Phil 420: *Metaphysics*
Spring 2008

[Handout 9]

Professor JeeLoo Liu

Nelson Goodman: *Ways of Worldmaking* [I]

Chapter I. Words, Works, Worlds

Note: In Goodman there are a lot of enigmatic remarks. I shall put these remarks down with the sign "*" so that we can discuss them in class.

§ I. Introduction

Q: In what sense are there many worlds?
Q: What distinguishes genuine from spurious worlds?
Q: What are worlds made of?
Q: How are worlds made?
Q: What role do symbols play in the making?
Q: How is Worldmaking related to knowing?

§ II. The Multiplicity of Worlds (or World-versions)

We are not speaking in terms of multiple possible alternatives to a single actual world but of multiple actual worlds.

(1) A statement is always made from a "frame of reference."

e.g. 'The sun always moves.'
'The sun never moves.'
___ We are inclined to regard the two strings of words not as complete statements with truth-values of their own but as elliptical for some such states as "Under frame of reference A, the sun always moves" and "Under frame of reference B, the sun never moves" – statements that may both be true of the same world.

* *We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds.*

(2) The *Worlds* are dependent on *Words* (our conceptualization, our description, our taxonomies, etc.).

We can never compare a version of the world with a world undescribed, undepicted, unperceived.

(3) There are multiple versions of the world depicted by various sciences; not all versions can be "reduced" to the fundamental physics.

The pluralist, far from being anti-scientific, accepts the sciences at full value. His typical adversary is the physicalist who maintains that physics is preeminent and all-inclusive, such that every other version must eventually be reduced to it or rejected as false or meaningless.

***Q*: Can all branches of knowledge about the world be ultimately reduced to physics?**

Goodman:
___ A reduction from one system to another can make a genuine contribution to understanding the interrelationships among world-versions; but reduction in any reasonably strict sense is rare, almost always partial, and seldom if ever unique.

(4) There is no perception without conception. [Seeing is Interpreting.]

Kant: "Conception without perception is empty; perception without conception is blind."

** Talk of unstructured content or an unconceptualized given or a substratum without properties is self-defeating, for the talk imposes structure, conceptualizes, ascribes properties.*

Conclusion: We can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols.

§ III. Ways of Worldmaking

***** Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand: the making is a remaking.

(a) **composition and decomposition** – taxonomy; kinds; organization; identification; names, etc.

Much of Worldmaking consists of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly: one the one hand, of dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into subspecies, analyzing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions; on the other hand, of composing wholes and kinds out of parts and members and subclasses, combining features into complexes, and making connections.

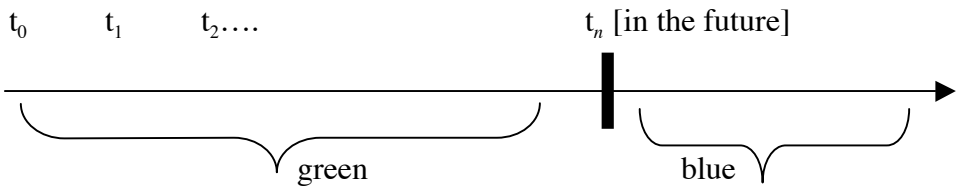
[individuation]

___ e.g. what is a 'war'? what is a 'state'? what is a university? what is a river?

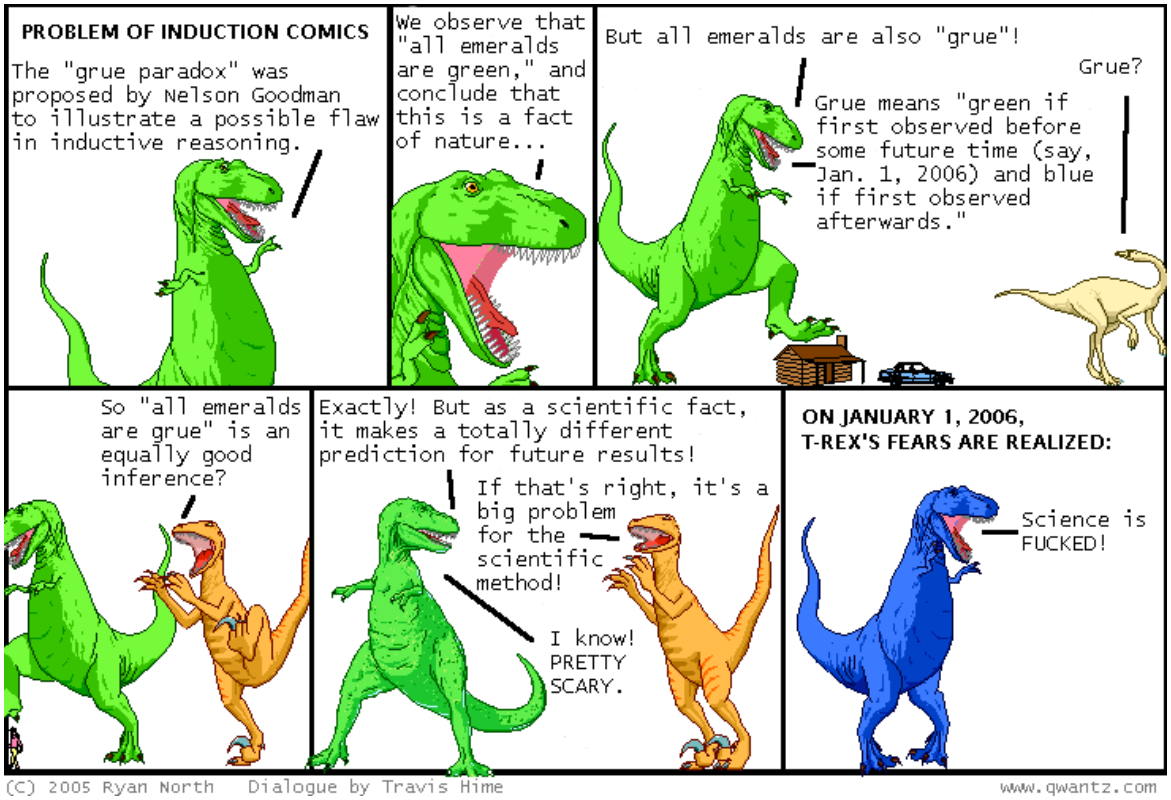
[identification]:
___ same or not the same?
"same what?" We always need our criteria in making comparisons.

