Review for Theoria.

Gary Kemp, *Quine versus Davidson: Truth, Reference, and Meaning*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 191 pp., ISBN 978–0–19–969562–1.

In this interesting and useful book Gary Kemp argues that the difference between W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson – as far as their views on truth, meaning, and reference are concerned – is "much deeper than is commonly recognized, and perhaps much deeper than Quine and Davidson quite acknowledged publicly" (p. 3).

In particular, Kemp claims that Davidsons's approach in the philosophy of language should be rejected because it is incompatible with Quine's naturalism. He also argues that Davidson's philosophy of language should be rejected in any case, partly because it presupposes theories of truth, which "must violate even those mildly naturalistic principles which even Davidson accepts" (p. 4).

It seems clear that Kemp accepts Quine's naturalism and he spends a good part of the book in explaining what it amounts to. This is a rather delicate matter, which is not always well understood, but Kemp handles it quite competently. However, "a thoroughgoing defence of naturalism, or Quine's version of it, is well beyond the scope of this book" (p. 12); possibly, there may be a coherentist justification for it (as suggested by the phrase "like the roof of a cathedral", p. 15).

Quine and Davidson often appeared to be in agreement on many fundamental issues, and when their views diverged, the differences may not have seemed to be very important. But Kemp thinks otherwise; he says: "In late work, Quine seems to dismiss the apparent difference between his scheme and Davidson's by assigning it to a matter of differing interests – Davidson's interest in the theory of meaning versus his own in epistemology – but I think that he was merely being nice" (p. 128).

As is well known, Quine maintained that the notion of meaning does not satisfy empiricist requirements. But Davidson suggested that empirical theories of meaning can be constructed on the basis of other semantic notions, which are supposedly more acceptable – in particular those of truth, reference, and satisfaction. While meaning is intensional, these latter notions are extensional. And Davidson held that there is an "indefinite phenomenon", ordinarily called "meaning", that can be approximately captured by a precise and extensional

Tarskian theory of truth (see p. 85). By contrast, "to presuppose meaning is exactly what Quine seeks to avoid" (p. 86).

Meaning.

According to Quine's naturalism, as Kemp points out, "[t]he link between language and the world is the relation of observation sentences to sensory triggering; nothing more" (p. 38). Kemp notes that Quine's view, from *Word and Object* and on, is that there is no way a theory of meaning can be empirically testable. "The assignment of meaning, the identification of synonymy and so on, must remain a matter of convenience, not a matter of scientifically discoverable objective fact" (p. 39).

For Quine, the indeterminacy of translation is just a somewhat plausible conjecture; it is not a main ingredient in his theory of language. The important point is that the notions of *meaning* and *proposition*, even if they could be defined in a reasonable way, cannot be used to *explain* anything, in particular they cannot explain our understanding or use of language (see p. 40). And "the whole point of Quine's naturalistic conception of language is precisely that our ability to speak a language can be described without using any semantical concepts at all" (p. 57). That is, without using "true", "meaning", and "reference". Of course, Quine accepts formal semantics; what he rejects is empirical semantics for natural languages (p. 55).

A Davidsonian theory of meaning for a natural language, e.g. for German, with English as a meta-language, would contain theorems (T-sentences) such as

- (1) 'Schnee ist weiss' is true in German if and only if snow is white.

Such sentences, established by means of observation and Davidson's principle of charity, also provide evidence for the theory. "The evidence for a theory of meaning will be, in effect, a finite mass of what Tarski called T-sentences [...] roughly speaking, a theory of meaning is confirmed for a language just in case it generates the right T-sentences" (p. 5).

Now, theorem (1) is supposed to somehow indicate or specify the meaning of 'Schnee ist weiss' in German. But why is this? Surely, (1) does not entail

- (2) 'Schnee ist weiss' in German means that snow is white.

