Review of “Rule-Following and Realism”

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Gary Ebbs’ *Rule-Following and Realism* is an enormously ambitious book. Over the course of about 300 pages the author discusses many of the most influential and widely-discussed arguments from the past sixty years in the philosophy of language, and tries to provide a sort of large-scale reconciliation of the various apparently conflicting ways of thinking about linguistic meaning that each of these arguments represents. In the book’s Introduction he offers a rather curious *apologia* for his approach:

What will strike most readers as unusual about this book is that it contains detailed reconstructions of arguments with which they are already familiar…But the reconstructions are integral to my method of working through the alternative points of view. My position is inextricably linked to my method.

The way of writing philosophy that Ebbs begs indulgence for here is of course just the very style that ancient and medieval commentators on the writings of Aristotle, the Bible etc. would have adopted as a matter of course. But it does certainly represent an unusual approach to discussing the core problems of the contemporary analytic tradition. That tradition will have taken an interesting turn indeed if Ebbs’ carefully synoptic brand of close textual commentary becomes the normal idiom within which its central problems are addressed.

The position that Ebbs seeks to defend in this book is a type of anti-skepticism in the philosophy of linguistic meaning. In the book’s first three chapters he provides a lengthy summary of Kripke’s famous discussions of rule-following and Quine’s arguments for the indeterminacy of translation. Both of these philosophers are represented as being skeptics about the possibility of making substantive, truth evaluable claims about the semantics of actual human languages. Ebbs suggests that these forms of skepticism arise from the allegiance that each philosopher has to a more general set of methodological presuppositions that simply fail to retain their plausibility once one develops a proper appreciation of the curious position that a philosopher is in when he seeks to understand a practice such as linguistic communication that one cannot help but be *actively engaged in*, even as one attempts to think about it from an entirely detached point of view.

Ebbs does not seem to think that our perspective upon the use of language is especially unique in this way. At one point in the book he compares it to the situation of a hypothetical group of people who have all been taught the same dance, but who find that they are only capable of resolving disagreements about how it should be performed by actually going through the motions of the
dance itself, rather than trying to describe the steps that are involved in it from the perspective of the armchair. He does, however, appear to believe that this fact about our relationship to the languages that we speak has been overlooked by a number of philosophers in ways that do crucial damage the plausibility of what each of them ends up arguing for. Kripke’s inability to take proper account of our inescapable involvement in the linguistic practices that we seek as philosophers to understand arises from his commitment to what Ebbs refers to as “metaphysical realism.” The problem with Kripkean “realism,” Ebbs suggests, is that it leads us to embrace a notion of rule-following that cannot be adapted to the explanation of linguistic behavior. Quine’s problematic methodological assumptions, on the other hand, are the result of his “scientific naturalism.” The problem with Quinean “naturalism,” according to Ebbs, is that it “objectifies” the phenomenon of linguistic communication by equating the meaningfulness of individual expressions in a language with their translatability by a third party who is uninitiated into the use of that very language.

The key to defusing both of the aforementioned varieties of skepticism, Ebbs proposes, is just to appreciate the restrictions that are imposed upon how we describe the phenomena of meaning and assertion by our permanent and inescapable occupation of a “participant perspective” upon the use of language. It is easy to be suspicious whenever a philosopher announces that he is going to persuade us of something by illuminating a flaw in our “perspective.” This sort of rhetoric all too often shows up in philosophy and elsewhere as a substitute for straightforward argumentation. To his credit, though, Ebbs recognizes that he owes us more than the mere assurance that such a third way is available to us as an alternative to both realism and naturalism. He identifies John McDowell as one contemporary philosopher who understands the necessity of describing our linguistic practices in a way that properly takes account of our own status as active participants in those practices, but he dismisses McDowell’s description of language-learning as a process whereby we “make our minds available to one another” as a uninformative metaphor that is never properly explicated. Ebbs’ remarks here are especially salutary given how often the claims that he defends about language seem to echo things that McDowell has said in his writings about both semantics and the philosophy of mind. McDowell’s ideas on these subjects have been enormously influential often the past decade or so, but many of his contemporary sympathizers have a tendency to paraphrase his views in a rather incantatory way.

