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Review of "When Words are Called For"

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Book Review | *When Words are Called For*

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***When Words are Called For*. Avner Baz. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012; 256 pages; ISBN 9780674055223.**

Introduction

In this remarkable book, we find Avner Baz offering a characterization of ordinary language philosophy, defending it against some of its most prominent critics, and showing how employing its methods can help get us out of some difficulties in our thinking about knowledge.

Doing ordinary language philosophy involves examining examples in which words of interest to philosophers might ordinarily be used. This amounts not simply to attending to the ways the circumstances surrounding what we ordinarily say make a difference to how to take what we say but also to attending to the kinds of circumstances in which saying this or that might actually arise. This sort of attention reveals that the things philosophers are inclined to say very often wouldn't ordinarily come up. And in the cases where something that sounds very like the sorts of things philosophers say might come up, what it amounts to in those examples is quite different from what we would expect. And this difference between what philosophers say and what we might ordinarily say is of some interest. On examination we find that it's not at all clear what to make of the things philosophers say.

The aim in attending to how words are ordinarily used, according to Baz, is not to arm ourselves with anything like an analysis of the words involved — we don't come to know the meanings of the words in question (at least not in anything like the philosophers' sense of "meanings of words") as a result of these investigations. Nor do these investigations lead us to the conclusion that the things philosophers say are to be regarded as nonsense. Instead, these reminders of how our words are ordinarily used bring into question whether we ought

to regard the investigations philosophers undertake and the analyses they offer as having anything to do with any of the words we ordinarily employ. These reminders are designed to loosen the hold of our idea that the claims philosophers are often inclined to make must make sense and that the problems to which they give rise are genuine problems.

Here I'll outline some of Baz's thinking. Though I'm deeply sympathetic with much of what Baz says in this book — it really is an important book — I'll also try to bring out a worry I have with the way Baz tends to characterize what he sees as the fundamental difference between the things the philosophers say and what we ordinarily say.

Responding to Criticisms

Ordinary language philosophy has been the subject of some pretty severe scrutiny. In particular, the business of sizing up what we might be up to in using philosophically interesting words like “know” and its cognates in the course of our lives — our lives, that is, outside of philosophy — has captured the attention of more than a few critics. Baz offers what I take to be successful responses to some of the most influential of these attacks.

Searle says we ought to reject the idea that meanings of words change in different contexts, a view he attributes to ordinary language philosophers, since if they did we'd be unable, for instance, to get answers to questions we ask — the words figuring in the answer, after all, find themselves in a different context than the words figuring in the question. Baz points out that Searle mistakenly assumes that ordinary language philosophy is in the business of offering an analysis of the words it investigates. He also makes it clear that Searle simply assumes there must be some specifiable things that count in every case as the meanings of our words but that Searle nowhere indicates how these things could be specified without appealing to how our words are ordinarily used.

Geach argues that because expressions like “I know that...” can find a home in each of the premises of a valid modus ponens argument, we ought to suppose that the sense of the expression in question must remain the same across those different contexts. So again we have an argument designed to raise into question the thought that expressions mean different things in different contexts, a view which Baz does not hold. But here too we find an argument designed to raise into question the idea that we should take saying “I know that...” to be a way of assuring someone of something rather than as a description. If expressions that make up the argument can be true, then they must be descriptions of how things are. Baz responds by bringing Geach's argument out of the ether and asking us to imagine someone actually offering it. In that sort of example, we find it would be unclear (at best) how to make sense of it and so that the argument isn't a very good one after all.

Soames says we need to take it for granted that there are fixed meanings of our words in order to account for the compositionality of language. Because the methods ordinary language philosophers employ reveal that what we say comes to different things in different circumstances, ordinary language philosophers can't be busy about discovering meanings. Baz responds to this by pointing out that Soames' argument counts meanings as "theoretical posits" and because of that what he's on about are clearly different from what we're interested in when we ordinarily ask after the meaning of this or that word.

Ultimately, the trouble Baz sees in each of these attempts to criticize ordinary language philosophy is that they take for granted a conception of meaning, what he calls the "prevailing conception of meaning", which has it that there exists apart from the ordinary uses of words something that counts as the meanings of those words, that these meanings have to do with what it is to which our words refer, and that what's said in a sentence is a function of the meanings of the words which make it up. Because ordinary language philosophy constitutes a challenge to that conception of meaning, simply assuming it's true in an effort to repudiate ordinary language philosophy can only amount to begging the question.

Extending the Method

After defending ordinary language philosophy against these attacks, Baz turns to a discussion of the ways it can be responsive to contemporary disputes about knowledge. Here I'll outline those disputes and identify Baz's response to them.

Williamson and the experimental philosophers disagree over the role of appeals to intuitions in sizing up whether knowledge is present in cases like those offered by Gettier. Williamson defends helping ourselves to intuitions by counting them as an extension of our ordinary ability to make judgments about whether people know in the course of our everyday lives. The experimental philosophers, of course, suspect our intuitions and think we'd better see what ordinary people would say when asked of the cases of interest whether in fact the characters they feature really do know this or that.

