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*The Themes of Quine's Philosophy: Meaning, Reference, and Knowledge*, by Edward Becker.

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 314. H/b £60.00.

Many books criticise Quine's work on semantics, but few do so without forswearing, at least tacitly or unwittingly, Quine's most basic philosophical commitments. Becker's is not such a book. He aims to contribute positively to a programme that is recognisably Quinean in letter and spirit. Quine's main ambition is to make naturalistic and indeed scientific sense of the whole of human knowledge, despite the impediments represented by his famous negative conclusions; and those negative conclusions—that translation is indeterminate, that reference is inscrutable, that analyticity and meaning prove to crumble on closer examination—are not reached for want of trying to establish their opposites. Becker tries to do better, and perhaps succeeds.

Among the aforementioned philosophical commitments is Quine's *behaviourism*. Becker is very explicit on what Quinean behaviourism comes to, and is meticulous in checking that nothing he argues for strays outside its confines. Quine's behaviourism is *not* that the meaning of a sentence or term can be identified with corresponding behaviour, nor that semantic expressions themselves reduce to behaviour. It's that 'the only facts relevant to translation are behavioural facts' (p. 128); later Becker expands, calling it a *supervenience* thesis—that there are 'no differences in meaning, synonymy, analyticity, etc.—without differences in behaviour or behavioural dispositions' (p. 233-4). His task then is to restore, on thoroughly Quinean ground, the determinacy of translation, the scrutability of reference, the objectivity of analyticity and synonymy, and even the conventionality of logic; he thereby clears the way for more straightforward and intuitive epistemological doctrines than Quine's own.

This comes in the final chapter of the book. The first four chapters—taking up 229 of 304 pages—are devoted to painstaking exegeses of the famous semantic doctrines: anti-conventionalism (Ch. 1), that the objectivity or at least the epistemic significance of analyticity and synonymy is insupportable (Ch. 2), the indeterminacy of translation (Ch. 3), ontological relativity and (or?) the inscrutability of reference (Ch. 4). Although I was very sympathetic to the substance of what Becker says here—my complaints never rose above quibbles—I thought some of this too scholarly, especially in comparison with the non-scholarly Chapter 5. Not about the style—Becker’s writing is exemplary—but about its point. To take the most visible example, much of Chapter 4—seventy-three pages—is devoted to trying to make sense of ‘Ontological Relativity’, an extraordinary essay which, however, a few years after it was written, Quine himself conceded was confused. I could not see why Becker could not have some space by reporting the wiser, simpler, and one could say more bracing account of the issue of the relevant sections of the later *The Roots of Reference*, *Pursuit of Truth*, or *From Stimulus to Science*, or the various later essays such as ‘Things and Their Place in Theories’. Still, the first four chapters contain various helpful exegetical or reconstructive things, including: the precise target of ‘Truth by Convention’ (pp. 7-13); the question-begging and circularity objections to conventionalism (pp. 42-4); stimulus meaning vs. intuitive meaning (pp. 101-2) and intersubjective vs. intrasubjective stimulus meaning (p. 105); the distinction between intralinguistic (possible) vs. interlinguistic (not possible) explications of synonymy and analyticity (pp. 117-21 (what has been called immanent vs. transcendental conceptions, helpfully connecting the matter with analogous phenomena regarding truth); the exact relations between physicalism, indeterminacy of translation, and behaviourism (p. 128-34); the argument for indeterminacy that presses from below (pp. 140-4) and that which presses from above (pp. 147-53). Of course these topics have been visited over and again in the literature, but new and worthwhile points do issue from Becker’s pen.

Then some quibbles: for a book that puts so much effort into scholarly matters, I would have liked more of Quine relationship to Carnap, especially when Carnap described things similar to the sort of thing advocated in Chapter 5; despite Quine's endorsing the term, I think verificationism a poor choice for conveying Quine's view of language (pp. xi, 89-90, 107, 267, 277); a slight lack of clarity on the crucial distinction between inscrutability arguments and full-blown indeterminacy arguments: the former leaves the truth-values of all sentences unscathed, whereas the latter, at least in earlier formulations, leaves open the possibility that one correct translation of a sentence could be the negation of another, equally correct translation of the same sentence; the important introduction of observation categoricals and reification (in the *Roots of Reference*) is underplayed (pp. 145-6 fn. 37); the later discussions of the underdetermination of theory by evidence in which Quine settles for incompatibility of competing theories' being *practical* rather than *logical* are not mentioned (see *Pursuit of Truth*); observation sentences could have been more satisfyingly distinguished from standing sentences by first distinguishing them as a sub-class of occasion sentences, namely those such that dispositions to assent to them vary with present stimulation, whereas dispositions to assent to occasion sentences such as 'interest rates are rising' do vary but not systematically according to present stimulation (p. 96f); little is made of an important problem that bedeviled Quine for over thirty years from shortly after the appearance of *Word and Object*, namely how to reconcile the proximity of stimulations with the demand that language and in particular observation sentences be social (Becker mentions it on p. 103-4, but only in a footnote—personally I think Quine thinks he *succeeded* in the reconciliation, and did not, as according to Becker, simply give in to Davidson in 'Progress on Two Fronts'); this I'm sure is a slip, but Becker sometimes characterises terms as 'untranslatable' or similar (p. 164, 270, 274) when he surely means 'not uniquely translatable', thereby encouraging certain misunderstandings; I don't think Quine ever

