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Mark Wilson, *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behaviour*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, 690 pages. ISBN: 9780199269259 (2008, paperback edition, ISBN: 9780199532308)

Reviewed by Nikolay Milkov (University of Paderborn)*

This is an investigation in conceptual semantics; it claims that the analytic tradition in philosophy has painted an overoptimistic picture of the human capacity to formulate concepts with sharp and objectively assessable boundaries that correctly present objects of the external world. Wilson's thesis is that the task of putting reality into concepts is not thus easy. Instead of using a "general theory of concepts", he seeks a solution in a liberalized program to adjust the meaning and use of concepts in every new language situation. Roughly speaking, we must set out the conceptual characteristics by recurrent corrections of our concepts, closely, following the shape of the external world.

To be true to facts, the belief that we can frame exact concepts was challenged in analytic philosophy of language long before Wilson. Already in the 1950s, J.L. Austin insisted that the word "exact" has no privilege over some other predicates of conceptual assessment (Austin 1954: 161). Rather, it receives its meaning in a close relationship to a family of words used in appraising statements: "precise", "rough", "accurate". Even before J.L. Austin, Otto Neurath fought against "the fiction of an ideal language" constructed out of clean, clear cut terms (Neurath 1932: 160).

Unfortunately, these critical remarks on the pursuit of rigorously formed concepts were soon forgotten. Arguably, this was a consequence of the hegemony of scientism and formalism in analytic philosophy in the 1960s–1990s. The fight against rigor was only resumed in recent years, Wilson being one of its first contenders. As early as 1992 he declared, albeit in more subdued voice, that "rigor is not everything" (Wilson 1992: 175). It is only now, however, that he advances a balanced argument against the injudicious pursuit of exactness in philosophy of language.

Wilson himself furnishes valuable information about the philosophical roots of his philosophy of language. His interest in concepts and predicates grew out of a thesis he wrote under Hilary Putnam, as well as from Putnam's work from the early 1970s, in particular from his scientific realism. At the same time, the author conceives of his program as a continuation of Quine's critique of Russell's and Carnap's philosophy of language (see Quine 1960).

By way of genealogy, we can easily trace the sources of Wilson's project with the help of this simple scheme: Neurath influenced Quine on this point and, as just

noted, Quine influenced Wilson. In what follows, however, I shall not discuss the genealogy of Wilson's ideas. Rather, I am going to review his arguments as well as the context in which they were developed.

Wilson's general position in his semantics of concepts can be called *anti-classicism*. His main target is "the classical view of concepts", first launched by Frege. Surprisingly enough, Wilson's paragon of classicism is not Frege but Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912). Philosophers like Russell believe in a "controllable semantic invariant that 'core conceptual content' provides. [They embrace ...] the notion that predicates carry with them relatively permanent bundles of directives which are open to our inspection and modification" (99). The author strongly opposes this belief. In truth, our descriptive practice often demands idiosyncratic strategies that cannot be anticipated in advance; when using concepts, we often need to closely keep to Nature instead.

In fact, the "classicists" admit that real life usage often behaves unevenly. At the same time, however, they continue to follow a strong methodological program. In particular, they assume that if we think "about the meanings of our terms carefully enough, any uneven usage can be regularized" (382). Typically, the classicists believe that difficulties in describing reality only arise with the introduction of the theory of relativity and of quantum mechanics. Wilson, in contrast, insists that such problems emerge even in the most solid corners of engineering. We often fail to exactly conceptualize even quite trivial situations.

The problem is that our whole vocabulary is shaped by largely unforeseeable directives which are constantly improved when vocabulary contacts the external world in order to fit it. In such cases, Nature itself determines which way to go. Of course, we possess control over our words. However, this control is rather limited.

Wilson does not deny that, in many cases, such concepts like "hardness", "force", "causation", and even "red", serve our usage pretty well. The problem is that in specific delicate cases of our concrete conceptual practice they stop working. They simply suffer from "conceptual overloading".

Take, for example, the word "hardness". It only offers a general direction for classifying our sensations. This is what presents a problem: the concept is rather abstract, which opens up the possibility to deviating from the profile of Nature by its use. Wilson's conclusion is that when we frame concepts, we lose the directives of immediate sensation-based classification.

In order to cope with this problem, he introduces (377 ff.) the idea of multi-dimensional mapping reality. It presents language-functioning by way of models the author calls *atlases* (alternatively, he calls them *façades*) which contain many sheets, or patches (indeed, an atlas consists of many cards stitched together). Every element in the patches corresponds to, and so presents particular elements of reality. Patches have natural boundaries which fit together quite well, so that we

can make a full-length portrait of the world with the help of a single patchwork of sheets. Furthermore, every patch also has specific tools of reasoning. Their rules are valid only for a particular patch and are determined exclusively by their practical validity: they have a top-down instrumental “correctness”, or “truth”.

