Review of “Words Without Meaning”

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Book Review


Gauker's *Words Without Meaning* is a splendid and provocative book. And I say this in spite of the fact that I disagree with just about everything Gauker says in his book. *Words Without Meaning* is nothing if not ambitious. In this relatively slim book Gauker offers a barrage of arguments against what he takes to be the 'received view' of how language functions and he develops his own rather radical alternative account, fruitfully applying this account to a wide variety of different issues within the philosophy of language. Along the way Gauker has interesting and provocative things to say about such diverse topics as mental representation, Putnam's Model-Theoretic Argument, quantifier restriction, presupposition projection, conversational implicature, conditionals, the semantic paradoxes, folk psychology, propositional attitudes, and propositional attitude reports.

I have no doubt that some will react strongly and negatively to Gauker's treatment of these subjects. Gauker attacks a number of views which are widely accepted or even unquestioned. And, at least to those of us sympathetic to the 'received view,' Gauker's own account frequently seems to get things back to front. Moreover, in such a short book, Gauker can only devote a limited amount of space to answering responses to his objections and criticisms of his positive views. Nevertheless I think that just about everything Gauker says deserves to be considered seriously and, even in a short book, Gauker does a good job of considering and answering many of the most obvious responses to his arguments. Those of us who remain unconvinced by Gauker's arguments and positive view will nevertheless benefit from carefully examining the case Gauker makes in *Words Without Meaning*. We can learn much by trying to articulate exactly where Gauker goes wrong in his criticisms of the received view and what exactly is wrong with the alternative view he advances.

It is not really possible to justice to the richness of Gauker's book in a short review such as this. Nevertheless, I shall spend some time laying out some of the details of the book to give the reader a flavor of what *Words Without Meaning* has to offer, before suggesting a few general worries concerning Gauker's program.

Gauker's book has four parts. In the first part Gauker describes what he calls 'the received view' of how language functions which holds that the primary function of language is to enable a speaker to reveal her thoughts to a hearer. On this picture the speaker chooses her words with the expectation that the hearer will be able to figure out, from this choice of words, what thought the speaker wished to communicate. This is because sentences have representational contents in virtue of the meanings of words they contain.
And a sentence can express a thought in virtue of it having the same representational content (in the context where it is deployed) as the thought it expresses.

Gauker notes that the received view presupposes a representational account of thought on which thought involves the deployment and manipulation of propositionally contentful representations of reality. And he argues that this picture of thought is untenable, attacking a number of well-developed programs, which aim to provide accounts of mental content. Those in the business of providing accounts of mental content are unlikely to be moved by Gauker's criticisms. But I think that Gauker does a good job of putting his finger on some of the major difficulties that need to be solved if we are to obtain such an account.

In contrast Gauker's own account is perhaps best seen as an attempt to take seriously the late-Wittgensteinian adage that language is a tool (I am not sure that Gauker would like this way of describing his project but I think it is a useful way to think of what Gauker is doing). Gauker's basic idea is that conversations always take place against the backdrop of some goal that the interlocutors are trying to achieve. And the primary function of our making an assertion is to shape the way in which interlocutors attempt to achieve that goal. Gauker develops this idea as follows.

Let us say that a literal is an atomic sentence or its negation. And let the opposite of an atomic sentence be its negation and the opposite of a negated atomic sentence be that atomic sentence without the negation applied to it. Now for each conversation we can distinguish between good ways of achieving the goal of that conversation and bad ways of achieving that goal. Furthermore, for each set of literals we can distinguish between those actions which accord with that set of literals relative to a given goal and those that do not. The primitive context for a conversation is the smallest set of literals such that every action in accordance with that set is a good way of achieving the goal of that conversation. A literal is assertible relative to a conversational context just in case it is a member of that context. A literal is deniable relative to a context just in case its opposite is assertible relative to that context. And all other literals are neither assertible nor deniable in that context.