[repetition]
___ Repetition as well as identification is relative to organization.
___ There will always be something different.

[kinds or properties]
___ The famous example of 'grue' – examined before a given date and green, or not so examined and blue



Is emerald 'green' or 'grue'?



** The uniformity of nature we marvel at or the reliability we protest belongs to a world of our own making.*

(b) **Weighing –** deciding the relevance of criteria; deciding on the importance or unimportance of features; evaluating the utilities or value, etc.

Suppose that some relevant kinds of one world are missing from another, we might say that the two worlds contain just the same classes sorted differently into relevant and irrelevant kinds. Some relevant kinds of the one world, rather than being absent from the other, are present as irrelevant kinds; some differences among worlds are not so much in entities comprised **as in emphasis or accent**.

** With changing interests and new insights, the visual weighing of features of bulk or line or stance or light alters, and yesterday's level world seems strangely perverted; yesterday's realistic calendar landscape becomes a repulsive caricature.*

Emphasis or weighing is not always binary as is sorting into relevant and irrelevant kinds or into important and unimportant features. Ratings of relevance, importance, utility, value often yield hierarchies rather than dichotomies.

(c) **Ordering –** ordering of derivation from primitives (what is more basic and what is derived?)

Nothing is primitive or is derivationally prior to anything apart from a constructional system.

All measurement is based upon order. Indeed, only through suitable arrangements and groupings can we handle vast quantities of material perceptually or cognitively.

* Daily time is marked off into twenty-four hours, and each of these into sixty minutes of sixty seconds each. Whatever else may be said of these modes of organization, they are not 'found in the world' but *built into a world.*

(d) **Deletion and Supplementation –** deleting details or supplementing details

The making of one world out of another usually involves some extensive weeding out and filling.

** Our capacity for overlooking is virtually unlimited, and what we do take in usually consists of significant fragments and clues that need massive supplementation.*

e.g. Giacometti's man (or JeeLoo's drawing of a stick man)

* Memory edits more ruthlessly. Even within what we do perceive and remember, we dismiss as illusory or negligible what cannot be fitted into the architecture of the world we are building.

The scientist is no less drastic, rejecting or purifying most of the entities and events of the world of ordinary things while generating quantities of filling for curves suggested by sparse data, and erecting elaborate structures on the basis of meager observations.

e.g. thermometer; scale; music notation, and the perception of motion
___ Sometimes motion in the perceptual world results from intricate and abundant fleshing out of the physical stimuli.

(e) **Deformation –** Some changes are reshaping or deformations that may be considered either corrections or distortions.

[Picasso's joke: Is she so flat and small?]

e.g. Picasso's Las Meninas (after Velasquez)

Velasquez: Las Meninas

Picasso: Las Meninas

Conclusion:

These are ways worlds are made – I do not say *the* ways. My classification is not offered as comprehensive or clearcut or mandatory.

§ IV. Trouble with Truth

With all this freedom to divide and combine, emphasize, order, delete, fill in and fill out, and even distort, what are the objectives and the constraints? What are the criteria for success in making a world?

Insofar as a version is verbal and consists of statements, truth may be relevant. (For nonverbal versions, truth is irrelevant.)
___ Truth pertains solely to what is said, and literal truth solely to what is said literally. We risk confusion when we speak of pictures or predicates as "true of" what they predict or apply to; they have no truth value and may represent or denote some things and not others.

But truth cannot be defined or tested by agreement with 'the world.'

***** *Truth, far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant.*

***** "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" would thus be a perverse and paralyzing policy for any world-maker. The whole truth would be too much; it is too vast, variable, and clogged with trivia. The truth alone would be too little, for some right versions are not true – being either false or neither true nor false – and even for the true versions rightness may matter more.

§ V. Relative Reality

***** If there is a "one and the same neutral and underlying world" of all versions of worlds, it would be a world without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern – a world not worth fighting for or against.

***** The physicist takes his world as the real one; the phenomenologist regards the perceptual world as fundamental…. For the man in the street, most versions from the familiar serviceable world he has jerry-built from fragments of scientific and artistic tradition and from his own struggle for survival. This world, indeed, is the one most often taken as real; for *reality in a world, like realism in a picture, is largely a matter of habit.*

* The right versions and actual worlds are many does not obliterate the distinction between right and wrong versions, and does not imply that all right alternatives are equally good for every or for any purpose.

* *While readiness to recognize alternative worlds may be liberating, …, a willingness to welcome all worlds builds none. A broad mind is no substitute for hard work.*

§ VI. On Knowledge

Knowledge cannot be exclusively or even primarily a matter of determining what is true. Much of knowing aims at something other than true, or any, belief.

***** All the processes of Worldmaking I have discussed enter into knowing. Perceiving motion often consists in producing it. Discovering laws involve drafting them. Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together.

* Worlds are as much made as found; knowing is as much remaking as reporting.

***Q*: In what sense is Goodman's view a form of *irrealism*?**