Language
and the World

Essays New and Old

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Advanced Reasoning Forum

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Preface

History of the Essays

Essays New

Richard L. Epstein

Richard L. Epstein (1947–) received his Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley in 1973. He began studies in philosophy as a postdoctoral fellow at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (1976–1978). His mentors in philosophy were George Hughes and Benson Mates.

   He has published books on mathematical logic, formal logic, logic as the art of reasoning well, and linguistics. He has translated and edited for publication the stories in *The BARK of DOG*. He is now Head of the Advanced Reasoning Forum and director of The BARK of DOG Foundation in Socorro, New Mexico.

The World as The Flow of All

The world is made up of things: rocks, tables, dogs, people, stars. Of this we are sure, for we have words for all these and many more.

We know of process and change, too. But we know of them only through things. For example, suppose I show you an apple. It's round, red, shiny. I take a bite of it. It's changed—no longer round, no longer red and shiny where I bit into it. I take another bite. The apple has changed some more. I take another bite, and another, and the apple has changed a lot. I give the core to my donkey. The apple is all gone.

The apple changed. But is that the apple I started with? If one apple changed, it wasn't what I first showed you, it wasn't what I bit into the second time, it wasn't the core. It must have been something beyond all those, somehow beyond any particular time, something that persists through all "its" changes. Talking of change we find ourselves talking about things beyond any particular time.

Change, we feel, is not real like things are real, like rocks, tables, dogs, people, stars, the sun. The sun? Everything we know about that fiery ball tells us that the sun is a process: nothing endures in it, not shape, not form, not even molecules—only process. A rock, too, is process, changing, never stable, though we don't notice the changes. The difference isn't that the sun is a process and the rock is a thing; the difference is the scale of time over which we note "changes".

Our focus in our language is on the world as made up of things, on stability in the flow of our experience. Still, we have some sense in our lives of flow, of flux, of change, of process. And we have some hints of that in our language.

Suppose you're in my living room with me, and I look out the window and say,

It's raining.

Yes, that's true. But what's raining? There's no "it": the weather isn't raining. The weather is rainy; the weather doesn't do anything. The word "it" is a dummy, there because in English every verb requires a subject. I could have said just,

Raining.

You would have understood me. It's clear I'm talking about now, which is all the "is" in the original sentence tells us. And it's clear

I'm talking about there, outside the window, though in English we don't require any word or phrase to mark that.

On a winter day I might say "Snowing", and you'd understand me. That's complete, clearly true or false, though it doesn't look like a sentence in English. Or I could say, "Sun-ing" or "Breeze-ing", which are odd, but once you've got the hang of my talking this way, you'd understand me.

If we were at my friend's apartment in the city, I might look out the window and say,

Running.

You'd understand me. It sounds odd because I haven't said who or what is running. That seems essential when we talk English because verbs are descriptions of what's happening to or because of a thing. Yet running is running, whether it's one person, a dog chasing a cat, or lots of people in a marathon. I don't describe all when I say "Running", but we never describe all. What I've said is true or false, enough to communicate.

Looking out my window at the patio I could say "Barking" and you'd understand me. On another day looking at my dogs I could say, "Sleeping". These are process words, and used this way they begin to become part of a way to describe process without a focus on things.

After a rain, as I look out at the patio I might say, "Mud". Mud isn't a thing. We don't say "There are three muds out there." We say, "There's some mud" because mud is a mass. Water, gold, snow are masses, too. We know they're part of what the world is made up of, different from things. Every part of mud is mud, while there's no part of an apple that is an apple. Processes are like that, too. Every part of raining is raining—there's no smallest part of raining, for a single drop of water is not raining.

Starting to see the world as process-mass, I look out the window and say, "Dog-ing". You'd understand, though it seems incomplete. One dog or many dogs? What's the dog doing? We need a verb and an indication of singular or plural when we talk in English. Yet if I say, "There's a dog", the verb is just "is". The dog is there, it exists there, that's all. "Dog-ing", understood as about there and now, does that as well, though it doesn't say whether there's one or many, whether alive or dead, whether big or small. Much is left out, but much is left out of our description "There's a dog."