These ideas are best illustrated with an example (adapted slightly from the example Gauker gives pp. 53-57). Suppose that we are conversing and our goal is fetching water, that we have a bucket, that there is a well containing water nearby, and there is an empty barrel nearby. Good ways of achieving our goal include fetching water from the well in the bucket. Bad ways of achieving our goal include trying to fetch water from the barrel in the bucket. Next consider the set $S$ of literals: \{that is a well. here is a bucket. this is a barrel. that contains water. this does not contain water.\}. This, plausibly, is the primitive context for our conversation. Actions that accord with this context and our goal include fetching water from the well in the bucket. Actions that do not accord with this context and our goal include trying to fetch water from the barrel in the bucket. The literals that are members of $S$ are assertible in $S$. Their opposites are deniable in $S$. And all other literals are neither assertible nor deniable in $S$. Gauker will go on, in the later stages of the book, to extend the notions of context and assertibility from this simple case to give an account of presupposition, quantifiers, conditionals, semantic vocabulary, and propositional attitude reports.

In the second part of *Words Without Meaning* Gauker considers three 'pragmatic' phenomena and argues that the 'received view' of language is unable to provide adequate accounts of them. More precisely, Gauker considers domains of discourse, presupposition, and conversational implicature. I will briefly summarize Gauker's arguments. (i) The received view cannot, Gauker maintains, explain how the domain of discourse for a given conversation is determined. It is certainly not determined, Gauker claims, by the
intentions of the interlocutors or by anything they might have in mind. In contrast, Gauker suggests, his own notion of the objective context of a conversation provides an elegant explanation of this phenomenon. Gauker considers a number of particular cases, one of which I will briefly outline here, since we will return to it a little bit later on. Gauker asks us to consider an unimaginative Peruvian goatherd who never wonders whether there are people who live beyond his remote valley. One day there is a bright shooting star that everyone in his valley sees. The goatherd says, truly, "Everyone saw the falling star." Later on the goatherd wonders whether there might be people who live beyond his valley, decides there probably are, and says, truly, "not everyone lives in the village." Obviously the domains of quantification operative in the goatherd's two utterances must be different. But, Gauker argues, there is nothing in the goatherd's intentions that might determine what domain should be assigned to each utterance. (ii) Gauker considers cases where utterances carry informative presuppositions and argues that these cases cannot be straightforwardly accounted for by the standard accounts of presupposition. In particular, and rather surprisingly, Gauker argues that the phenomenon of utterances carrying informative presuppositions cannot be adequately explained in terms of presupposition accommodation. In contrast Gauker suggests his own account of language provides a better model for understanding these cases. (iii) Gauker argues that the paradigm cases of conversational implicature are not, in fact, cases of conversational implicature at all but rather cases of situated inference. In cases of so-called conversational implicature the hearer does not use the Gricean maxims to try to figure out what information the speaker might be seeking to convey. Rather she simply makes a straightforward inference from what the speaker literally asserts. All of this is, of course, highly provocative. But, as I said earlier, even if we are not convinced by Gauker's arguments, I think Gauker lays down an important challenge for us. Advocates of the received view must explain and clarify their accounts of the phenomena Gauker considers.

In the third part of the book Gauker addresses three 'semantic' phenomena for which, he claims, the 'received view' of language cannot provide an adequate account. Once again I will briefly summarize Gauker's arguments. (i) Gauker argues that the rule of universal instantiation appears to fail in cases where the instantiating term is not in our domain of discourse. Thus, for example, at the beginning of a lecture I might correctly assert "everyone is here" but we may not infer from that that Socrates is here. In contrast the rule of existential introduction does seem valid, if Socrates is here then someone is here. The standard treatment of domains of discourse cannot explain this asymmetry adequately, Gauker argues, but his own account of domains of discourse in terms of objective contexts fairs better. (ii) Gauker offers an account of conditionals inspired by the account presented by Robert Brandom in his Making it Explicit. (iii) Gauker argues that the received view cannot provide an adequate treatment of the semantic paradoxes but that his account is able to block the paradoxical arguments in a well-motivated manner.