Contextualists and anti-contextualists disagree over the impact the different contexts that can surround saying we know have on whether or not saying we know is true. Contextualists offer cases in which it appears that whether it's true that someone knows has much to do with the context of the case in question — depending on the contextualist you ask, assessing whether someone knows requires sizing up the relevant alternatives to what's claimed to be known, for example, or the stakes involved in whether what's said to be known is so. Anti-contextualists think none of this matters at all to whether a person can be

rightly said to know. What matters is simply whether knowledge is there to be reported on, and whether it is doesn't depend on changes in context.

Among the troubles Baz sees in each of these disputes is that both parties assume that it's always in order to ask whether a person knows this or that because knowledge is either there to be reported on or it's not. Baz finds that when we imagine ourselves inhabiting the examples these philosophers imagine it's hard to see why someone in those examples would ever ask such a thing. Of interest to the folks in the examples where questions about a person's basis for saying she knows might arise, for instance, what's at issue is not so much whether a person knows, but whether the thing they say they know is so. The result is that Williamson, the experimental philosophers, the contextualists, and the anti-contextualists are all tempted to ask a question which has no place in the examples they imagine. Without being able to make sense of their question, it's hard to see how to take seriously any of the responses they offer.

Because these two disputes, intractable as they seem, turn on the common assumption that the questions at their center make sense, we have reason to resist getting caught up in those disputes and reason to release ourselves from those disputes if we should find ourselves in their grip.

Throughout these sections of the book, Baz offers his own diagnosis of what's gone wrong with these philosophers' questions. To his mind, what we're up to in asking and answering questions about these imaginary cases is quite a bit different from what we're up to when we ordinarily ask and answer such questions. Where questions ordinarily arise, he suggests, they do so in connection with some point. Where words are ordinarily deployed, he suggests, there is some point to their deployment. In contrast to this, the questions philosophers are tempted to ask about these imaginary cases are without any (ordinary) point. And it's because these questions are without any (ordinary) point, Baz suggests, it's not clear how to make sense of them. It's for this reason that Baz regards the things philosophers often say as merely idling.

My Worries

I'm deeply sympathetic with Baz's thought that there are important differences to be marked between the kinds of things philosophers say about their austere examples and the kinds of things we may say or think in the course of talking to one another. And I'm appreciative, too, of his observation that the lack of texture, as it were, of the examples with which philosophers busy themselves is likely to be an important part of the story about why they find themselves sometimes fighting over what to make of those examples.

What I'm curious about is Baz's thought that our ordinary talk is always connected to points. The thought that there is always a point to the things we ordinarily say seems to me to be a very tempting thing to think. And it certainly seems to be a tempting way to carve a distinction between the kinds of things philosophers often say and what we ordinarily say. But I want to see what to make of it. And I know of no place to turn in order to see what to make of it apart from examples which feature talk about points. So I'll turn to those now. I'll do a little ordinary language philosophy.

Suppose you and I are out for coffee. Suppose that after passing some time in talk our conversation turns toward baseball. Suppose we're trying to get clear on what the real trouble is with the Minnesota Twins. I'm in the middle of building my case for having a little optimism about next season and you interrupt. I imagine that if I want to see my argument through I might protest by saying something like this: "Hey, I was making a point". Or take another case. Suppose you don't interrupt. Suppose that as I'm making my case we find ourselves drifting into wisecracks about the Metrodome. I soon realize, though, that I'd lost track of my earlier remarks. So I suggest we retrace our steps. "Wait," I say, "there was a point I was trying to make". Or, to take still another case, suppose we meet over coffee for our weekly reading group. After our usual preliminary pleasantries I dive headlong into my take on the material on deck. Let's suppose, though, that this is hasty. You recall that we've still got unfinished business to tend to. So you look down at your notes from the previous week and you say, "Let's start with some points we left off on last week."

Here are some examples which feature points — examples, that is, in which we say we are or were making points, that there is or was a point to what we were saying, that we were on a time discussing some points. In these sorts of examples, talk about points seems bound up with things we take to be relatively important to the conversation, with things we want to see through or that we want to revisit.

We don't take everything we say to be especially important (not all of us anyway) and much of it isn't stuff we're particularly eager to revisit. Though I might be taken aback if you move on to last week's business before we've finished exchanging our usual preliminary pleasantries, I certainly wouldn't protest by saying there was a point to what I was saying. If our conversation drifts before I finish telling you what I made for dinner last night, I certainly wouldn't steer us back when I realize we've drifted by suggesting there was a point I was trying to make. And I'm not sure how you could take my following up a wisecrack about the Metrodome with, "there was a point to that joke, you know". Not, at least, if it was just a joke.