I could turn, and looking around the room say, "Table-ing". You'd understand. An odd way to talk, but true. Or pointing to the next room I could say, "Woman-ing". Odd, too, incomplete, but true. Or I could say "Brown-ing" while pointing in the direction of my old dog Birta. That would be true. Brown is not a color that attaches itself to a thing; "brown-ing" is a description that applies in the flux at that time and place. We are beginning to see the world as made up of processes.

Processes? To say that is to slip back into thing-talk. This process, that process, one process, two processes, a fast process, a blue process. No. To see process in the world there are not processes, just process, the flow of all. Words like "raining", "sun-ing", "running", "dog-ing", "mud-ing" describe the flux at a time and place. They don't pick out separate parts of the flow any more than "Pacific Ocean" and "Baltic Sea" pick out parts separate and distinct from the water that covers the earth.

To say that Zoe is woman-ing is to talk of Zoe as a process-mass, continuing through time not as a supratemporal object but as a way. But Zoe is not a process-mass, for that is to treat her as a thing again, just a different kind of thing. There are no processes, no masses. There is only the flow of all that we describe in various ways, one of which is "Zoe-ing". Still, I'll use the terms "mass-process language" and "mass-process word" because the parts of English that lead us to this other view are words we use in English for processes and masses.

To talk of the world as the flow of all we can borrow and modify some words from English like "raining", "sun-ing", "running", "dog-ing", "mud-ing", "woman-ing". We add "-ing" to remind us of our new way of talking, of seeing. When we specify a context for these words, each is true or false.

We can say "Dog-ing running brown-ing", and that would be true if you had pointed to my dog Birta running in the hills. Better is to use "+ " to indicate that the descriptions are mixed together and not simply applying at a time and place. So pointing to Birta it would be correct to say "Running + dog-ing + brown-ing", while "Running dog-ing brown-ing" without the "+" might be true if there were seventeen white dogs in a room where there is a cockroach running across a brown table (I have to resort to English for my examples).

In "dog-ing + brown-ing" there is no subject or predicate. An equivalent description is "brown-ing + dog-ing". The words "dog-ing" and "brown-ing" have equal status: there is no individual thing that is

meant as the subject and no comment on "it" as a predicate. There
(pointing) is dog-ing and brown-ing mixed together.

We can mark a description for time and place, like "Raining
(yesterday, here)" or "(Running + dog-ing + browning) (today, there)",
where the markers are made clear by context. Any of the mass-process
words can be marked for time. This suggests that each is a verb. But
how can there be verbs without nouns? We could use time marking
just for entire sentences, as in "Yesterday ((dog-ing + running) and
(raining))". Or we could use only comparisons for temporal ordering,
as in "(bark-ing + dog-ing) before (rabbit-ing + run-ing)". In these no
part is marked for time, so we have no temptation to classify a part of
the expression as a verb.

We can describe more fully by saying:

Not–Raining (here, now)

(Rabbit-ing + Running) (there, now) *and*
   (Dog-ing + Chasing) (there, now)

Coyote-ing (yesterday, there) *or* Dog-ing (yesterday, there)

All the ways we join sentences in English with the connectives "not",
"or", "and", "if . . . then . . ." we can use in talking of the world as the
flow of all, for those require only that the sentences are (considered to
be) true or false, not that they are about things.

In English we get tongue-tied trying to talk of sameness and differ-
ence. Is (are?) the apple then and the apple now the same? How can
two things be the same? Can there be sameness and difference without
talk of things? A visitor to my ranch saw a couple dogs in the corral
yesterday. She's standing next to me today and wonders whether those
were the same as the dogs that are here in front of us. Is dog-ing then
and there the same as dog-ing here and now? We can formulate that
question in mass-process talk by asking whether the following is true:

Dog-ing (yesterday, corral) $\approx$ Dog-ing (here, now)

The symbol "$\approx$" is not meant for identity of things but similarity,
indicating equivalent descriptions.

