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COMMENTARY



## Commentary on Mark Richard, *Meanings as Species*

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### A fond farewell to Cartesian linguistics

It's been a long productive ride, but it's time to get off the bandwagon and recognize that the Cartesian tradition, in analytic philosophy of language and mind and linguistics, has played itself out in a constructive and honorable way: by being both rigorous and ambitious, it has uncovered the contradictions in its own grand scheme, and helped lay the foundations for a more naturalistic understanding of meaning. It is hard to imagine how Einsteinian physics could have ever come into existence without being able to use Newtonian physics as a well-equipped base camp, and the emerging view of meanings that Richard so patiently and exhaustively extracts from the analytic tradition is similarly illuminated by its obsolescent concepts. Essentialism is always appealing to theoreticians, especially to philosophers, because it promises what might be called the Euclidification of theory: a set of definitions and axioms from which theorems might be deduced and then triumphantly confirmed empirically, just like geometry, the ideal of knowledge ever since Socrates and the slave boy. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a theory of meaning that was full of rigorous proofs, thanks to a starter kit of ingenious idealizations!

That dream has been the inspiration of philosophers who have clung to Frege and Russell and their brilliant successors for more than a century, and one of the most interesting features of Richard's book – to me – is how hard he has to labor to get and hold the attention of those of his colleagues whose natural reaction to his arguments for these innovations is so often an inability to suspend disbelief long enough to consider a position. Another is his exposure of what I now

recognize as a philosophical syndrome: the inability of many philosophers to live with some of the counterintuitive doctrines of some of their heroes. Long ago I realized that many self-styled Wittgensteinians couldn't reconcile themselves to the ominously 'behavioristic' implications of his beetle in the box (which I have always endorsed – see my discussion in *Consciousness Explained* (1991a), pp. 462–463), and Richard shows that a similar discomfort haunts those who admire Quine for his ambitious attempt, mainly in *Word and Object* (Quine 1951), but also, of course, in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (Quine 1960), to 'regiment' language, the ultimate goal of so much Cartesian theorizing. Indeterminacy of meaning? Fie! How can we accept *any* indeterminacy of meaning if we are to Euclidify the field? Quine has to be wrong about that! Richard shows that we can do this as calmly as rigorous Darwinian biologists accept the indeterminacy of species boundaries. The empirical world has, happily, enough regularity, enough 'real patterns' (Dennett, 1991b) in it, to anchor our meanings well enough to give us time to build science using our shared understanding. As Richard says,

I think Quine's skepticism is overdone. I agree that there is a healthy indeterminacy as to whether, for example, samples of green tea are things of which 'water' as it's used in the everyday is true. But I reject Quine's linguistic behaviorism. Psychological structures like prototypes and schemata as well as (innate) psychological states involved in the analysis of perception and the generation of 'core concepts' are shared by all normal humans. They are associated in the course of language learning with both lexical items and more complex phrases. This association helps ground translation, I would say, in a way that supports our everyday practices of interpretation without offering support to the idea that 'Pupkins' means something like, 'Oh, lo, an animated piece of the sum of the canine world'. This and what I called in this section causal constraints on translation, I would say, reduces but does not eliminate referential indeterminacy. (p. 115)

Quine was onto this, in many regards, but he never got around to seeing how Darwinian thinking could make his case much more intuitive. Richard, in his Coda, sums it up:

Thinking of meaning in this way has a number of payoffs. It reconciles Quine's skepticism about an epistemically interesting sort of analyticity—one that could ground a priori knowledge—with the belief that everyday talk about meaning is tracking something real, something about which we can and should theorize. (p. 201)

Here I must point to a major lacuna in Richard's impressive command of the literature: Ruth Millikan is never mentioned. Her 1984 book, *Language*,

*Thought and other Biological Categories*, took a long time to sink in, and is still considered, as *Meanings as Species* manifests, to be outside the canon of unignorable work by the coterie of thinkers Richard is mainly addressing. But consider how her assault on what she called ‘meaning rationalism’ in 1984 presages Richard’s claims:

We must be willing to discover that, just as we cannot know apriori or with Cartesian certainty whether any particular thing we think or say is true, so we cannot know a priori or with Cartesian certainty that in seeming to think or talk about something we *are* thinking or talking about—*anything at all*. We cannot know a priori *that we mean*. Nor can we know a priori or with Cartesian certainty *what* it is that we are thinking or talking about. Further, we cannot tell just by armchair reflection whether or not two terms in our idiolect are synonymous, whether a single term is ambiguous, or whether any particular state of affairs is or is not ‘logically possible’ in any interesting or useful sense of that term. (p. 10)

And she issued a diagnosis that must have fallen on deaf ears, given the efforts Richard must go through to close off the escape routes:

Meaning rationalism is not a single doctrine but a syndrome. The paradigm meaning rationalist believes that intensions can’t be wrong or mistaken and that mere (seeming) thoughts-of, as opposed to judgments about, cannot be senseless. ... Compulsive search for “necessary and sufficient conditions” by which to define certain puzzling terms and engaging in the pastime of inventing fictitious “counterexamples” to these definitions is one of the clearest symptoms of meaning rationalism. (pp. 326–327)

One of the innovations Richard explores so imaginatively in his book is the idea of Interpretive Common Ground (ICG), which includes the *external and social* environment in which a speaker is situated. Millikan, in her most recent book, *Beyond Concepts* (2017), offers a way of dealing with the details of these social and psychological processes that cuts through most of the problems in a single stroke: drop the requirement that there are concepts that are (and must be) *shared* for communication to be possible (see Richard, p. 77). Millikan’s neologism, *unicepts*, are like concepts in that they anchor the meaning of words *for individual speakers*, but each speaker has her own way of coming to her current set of unicepts, and it is influenced by features of her life that she may be largely oblivious to. Unicepts are the (ultimately neurological) structures based on *unitrackers* that enable us to track regularities in the world, the Gibsonian affordances in our worlds that are worth attending to, and they are idiosyncratic, relying on the ‘clumpiness’ of the world to provide sufficient landmarks so that people can get on the same page most of the time without difficulty.

I am amused to note that here is another instance of what might be called the magical use of the definite article by philosophers. David Chalmers (1995) gave us *The Hard Problem*, which has tied consciousness researchers in knots for a quarter century because they think they must have a single, shared property that is, well, *essential* for consciousness. I have argued that they are bamboozled by the word ‘the’ just as magicians were fooled by Ralph Hull’s magic trick, *The Tuned Deck*, which was just a bag of familiar tricks his fellow magicians already all knew, not a Hard Problem (Dennett, 2005, 2013). When philosophers speak, as they have since Frege, of *The* concept of DOG or HORSE, they are falling in a similar imagination trap.<sup>1</sup> We can each have our own concept (or better, unicept) of DOG and HORSE, and as long as our concepts, like our idiolects, stay in robust consonance with those of our neighbors and associates, we will manage just fine. We don’t need to go through the hundreds or thousands of ‘connotations’ each of us has for ‘married’ or ‘Jew’ sorting them into the (‘essential’) components of meaning and the historical accidents of association and disposition. When evolutionary biologists adopt ‘population thinking’ they don’t have to worry much about the proper distinction between varieties and subspecies, which individual organisms are ‘wild type’, and which organisms are ‘sports’ or ‘mutants’. The *sorta* operator (Dennett, 2013, 2017) can be used responsibly in spite of philosophers’ obsessions with ‘difference-makers’ and other substitutes of essences.

One of Richard’s insights is an enlargement of Quine’s point about the triviality of stipulative definitions, which create, at best, *transient* analyticities. We philosophers are so fond to stipulative definitions in formal systems that we tend to think of them as an ideal, roughly approximated (somehow) in natural language, and perhaps even a worthy philosophical endeavor. Think how often a philosophical ‘theory’ of this or that turns out to be, on examination, ‘a system of definitions propounded and defended’ (the subtitle of David Schwayder’s 1965 book). But when we stipulatively define a term, we *launch* it into the world as a candidate for adoption, and this is a ballistic launch, nothing we can easily control or guide as time passes (Richard, pp. 36–37). Just think of how Dawkins’ rather careful definition of his coinage ‘meme’ has evolved over the years (Dennett, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup>If we take the definite article seriously—the concept marriage has different application conditions now than it did before—we seem to be rejecting referentialism’ (Richard, p. 129).