The first three parts of Gauker's book, therefore, make the case that the received view of language faces certain allegedly insurmountable problems that dissolve on Gauker's own account. Still, a question remains. We routinely ascribe propositional attitudes to others and ourselves. How come we don't use language to communicate the contents of our propositional attitudes to other people? One might suppose that, whatever its initial function, language would soon acquire the function of communicating the contents of our propositional attitudes to other people.

To counter this worry, in the final part of his book Gauker sketches an alternative account of propositional attitude ascriptions on which they do not involve our ascribing content bearing mental states
to the subjects of our ascriptions. Having done this, Gauker argues that, at least in this case, our only access to our subject matter comes from our talk about that subject matter. Our only access to the nature of propositional attitudes comes from our practices of making propositional attitude ascriptions. Consequently, since our practices of propositional attitude ascription do not involve our ascribing contentful states, we should not conceive of propositional attitudes as contentful states. And the objection we are considering fails.

Gauker's account of propositional attitude ascriptions is predictably radical. According to Gauker, when I ascribe a belief to John such as "John believes that P" *I am asserting P on John's behalf*. And, in a similar way, when I say "John desires that R" *I am requesting or commanding that R on John's behalf*. Gauker develops this idea into an account of the assertibility conditions of propositional attitude ascriptions which carries over to cases where propositional attitude sentences occur as components of more logically complex sentences.

Of course, the claim that our only access to the nature of propositional attitudes comes from our practices of making propositional attitude ascriptions will leave many unmoved. For, it might be thought, our primary grasp upon propositional attitudes comes not from our propositional attitude ascriptions but rather from our deployment of *folk psychology* in our predictions and explanations of human behavior. Gauker recognizes this response and argues at length that we typically do not use folk psychology in our predictions and explanations of behavior. The few cases where we do offer predications or explanations of behavior which cite the beliefs or desires of the agent are very special cases which can be explained within Gauker's framework. Note that Gauker is not arguing, as many eliminativists do, that folk psychology is a widely used but bad and error-ridden theory that needs to be replaced with a better theory of the mind. Rather he is arguing that we simply do not use a predictive/explanatory folk psychology.

Anyone who denies that we ordinarily use a predictive/explanatory folk psychology is obviously beholden to explain exactly how it is that we do normally go about predicting and explaining human behavior. And here too Gauker has interesting and provocative things to say. Gauker argues that many of our predications are simply based upon inductive generalizations. I may correctly predict that the hot and sweating runner will stop at the drinking fountain to drink, but this is not because I attribute certain beliefs and desires to the runner, rather it is because I know from past experience that hot sweaty runners tend to stop for drinks. Obviously, however, there are limits to the forms of behavior that may be predicted on the basis of such inductive generalizations. But, as I understand Gauker, (a large portion of) the remaining cases of prediction can be understood as flowing from our linguistic competence. Thus, for example, if a student says that they will meet me at my office I will expect to find them at my office, not because I deploy a predictive folk psychology to determine how the student is likely to behave, but rather simply because I take the student to be linguistically competent and part of what it is to be linguistically competent is to normally do what one says one is going to do. Being linguistically competent involves behaving in certain ways when we or others make certain assertions and recognizing that others will behave in these ways when they or others make those assertions.

I hope that this brief summary has given the reader a taste of the range and ambition of Gauker's book. It is obviously impossible to offer detailed discussion and criticism of each of Gauker's claims here. But I would like to conclude by articulating three general worries about Gauker's project.

Now I suspect that something like 'the received view' of how language works is indeed the natural way to
describe how language works. I suspect that if you pick an unphilosophical friend and ask her what happens when two people hold a conversation you are likely to hear something that sounds, more or less, like 'the received view.' But this raises a worry for any attempt to overturn the received view. Put crudely, the worry is this. Our language is a conventional activity and it is we, in the end, who determine the conventions that govern it. It is we who what is going to count as a successful deployment of language. It is we who determine what is going to count as the goal of our linguistic activity. And it is we who determine what conventions and norms are going to regulate our use of language.