commits to saying ‘it is *nonsense* to ask after the references of our terms’ (p. 173, my emphasis); Becker perhaps misplays Quine’s invocation of the Tarski intralinguistic paradigm concerning reference (“‘rabbits’ refers to rabbits’ etc.)—it is a ‘light’, immanent notion, does not provide an anchor of words to things, and accepting it stops the regress; it’s not as if one has magical powers over one’s own words (pp. 218-24, but p. 225 where Becker gets it right).

In Chapter 5 Becker shifts gears, from synopsis and exegesis to criticism and construction. Let me say that this chapter alone makes the book; its structure is tight, the writing is lively, and the points cogent and wide of scope. Becker again disposes of the common complaint that Quine is a simple behaviourist in the manner of Skinner (see above—although, harmlessly, Becker repeats the mistaken idea that Quine thought of assent and dissent as *intentional* notions, saying ‘sentences in which we speak of them contain contexts that are not subject to substitutivity of identity’ p. 234; no, they are just more behaviour—see p. 252 of *Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionalist*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2008). Then he explains how one could, working within Quine behaviourism, solve the ‘Gavagai’ problem). I can’t convey much of this discussion here, but a major point is that Becker thinks that, contrary to Quine, ‘Gavagai’ (or ‘Rabbit’) is *not* stimulus synonymous with both ‘A rabbit is there’ and ‘That’s a rabbit’ (pp. 235-6); the latter, unlike the former, requires a visible rabbit. And closer attention to what goes on when we *point out* an object, and when we observe that cooperation from the subjects can rightly be demanded, disqualify many of Quine’s weird translations such as ‘Undetached rabbit-part’.

The really crucial part of the discussion is when Becker responds to what Quine regarded as knock-down argument for the inscrutability of reference, that by proxy-functions—1-1 mappings of the range of the reference relation. The challenge is to find a way of distinguishing between reference schemes that make true all and only the same sentences.

Suppose R is an empirically adequate reference scheme and R\* takes as its range the proxies of R-referents (so that for example ‘Spot is a dog’ is transformed into ‘The proxy of Spot is the proxy of a dog’). Then a sentence of R\* will have same truth-value as the corresponding sentence of R, but will be about the proxies. Becker proposes that we can add to the requirements on translation that translation should involve a ‘part-by-part’ matching of words (pp. 258-9). For my part I’m not persuaded. Consider the proxy-function ‘x is a cosmic complement of y’. Suppose aliens spoke a language with *simple* terms for cosmic complements. But, unsuspecting, we translate them as talking about rabbits etc. Would we be making a mistake? Or is the supposition somehow impossible? Or is the distinction it involves unreal? I’m not sure what Becker would say. It’s hard to see his added constraint as being more than a purely formal one on translational practice, and that much does not answer the question of the constraint’s empirical justification, or bring to light a previously overlooked behavioural difference in reference schemes that are proxy-equivalent. And even if we grant it, it remains a ‘light’ constraint—it doesn’t pin down reference as a substantive word-thing relation.

Becker has another important idea for the translation of theoretical predicates, which as I said will remind one of Carnap: a description  $\Psi$  is a  $\Phi$ -description for a speaker iff he would assent to “if something were  $\Psi$  then it would be  $\Phi$ ” (p. 263). In other words: we ask the native not for the extensions of predicates but for the links between them. Again, it’s promising but one worries that non-semantic matters of fact will creep in, and also that one is asking the subject for his opinion of a subjunctive conditional, therefore requiring that that sophisticated form of words first be translated; indeed that one is relying semantic necessity in setting the test. With the crucial addition of these and some other points, Becker argues in closing that a Davidsonian programme delivers analyticity, the determinacy of translation and reference, and, since (roughly), if the translation of P is a logical truth then ‘P’ is true in L

will be derivable in an empirical theory (pp, 290-1) it is ‘true by language’ in a straightforward way; they are also conventional (borrowing the ideas of David Lewis in spelling out the sense of ‘conventional’).

I was disappointed not to see words about extensionalism, and about truth—especially as Tarski is implicitly imported with Davidson; both are so vital to things Quinean. I was also sorry to see a book about Quine not mentioning the formidable book by Peter Hylton, *Quine* (Routledge, 2009). Errata: p. 110 read the second and fourth occurrences of ‘ $\Phi$ ’ as (say) ‘ $\Psi$ ’; p. 150 read ‘intension’ for ‘intention’; p. 302 read ‘nor’ for ‘not’.

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