We can assert similarity without talk of time and location, too:

(Canine-ing + Domestic-ing) $\approx$ Dog-ing

This is not a universal statement that at any place and time "(Canine-
ing + Domestic-ing)" describes the same as "Dog-ing". Rather ,

the concept, the category, the genus if you will of "Canine-ing + Domestic-ing" is the same (similar to) that of "Dog-ing".

More generally, we can say that dog-ing is part of animal-ing. But that's misleading because for there to be a part, there must be a whole, and animal-ing, just as mud-ing, is not a whole, not a thing. Rather, the conception of dog-ing is *subordinate to* that of canine-ing, so long as we don't think of concepts as things but rather as concept-ing, as I describe in "Language-Thought-Meaning" in this volume. Abbreviating "subordinate to" as "sub", we have that the following are true:

Tree-ing sub Plant-ing

Reading sub Thinking

Pegasus-ing sub Horse-ing

And the following are false:

Cat-ing sub Dog-ing

Barking sub Meowing

We have a simple grammar: base words, conjunctions of base words, base words of specific times and places, sentence connectives, a subordination relation, and a similarity relation.

In the accompanying essay "Language and the World" and essays by others in this volume, we'll see that there are many languages that have the structure and conceptions of this artificial mass-process language: no nouns, no verbs, no partitioning of the world but only describing the flow of all. Those essays explore how this matters to philosophy, to linguistics, to anthropology, to ethics—to our way in the world.

Dedicated to the memory of Suely Porto Alves
in the flow of all, the flow of love

Language and the World

Introduction

There are two kinds of languages: thing languages and mass-process languages.

In a thing language, the grammar leads speakers to look first for stability in the world: the world is made up of things, individual things that persist in time. Words that can be used to pick out that stability are nouns. Descriptions of the individual things in time are verbs. There may be words for mass and process in such a language, but they are

secondary, and the grammar forces their use into the syntactic role of nouns and verbs, leading speakers to think of them in some way as things and as descriptions of things in time.

In a mass-process language, the grammar leads speakers to encounter the world as the flow of all. There is no idea of change, for there is nothing to change, there are only differing descriptions of the flow. Every base word can serve as a description and as a modifier. Each can be marked for time, or whole assertions can be marked for time, or assertions can be compared for time as before or after. If stability can be found it is only with secondary grammatical constructions. There are no nouns and verbs, for there are no words for individual things and no descriptions of things in time.

There is good reason for a noun-verb distinction in thing languages. There is good reason for no noun-verb distinction in mass-process languages. This is what I will show in this paper, along with how linguists and anthropologists do or do not take account of such very different grammars.

Thing languages
Languages such as English, German, and French are *thing languages*: the grammar of these directs their speakers to look first for stability in the world as made up of things. For example, in English there are lots of words for kinds of things. We have "dog", "apple", "rock", "chair". We talk of an apple or the apple: the singular with the article indicates we are meaning to talk about an individual thing. We talk of all the apples on the table, indicating with the plural our intention to get someone to pay attention to many individual things of that kind.

We describe things. I take an apple; it's red, round, shiny, firm. I bite into it and put it on the table. It's no longer round, and where I bit it's an off-white color. I leave it on the table for a couple days, and it is no longer red and firm: it's mushy and brown. We say the apple changed. But what changed? Our grammar insists that we are talking about one thing that has gone through changes—the apple. So the apple is a thing that is supratemporal: it persists in time through its changes. We describe the changes with words and phrases like "was red", "is mushy", "softened", "changed color". The grammar of English directs us first to look for stability in terms of things and then to talk of how those things go through changes

We say that a word or phrase for a thing we mean to be talking