Granted this, however, it is not clear what we should say about any theory that rejects the 'received view' as radically mistaken. Such a claim would, in effect, seem analogous to claiming that we were radically mistaken as to the rules and goals of chess. In order to attack the received view as incorrect we would therefore need to argue one of two things. Firstly we might argue that we institute and follow various conventions governing language but that when we come to reflect upon these and articulate them we are systematically and radically mistaken as to their nature. We would need to argue, in effect, for a radical error theory to the effect that, although we institute the conventions and goals of our language use, we are pretty much always mistaken as to what these are. Such a claim would need considerable motivation and defense. And I do not, at the moment, see how it might be satisfactorily motivated or defended. Alternatively the enemy of the received view might grant that we are correct about the goals and conventions governing our use of language but argue that, in the end, these goals and conventions are incoherent and need to be replaced with coherent alternatives. In other words, the enemy of the received view might argue for a radical form of revisionism concerning our linguistic practices. And this doesn't seem terribly a happy conclusion either. Now I recognize that there is obviously much more to say here. But I think Gauker's attempt to reject the received view must respond to the challenge just articulated and I am not convinced Gauker can respond satisfactorily.

The second worry I want to touch upon concerns whether Gauker's own attempts to explain various phenomena that the received view finds troublesome are really any better off than the attempts he criticizes. One problem here is that Gauker's notion of an objective context ends up doing a great deal of work for him and a lot turns upon how we understand this notion. Let us return to the Peruvian goatherd who utters "everyone saw the falling star" and "not everyone in the universe lives in the village." I agree with Gauker that it is not clear there is anything in the goatherd's intentions which explicitly restricts the domain of discourse for the former sentence in a different way from the way it is restricted in the second sentence. And I agree that the received view faces certain problems explaining how these domains of discourse might be determined. But it is not really clear that Gauker's own suggestion helps. Gauker's suggestion is that the domain of discourse is determined by what is objectively relevant to the goals of the conversation. But one problem here is that it is not at all clear what the goals of the goatherd's conversations might be. What is the goal of the goatherd's first conversation and who, precisely, are objectively relevant to it? Is everyone in the world relevant, or just those folks who live in the village, or just a subset of these? As far as I can see there seems no obvious way to answer this question and this seems to leave Gauker's account of discourse domains in no better shape that anyone else's. Moreover, I suspect that if we could find some way of deciding exactly what the goal of the goatherd's first conversation is (for example, we might take into account the goatherd's dispositions, or what the goatherd would say in counter-factual circumstances, or what the goatherd is willing to say in the future about his past conversational intentions, etc.) this would provide friends of the received view with a way of determining the domain of discourse for that conversation. In other words, I suspect that if Gauker's account can be made to work then so can a more traditional account. But, if the more traditional accounts
fail, so will Gauker's account. Obviously, there is much more to say here. But Gauker needs to address this concern.

This brings us to the third worry I have concerning Gauker's work. Gauker's account is elegant and attractive but, as Gauker himself realizes, the central notions of Gauker's account are left unexplicated. In particular, it is not clear what it is for something to be the goal of a conversation, what it is for something to be objectively relevant to a conversation, what it is for an action to be in accordance with a set of sentences, what it is for an action to be a good way of achieving a goal relative to a set of sentences, and what it is for an agent to have a certain take upon a given context. He also needs to explain what it is to speak on someone's behalf. All of these notions need to be carefully defined if Gauker's account is to be adequately evaluated and as long as they remain undefined it is not clear exactly what Gauker's account comes to. The worry I have is that these notions will turn out to be at least as intractable as the notion of mental content which is invoked by the received view and which is criticized by Gauker. Indeed, I wonder whether they can be adequately defined without appealing to something like the notion of representation that Gauker eschews.

As I hope I have made clear, Gauker's book is a provocative challenge to much that is mainstream in the philosophy of language. There is, obviously, much more that Gauker needs say but which could not be said within the space of a 300-page book. But I hope we can look forward to Gauker's working out and refining the details of his project over the next few years.

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