causality. In the case of Benjy and his *opening the gate*, we have already mentioned that there is no other instance in the text, our sentence is their unique co-occurrence; and only one other instance where somebody else (his sister Caddy) is opening the gate. Are those two instances sufficient to ensconce in his mind the connexion Hume is talking about? Not likely. Moreover, if we remind ourselves of the deep chasm separating first-person and third-person, perhaps we should not count Caddy's opening the gate as offering any additional reason for Benjy to understand his *himself's* opening the gate. To repeat, the sentence we are considering is the one and only time where his interior monologue utters *I opened the gate*. We have, therefore, a strong case against the claim that Benjy possesses a clear causal understanding about the gate's being opened by him since the Humean analysis does not seem to endorse it.

We have now reached the conclusion of our paper. Notwithstanding the difficulty of unconditionally denying Benjy the very possibility of intentionality at all, we can be reasonably confident that a skeptical stance concerning his causal understanding as far as his *opening the gate* is concerned has an undeniable strength; succinctly put, he seems to lack the causal understanding involving the gate and himself.

As a corollary to this result, we see that Bockting, so far as this sentence is concerned, is rescued out of the outright contradiction we saw at the beginning, threatening her thesis about Benjy's causal non-understanding due to his not having mastered the use of transitive verbs in English.

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