

Foreword

In this book, Ruth Millikan presents a remarkably original and ambitious theory concerning the topics that have been at the center of philosophical attention in recent years: language, thought, meaning, reference, intentionality. She achieves this originality, moreover, not by rejecting the spirit and attitude of the mainstream but by adopting it more resolutely than its leading practitioners. One of the happiest trends in philosophy in the last twenty years has been its Naturalization: since we human beings are a part of nature—supremely complicated but unprivileged portions of the biosphere—philosophical accounts of our minds, our knowledge, our language must in the end be continuous with, and harmonious with, the natural sciences. But while striking the Naturalistic Pose is as agreeable and welcome as it is easy, actually *doing* naturalized philosophy has proved difficult—indeed a very unnatural act for a philosopher to perform—and contemporary philosophy of meaning, even where it is most brilliant, has been inconstant in its commitment to naturalism.

Millikan's originality, then, does not consist in launching a scornful attack on the tradition (that's been done before, many times), but in something at once more revolutionary and more constructive: devising in detail an alternative theory of meaning that is more deeply naturalistic, while preserving and amplifying the hard-won gains of the last half century. Thus this book owes profound debts to Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine, and especially Sellars, while at the same time occupying an arrestingly independent vantage point from which all of them—and Putnam and Fodor and virtually everyone else writing about meaning, reference, and intentionality—can be seen to be failed naturalists, unwitting "Meaning Rationalists" who have never quite managed to wean themselves from their Cartesian heritage.

Contemporary philosophical theory of meaning is something of a black hole. One simply cannot hope to work effectively on the issues without becoming intimately familiar with the technical literature, but that literature is such an intricately interlocked, powerfully argued con-

glomeration of doctrines that once one has come to terms with it, one is typically caught in its embrace. Millikan has somehow found the centrifugal energy to *leave* the tradition—*after* understanding it. At one point she says, after asking some particularly novel questions about particularly familiar matters, “In order to answer these questions we will have to strike out on our own.” And that is just what she does. What she doesn’t overturn, she supports with new arguments. Things we had taken for granted as primitives, in effect, are given foundations and explanations. New taxonomies of old friends reveal differences that had been papered over, similarities that had been missed.

Along the way answers are given to just about all the persistent puzzle questions about meaning, intentionality, and representation that currently preoccupy the field. Taken individually, they are often quite compelling, but if they are to escape the gravitational distortions of the standard ways of looking at the issues and establish themselves as part of a genuine alternative, the whole theory must be laid out. That takes a hefty book, but there are ample rewards in every chapter.

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