Charting multi-dimensional maps of specific parts of the external world is a task of fine-grained examination of language in order to resettle it upon less confusing rails: it closely inspects the oddities of the environment. The problem with the classical thinking of philosophers like Russell is that it characteristically advances atlases of one patch only and so has a flat structure. In a way, it resembles the first-order theories of logicians. Wilson opposes the flat structure model with a system of atlas assemblies. It has multiple dimensions and is based on atlases with many patches, or on façades-ensembles, upon which we can evolve a reliable language usage. In various situations we can put into use different patches of the atlas.

By way of assessing Wilson’s theory of conceptual semantics, I shall set out four points of criticism:

- i. As I have already hinted at, it is not easy to understand why Wilson’s criticism concentrates on Russell, and even less so on Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy*. Indeed, the philosopher who first put exactly formulated concepts, with clear-cut boundaries, at the focus of our attention was Frege — the author of *Conceptual Notation* (1879) — not Russell. Especially problematic is Wilson’s claim that Russell’s classical theory of concepts semantics was primarily advanced in his 1912 theory of universals. Indeed, the author correctly underlines that Russell’s universals are both ontological and epistemological. At the same time, however, he mistakenly claims that they are also linguistic unities. In fact, Russell accepted the identity between ontological and linguistic unities only with his anti-Hegelian turn in 1898, and rejected it when he introduced his theory of denoting (later replaced with the theory of descriptions) in 1903.

Wilson expresses strong antipathy to Russell’s alleged belief that we know universals fully: he calls this doctrine “semantic finality”. In fact, however, in *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell only made the epistemological claim that we completely grasp (or are acquainted with) universals — not that we fully know concepts. Furthermore, this thesis was advanced in defense of the absolute validity of truth and was directed against what Russell believed to be Hegelian relativism.

- ii. Wilson’s conception was mainly inspired by remarks about conceptual ambiguity made by some applied mathematicians and engineers in the second half of the nineteenth century, above all Oliver Heaviside (1850–1925), Jacques

Hadamard (1865–1963), and Franz Reuleaux (1829–1905). They have convincingly demonstrated that when applied to different environments, concepts, in particular those used in mechanics, change their meaning.

Above all, these authors worked *before* Russell entered the scene, and Russell had his reasons to be more interested in the works of Dedekind, Peano, and Frege than in their works: indeed, they simply offered him more powerful tools for his purposes. This is not surprising since Russell and Wilson's authors worked in different sub-disciplines: whereas Russell explored problems of pure mathematics, Heaviside, Hadamard, and Reuleaux worked in the field of applied mathematics. The legitimate question is: can Wilson's obscure authors help to reach a theory with the same deductive power as that developed in *Principia Mathematica*?

- iii. An interesting characteristic of *Wandering Significance* is that in it Wilson also gives examples from different branches of science, rarely discussed by philosophers, such as cartography and ethnomusicology. This point makes it difficult to understand why the author failed to notice that the problem with “semantic mimicry” is successfully treated by other special sciences, for example, by the so called *grammar of words* (concepts), first developed in the late 1930s (see Palmer 1938). This new subdiscipline showed that the words/concepts do not have meanings in and by themselves. Rather, their meaning is determined by the way they are used in different combinations (collocations) with members of closed groups of words with which they keep company. In fact, every word has a conventionally limited range that determines with which other words it can collocate (for instance, *putrid*, *rancid*, and *addled* are synonymous; nevertheless, *putrid* collocates with fish, *rancid* with butter, oil, lard, and *addled* with eggs only). This is how ordinary language achieves plasticity with a limited vocabulary; to put it in Wilson's idiom, that is how concepts like *decayed*, which are only abstract directives for use, can (relatively) exactly denote heterogeneous elements of the external world.
- iv. Wilson's book takes a radically critical stance. In particular, the author deplores the fact that the drift towards using concepts that are far away from Nature, “has increased in recent years and many of [our] contemporaries now pursue projects that strike as functionally pointless, often under the self-styled banner of analytic metaphysics” (p. xv). For him, this is a drift towards scholastic aloofness and intellectual inertia. The anti-classicist opposes it by way of meticulously evaluating concepts.

I for my part, am more prone to see here a problem in philosophy as such, which has the propensity to give birth to ever new sub-disciplines. Some one hundred years ago, it split into what are called today, analytic and continental philosophy. Wilson faces now another cleavage, this time in analytic

philosophy itself: that between (a) analytic metaphysics; and (b) empirical philosophy which is close to science — which is the type of philosophy Wilson practices. It is worth noting that, in the last decades, similar cleavages were articulated in mainstream analytic philosophy: for example, that between meta-ethics and applied ethics. Today it is clear that it made analytic ethics more perspicuous. I am convinced that a similar division of labor between analytic metaphysics and empirical philosophy will introduce more order to analytic philosophy in general. In other words, Wilson's project will be more appealing if he abandons the idea to reconstruct the whole of analytic philosophy, by focusing his energy on exploring the conceptual changes (the "mimicries") in different engineering disciplines and in applied mathematics instead.