In the remainder of the book Ebbs attempts to provide a more substantive account of what differentiates the “participant perspective” upon language use and linguistic understanding from philosophical presuppositions such as those adopted by the Kripkean skeptic and the Quinean indeterminist. He spends three chapters trying to show how the adoption of this perspective will enable us to identify what the very best reasons are for rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction. In this section of the book he provides an imaginative reconstruction of the debate between Quine and Carnap about the status of analytic truths. Ebbs’ principal contention here is that these two philosophers were in an important sense talking past one another when they argued over whether the notion of analyticity had any role to play in the explanation of linguistic meaning. He argues that Quine was simply mistaken in supposing that his teacher’s goal was to provide “a philosophical theory of what makes logical and mathematical truth possible.” Ebbs offers a fairly novel interpretation of Carnap’s philosophical project, according to which the aim of The Logical Syntax of Language was only to provide a method for the “codification” of rules for the use of natural languages that scientists could be justified in taking for granted without damaging the objectivity of their empirical research. In this book Carnap discusses how one might go about constructing
rigorous metalanguages for use in the interpretation of everyday descriptive speech. The rules for
the use of these metalanguages would include “meaning postulates” that served to single out
analytic equivalences of meaning amongst the terms employed in the object language. Carnap’s aim
in detailing the procedures for constructing these languages was (Ebbs thinks) much more modestly
pragmatist in spirit that Quineans represent them as having been; he simply wanted to provide a
framework for the resolution of disputes in the sciences that eschewed the sorts of appeals to hoary
metaphysical notions that he saw in the debates that were taking place between the constructivist
and non-constructivist mathematicians of his own day.

Ebbs’ discussion of Carnap’s writings is laudably clear, well-documented and imaginative. I am not
myself entirely convinced by this reconstruction of Carnap’s position, perhaps only because it
represents his project as being curiously unambitious in its philosophical scope. For if the selection
of “meaning postulates” for a language in which genuinely scientific discourse takes place is not
based upon substantive views that one has about the independence of their truth conditions from
empirical considerations, it is difficult to see how this rather mysterious process of “codification”
could be anything other than arbitrary. And if a particular “codification” of the semantic rules of a
language does in fact prove useful in the resolution of scientific disputes, then surely the
philosophically interesting question to ask is, why does it work so well? There is little evidence that
I am aware of in Carnap’s writings, and none that is identified by Ebbs, to show that he would have
regarded such a question as being somehow philosophically illegitimate or nonsensical. A more
Kantian reading of Carnap’s work such as has recently been proposed by Michael Friedman,
according to which his goal was to illuminate the transcendental preconditions of mathematical and
scientific knowledge, therefore seems to me at the very least to have charity on its side, even in
spite of the fact that it might end up making Carnap’s approach to linguistic questions seems more
vulnerable to the sort of criticisms that Quine eventually made against it.

The best reasons for rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction, according to Ebbs, do not in fact
arise from reflection upon how one might detach ourselves somehow from the quotidian usage of a
given human language in order to come up with a set of rules for its employment as a means of
communication. Rather, we shall come to appreciate the impossibility of maintaining this
distinction simply by noticing that when we participate competently in the use of any human
language, we always leave ourselves open to the very most radical sort of correction with respect to
how we understand the meanings of the expressions that we use. It is a simple truism, Ebbs thinks,
that within the context of everyday usage there is simply no way of foreseeing what sorts of
revisions our semantic beliefs may undergo, and what sort of considerations might matter in
particular cases in determining whether or not the meaning of a word has changed. The normal
attitude of a competent language user toward the relationship between empirical and semantic
knowledge is therefore one of mere deference to the opinions of whomever happen to be the experts
on the particular subject that is at issue when some term or other from the language seems to be
undergoing a change in meaning.

The phenomenon that Ebbs is directing our attention to here is just what Hilary Putnam refers to as
the “division of linguistic labor.” Putnam appeals to this phenomenon to justify both his own
rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction and his commitment to a type of anti-individualism
about linguistic meaning. The final four chapters of Ebbs’ book are devoted to the task of providing
a detailed examination of anti-individualism in semantics, as this position is defended by both
Putnam and Tyler Burge. Ebbs argues on behalf of what he calls “deflationary anti-individualism,” a position that is subtly different from the more familiar versions of this position that one finds in the writings of these two philosophers. These chapters of *Rule-Following and Realism* contain many the book’s most original and philosophically interesting suggestions.