Richard has delved well into the ways and ideas of evolutionary biology, but he's missed a few tricks that could help his case. A footnote (p. 12) perpetuates a common confusion about Lamarckianism.

There are of course major disanalogies between biological and linguistic evolution. For example: Linguistic evolution is in good part Lamarckian, with 'acquired traits' often becoming fixed in a language. Even granting that there are some Lamarckian processes in biological evolution, they are presumably nowhere near as important biologically as they are linguistically.

The Lamarckian heresy is properly restricted to multicellular organisms that distinguish somatic cells from germ line cells. In viruses, for example, there is really no useful distinction between mutation and the acquisition of new traits. If meanings are considered to be memes, unliving but evolving 'symbionts' of language users, the misdirection disappears. When Jane Q. Public's meaning of the word 'marriage' evolves – perhaps without her realizing it – this is no more Lamarckian than her unwitting acquisition of a mutant strain of Covid-19. This shift in perspective comes in handy on p100, where Richard says

It is natural to describe the members of our little family as literally sharing a vocabulary. Saying that, we can't identify the words of the shared vocabulary with feature sets—collections of morphological, phonological, syntactic, and semantic properties manifested in the user's speech. For if that's what words are, our family members do not have common words for 'coffee', 'eat', and 'mother'. If we are going to describe the family in the natural way, we need to think of words in some other way. What seems apt is to think of them in something like the way that we are taught in high school to think of genes. Genes come in different 'versions'—alleles—and different members of a species will vary as to which alleles of a particular gene they have. Likewise, words come in different versions, and Matt, Noah, and Diane have different versions of the same words. If this is how we think of things, then linguistic individuals—embodied lexicons—are not stable in the way that embodied genomes are, for such things as morphology, phonology, and syntactic and semantic roles in a lexicon change over time.

No, words are not like genes; they are like viruses and bacteria. And 'linguistic individuals – embodied lexicons' are more perspicuously seen as having something like a microbiome, a huge population of unrelated symbionts, some very useful, even essential for life, and others quite deleterious in their effects on their hosts. One of the great contributions of evolutionary thinking here – and I think Richard recognizes this, but doesn't stress it, is that when a process is a variety of natural selection, things can happen that aren't just caused; there are *reasons why they*

*happen*, reasons that nobody needs to formulate or appreciate – free-floating rationales, as I have called them (1983, 2017).

While I am drawing attention to worthy compatriots who have escaped Richard's notice, I must add linguist Daniel Dor's remarkable work, *The Instruction of Imagination* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), which somehow fell deadborn from the press and has received scant attention from the linguists and philosophers of language who could benefit from it, if only by discovering novel objections to the novel arguments he advances. He, like many others, has still not appreciated the power of evolutionary thinking (and especially the power of free-floating rationales) but his particular ways of resisting the pull of Chomsky's version of nativism, and his appreciation of the role of Richard's ICGs, makes him unignorable, in my view, by those who are waking up from their Cartesian reveries.

We are all familiar with the language mavens who insist on the 'rules' of 'proper English' and we have learned at long last to look askance at their editorial edicts about 'correct pronunciation' and whether it is OK to blithely split an infinitive, a practice up with which they will not put. We should recognize that treating meanings as timeless is just another tenet of this schoolmarmish and unmotivatable ideology. Things shift. Communication continues. Laying down the law in dictionaries is an obsolete idea. Stipulated meanings in formal systems are OK, but we need to remember that these are special cases, deliberately frozen in time, so to speak. A proper semantics of natural language will look more like biology than geometry.

## Disclosure statement

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