There are lots of other kinds of cases to consider. Suppose we're talking over coffee and you see that the person at the table next to us has left her purse behind. You shout to her as she's walking out the door, "Hey!" If I haven't also noticed her purse, I might ask you what the point of that was. Or suppose a mutual friend drops by and that, unbeknownst to me, you two are at odds with one another. Perhaps you're cordial when he says hello, but as soon as he leaves you curse him in a whisper. So I might ask in such a case, "What was the point of that?"

In these cases something threw me. In order to get my bearings, I asked after the point. And in each of these cases, there was a point to what you said.

But I see too that in cases where I'm thrown, there need not be any point to what you say. Suppose we're talking about movies we've lately seen and as we do you've got your eye on the ducks in the lake across the street. You ask, quite out of the blue, whether mallards with green heads are males or females. Your question here is surely a surprise, especially if I don't also see the ducks. "What was the point of that?", I might ask. And here I think you could say that there was no point, but that you were just curious or that you were just wondering. It's worth noting that even though there need not have been a point, I may nevertheless offer up an answer to your question.

Sometimes, too, we find ourselves in conversation with people who aren't terribly wedded to structure. Their remarks roam, they try things out, they run things by us. These are people who like thinking things through. Suppose we fix on something they say, something curious enough to give rise to the question, and ask what the point of it was. I expect they could say that there was no point, that they were just exploring, that they were just trying it out or running it by us, or that they were just thinking something through. And of course we'd do well to keep in mind in the face of these sorts of conversations that they're often a welcome change from conversations with those who always have a point to make — those for whom there's always some point to what they say. Those people are sometimes hard to bear.

Here, then, are some more examples that feature talk of points. So far, though, it seems to me that the examples come up short in giving substance to the thought that there are always points to what we ordinarily say. There are, of course, examples in which there are points that we mean to be making or points we want to revisit, but there are also examples in which there appear to be none. Sometimes we're just joking or we're just exchanging pleasantries, sometimes we're just exploring or trying something out, sometimes we're just curious or we're just wondering.

Maybe a much simpler case will help. Maybe a case stripped of peculiar remarks or morals to the story or matters of much import will betray the points Baz suggests are connected to our talk.

Suppose we head back into the coffee shop. This time we order some pastries, and I alone order coffee. Suppose now that you ask, “What was the point of that?” Though there are lots of things you could be asking about, we’ll suppose your question is focused on my coffee order. You ask, “What was the point of that?” Now I have to confess that when I think about this question in the shadow of the examples we surveyed above, it’s a little unclear to me how I’m to take it. I want to fill in the example with details to help me see what you could be asking.

Maybe I’d ordered the coffee to go. Maybe you’d figured we were staying here and you wanted to get straight on whether I had that same idea. Or maybe I ordered decaf and you happen to stand in opposition to decaf. Your question, then, amounts to this: “What’s the point of ordering decaf?” Here I guess I might say, “I don’t want to be up all night”. But then again, if decaf is what I usually order, I might say something like this: “What do you mean what’s the point? I always get decaf”. Or maybe we’ve just dropped by the coffee shop for the pastries. Maybe you’ve already got coffee for us in the Thermos in the car. So maybe your question is a question about why I’m buying coffee when we already have some. These are some ways I could make heads or tails of your question. But apart from these special sorts of circumstances, it’s unclear to me what you could be asking in asking what the point of my order was.

Things are no better if I say to you, just after ordering my coffee, “there was a point to my ordering coffee”. There is no doubt that this is a strange thing for me to say. But I suppose it’s not impossible to make sense of it. Maybe you’re the one who usually foots the bill when we go for coffee and here I’m making it clear that you should put your wallet away, that I’m picking up the tab this time. I guess that may be a bit of a stretch. Here’s a way to take it. Maybe you make horrible coffee and you’ve got some in the Thermos out in the car waiting for us. So my saying there was a point to my ordering coffee is on the way towards letting you in on my view of your awful ways with coffee. Or maybe this is better. Maybe you’re already on your way out the door. Maybe you think I’ve got my coffee but I haven’t yet. You holler to me, “C’mon, let’s go!” So my saying what I do amounts to letting you know I haven’t yet received my coffee. However the details go, I see that I need to import some in order to make something out of what I say here. Without these special circumstances to help, I’m once again at a loss for what to make of my saying what I do.

Suppose that I say what I say to the barista rather than to you. I look her in the eye after I order and say “there was a point to my ordering coffee”. Once again, this is odd. But there’s a way to make something of it. Maybe because she is so busy she has forgotten my order. So what I say is a (snarky) reminder. Or maybe it becomes apparent to me after I ordered, since her conversation with her friend continues unhindered, that I am being ignored. But I decide I will not be ignored. I raise my voice and I make my stand. So here again there are some ways to make heads or tails of my allegation that there was a point to my ordering coffee. But if I simply order coffee, it’s hard for me to see what I could be saying in saying to anyone “there was a point to my ordering coffee.”

In advance of thinking of examples which feature talk about points, I was tempted to go in for the picture that there are always points connected to the things we ordinarily say. In view of these examples, though, I’m now inclined to try to resist the advances of that picture until I have reasons for thinking it’s so.