According to Putnam’s externalist account of the reference relation, the meanings of proper names and so-called “natural kind” terms can only be described in terms of the causal relationships between speakers and objects in the external world, and consequently (as Putnam famously puts it) “ain’t in the head.” But Ebbs suggests that Putnam’s brand of externalism loses its plausibility as soon as we simply take it for granted in philosophical contexts (as we in fact clearly do during everyday acts of communication) that two or more speakers of the same language can normally understand one another’s use of most terms within a language more or less regardless of their level of expertise. For once we recognize the plausibility of this assumption, he argues, we shall have no reason to doubt that the knowledge required for understanding these terms can be represented in purely *disquotational* terms, without any explicit appeal to the aetiology of their introduction into the language. Similar sorts of considerations can be appealed to, Ebbs thinks, as an alternative to the rather mysterious-sounding suggestion Burge makes that when we try to provide “meaning-giving characterizations” of terms in a shared language, what makes them true or false has something to do with their fidelity to “notions” that subsist independently of the background beliefs and interests of competent users of that language.

In these sections of the book Ebbs does a good deal more than McDowell has ever managed to do to show how the recognition that we cannot escape a “participant perspective” upon our own linguistic habits might serve as a powerful instrument of demystification in the philosophy of language. A worry remains, however: by adopting this deflationist approach do we not risk leaving ourselves vulnerable to a fairly crude variety of skepticism? Isn’t it in fact perfectly possible that, although I may well be entitled to assume the existence of a shared, veridical understanding of statements made in a language that I speak when I seem to be using it to communicate with others, I might nonetheless be subject to global error simply because I am really just an isolated brain in a vat? Part of the point of non-deflationary, causal accounts of reference that characterize the meanings of words in terms of their relations with objects in the external world is after all precisely to rule out this sort of possibility.

Ebbs responds to this skeptical challenge in a familiar way. He argues that the assumption of generally veridical understanding of the words used by participants in a shared language extends to the sentence “I am not a brain in a vat.” If I were a brain in a vat, however, then I could not competently use this sentence to express the thought that I am not one. Ebbs dismisses the suggestion made by Thomas Nagel that even granted the soundness of this type of anti-skeptical argument, our situation may be sufficiently *analogous* to that of a brain in a vat, in a way that we ourselves are simply not equipped to describe in our own language, to make the skeptic’s general attitude toward our beliefs seem plausible. For the very coherence of Nagel’s suggestion, he argues, depends upon the nonsensical presupposition that “we must be able to conceive of a representation of the world using concepts we don’t possess and can’t acquire.”

This response to Nagel’s brand of skepticism seems a little hasty. For the argumentative function that is served by the sort of conceivability claim made here by Nagel may not, in fact, be to defend the possibility of any single discrete “representation of the world” available from a “perspective”
more encompassing that our own. Instead what it might be meant to suggest is that, just as a brain in a vat might perversely maintain that it is really a regular person with arms and legs and a house in the suburbs, so might our own habits of assertion arise from a similarly confused and contradictory set of impulses that (although we may indeed share them with other users of a common language) cannot under normal circumstances be relied upon to issue in the communication of truths rather than falsehoods or incoherencies. The version of anti-individualism that Ebbs defends does not seem to provide us with any resources to respond to this somewhat more radical, Pyrrhonist form of skepticism. But in this respect perhaps he is not really any worse off than the defender of an anti-individualist position closer in spirit to Putnam’s or Burge’s would be.

For most of the sorts of practices engaged in by human beings that are worth thinking about at the level of generality and abstraction to which philosophy aspires, it seems fair to assume that genuine insight can be acquired by thinking about them both from the perspective of an engaged participant and from the perspective of a detached observer. Ebbs’ book ultimately left me unconvinced that the former sort of perspective has some special sort of priority or importance when it comes to the understanding of our specifically linguistic practices. But Ebbs is far from alone amongst contemporary philosophers in having this view about the proper approach to understanding the place of meaning in the world, and Rule-Following and Realism is certainly one of the most carefully-worked out and rigorously argued defenses of it that I have seen. Because the book covers such a wide range of important arguments from recent work in the philosophy of language, in a way that remains more or less faithful to the intentions of the authors who first made them while at the same time aspiring to something like a synthesis, it would also make an absolutely first-rate textbook for a graduate-level course. Anyone who read Ebbs’ book alongside of the works of Carnap, Quine, Putnam or Burge would be bound to find it an enormously helpful source of clarification and insight into the ideas of all of these influential thinkers.

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