It may be helpful for clearing up Wilson's project further, to view it in a historical-philosophical context. One central point of the book is that "much of a language's potential usage is likely to be currently *formless*, in that it is not yet settled how its terminology should be employed over domains as yet rarely visited" (381). Language only takes its final shape when it comes in contact with external reality. This claim strongly reminds Donald Davidson's anti-realistic philosophy of language, set out in especially clear form in "The nice derangement of epitaphs" (1986) where it is argued that in an act of communication, there is no language in the sense of some well-formed theory. Instead of theories, it is more appropriate to refer to the skills or dispositions of the two sides of the communication act before its start. In the moment of communication, these skills, or apparent theories, actualize into a "momentary theory" which is now shared by both sides.

Despite this kinship, Wilson's conception is clearly different from Davidson's. Indeed, he is neither interested in communication, nor in inter-subjectivity, nor in our speech acts, and also not in the meaning of propositions: his subject-matter is the words (concepts).

Wilson is not sure about the relatedness of his study to Wittgenstein's ideas. He tells us that the first readers of his work — still in manuscript form — asked about his possible Wittgensteinian influences. Indeed, there are clear similarities between Wilson's view and that of Wittgenstein. First of all, both fight our "craving for generality". Wilson, in particular, underlines that "we are naturally inclined, without benefit of any philosophical indoctrination, to picture 'concepts' corrective functions in simple and overly schematic terms. ... It is from this native semantic naivete that the classical picture of concepts emerges" (11). In this key the author criticizes some of our everyday attitudes as "*ur*-philosophy". Arguably, Wittgenstein claimed the same. A further similarity is the doctrine that our *a priori* concepts — the river-bed of the actual use ("flow") of concepts — change according to the way the river flows. This is expressed in the metaphor "river/riverbed" Wilson

uses (102, 111), which is also used almost in the same sense in Wittgenstein's 1969 *On Certainty*, §97 (Wilson himself failed to notice this).

Despite these similarities, the two philosophers clearly defend different positions. Above all, Wilson dislikes Goethe as a theoretician, and has special reservations vis-à-vis Wittgenstein, exactly because he is afraid that Wittgenstein follows Goethe's explorations in morphology and metaphysics. This shows Wilson as fighting on two fronts: on the one hand, against "Russell's" penchant for conceptual overloading; on the other, against the metaphysical stance of the later Wittgenstein.

At the same time Wilson declares that he "will be flattered if [his] work is regarded as a worthy continuation of the school of tempered common sense pioneered by Thomas Reid and J.L. Austin" (xviii). As regards J.L. Austin he is right. Similarly to Wilson, he stressed the *situations* in which words are used. Furthermore, as already noted above, Austin was one of the first critics of the concept of exactness in the analytic philosophy of language.

But Wilson's project is also close to that of Gilbert Ryle (and the author failed to notice that either). In particular, it is related to Ryle's endeavor to chart our "logical geography" anew since the old one is "infected" with bad philosophy (Ryle 1949:9). Furthermore, similarly to Wilson, Ryle and his friends at Oxford saw the task of philosophy as consisting in examining the patterns of behaviour of language-units in specific situations in order to illuminate the status of every particular concept. It studies the "logical behaviour which the concepts of daily life exhibit" (Strawson 1967:313).

In fact, Wilson's *Essay on Conceptual Behaviour* continues this project. Of course, I do not believe that he does so because he is *influenced* by the Oxford philosophers. Wilson simply *rediscovered* their ideas. This point is clearly seen in the fact that our author does not just repeat the ideas of the ordinary language philosophers. Indeed, much of what we read in his book is new — specifically, the close attention he pays to the conceptual behaviour in applied mathematics and his general reverence to science.

Being conscious of his relatedness to J.L. Austin as he is, Wilson nevertheless insists that his position is radically different from that of Austin. In this connection, the author underlines Austin's reference to the practice of the ordinary language as a highest court of appeal. In contrast, Wilson develops his theory of conceptual semantic along the lines of engineering: this is his starting point. Moreover, he claims that these are "diametrically opposed presumptions" (473). Indeed, the realm of ordinary language "is precisely where the streams of *ur*-philosophical thought initiate" (*ibid.*).

I cannot agree with this interpretation. Above all, at least for *today's* philosophers, the dichotomy:

1. investigation of concepts in the situations of their use / in isolation, is of much greater theoretical interest than the dichotomy:
2. philosophy of common sense (of ordinary language) / philosophy of science / of applied mathematics, of engineering.

This is the case because today we cannot set out a convincing philosophical opposition starting from the dichotomy “philosophy of common sense / philosophy of science”: these are simply different philosophical stances that have coexisted peacefully for decades. This is not the case, however, with the dichotomy “concepts in situation / concepts in isolation”, which is a rather unexplored dichotomy and thus can be a source of new insights. To be sure, in the last decades, the study of the concrete situations in which the concepts are used was almost totally neglected. Even when Austin’s philosophy was exploited further (in such works as Searle 1969; Cavell 1969; and Skinner 2002), the first concern was his theory of speech acts, not his situational semantics of concepts.

To conclude, Wilson’s work demonstrates that the philosophy of the so-called “Oxford School” of the 1950s, which practically lost its influence in the 1970s, was not just an abortive development in analytic philosophy. It started an important direction of study that is capable of reviving, albeit in new forms. *Wandering Significance* is such a revival in the field of the scientifically informed philosophy.

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