Nevertheless, Davidson seems to have held that something like (2) follows from (1). In virtue of what would such an inference be valid? Do we know a priori that meaning is the same as truth-conditions? Someone might suppose that (2) follows because the theory also contains axioms to the effect that ‘Schnee’ refers to snow and the predicate ‘ist weiss’ is satisfied by what is white. But it is hard to see how this validates the inference, and if we already know such semantic facts – despite Quine’s arguments concerning inscrutability of reference and proxy functions – it is unclear what a Davidsonian meaning theory contributes, apart from compositionality.

Kemp, however, says of inferences like that from (1) to (2): “One can cite various objections to this inference, but perhaps there is no harm in it; [...] if one feels that theories of truth come up short of being genuine *theories of meaning*, one can add on this external adjunct if one likes” (p. 88–9). Well, perhaps.

But granted that the step from (1) to (2) is unproblematic, there is still the problem that “whereas Davidson attempts to describe an objective procedure of interpretation, Quine’s conclusion is that no such objectivity can be claimed for translation” (p. 81). Kemp’s criticism of Davidson “centres on the very idea that truth can play the sort of role in interpretation that Davidson envisages” (p. 81).

Truth.

A Davidsonian theory of meaning resembles a Tarskian truth-theory, but it presupposes a transcendental notion of truth, a notion that can be applied to sentences of other languages than the home language. It cannot make use of deflationary truth of the kind accepted by Quine, for this is immanent and does not help to establish an (extensional) connection between object-language and meta-language that can replace the desired (intensional) meaning-identity. For example, the T-sentence (1) above applies the truth-predicate to a language different from its own, so truth is not merely immanent here. As Kemp remarks, Davidson’s theory of meaning “absolutely requires his transcendental outlook on truth” (p. 8).

Deflationism about truth does not determine the meaning of truth in all contexts; not, e.g., in infinite generalizations such as ‘Every truth-functional tautology is true’ (see pp. 100–104). And the disposition to accept all instances of the schema

‘s’ is true iff s,

where the sentence 's' does not contain the word 'true', does not help us to understand 'true' in interpretative sentences such as (1). Besides the schema must be complicated to take care of indexicals and context-dependence (see pp. 96–99). Here, a theory of reference is needed.

Of course, Quine too can apply 'true' to sentences in other languages, but only indirectly, by first finding or presupposing a sentence in the home language, which is an acceptable *translation* of the given sentence. But this move is not open to Davidson, for if he can find a translation of the sentence, he thereby knows what it *means*, and this is supposed to be what he is going to find out by finding its *truth-condition*. “Indeed, a major ambition of Davidson’s programme is to articulate the process of translation, not to presuppose it at its centre” (p. 99). On the other hand, while Quine makes assumptions about “meaning” when he proposes a translation manual, this is just convenient in practice, not of any theoretical importance.

Davidson seems to have held that there is “a single pre-theoretical concept of truth” that we all share and that Tarski employed when he defined specific truth-predicates for certain languages (see the quotation on p. 113 in Kemp’s book). But from Quine’s point of view, what Tarski taught was rather that “in fact no absolute or transcendent truth-predicate is strictly speaking possible” (p. 116). When Quine himself in some places allows that truth is “transcendent”, this is “only as a metaphor for the fact that sometimes science fails to accept statements that are in point of fact true” (p. 117).

Kemp argues that certain suggestions as to how Davidsonians might handle the inconsistencies generated by Davidson’s truth-predicate are unsuccessful (see p. 118–22). He concludes that Quine’s naturalism “provides a genuine alternative outlook on language that steers clear of such semantical concepts as Davidsonian transcendental truth” (p. 122).

Reference.

Davidson held that ‘reference’ is a theoretical notion, somewhat like e.g. ‘electron’ in physical theory, and that both can describe facts if the theories in question are confirmed (see p. 126). By contrast, Quine argued, mostly by means of proxy functions, that reference is inscrutable or indeterminate; while electrons are real, there is no fact of the matter concerning reference. Kemp argues, convincingly, that Davidson’s proposed analogy, where temperature is similarly relative or “indeterminate” because of the different scales of

measurement, is inadequate and “does nothing to dispel the indeterminacy” (p. 126).

The existence of electrons does not depend upon our use of language, but reference does. For Quine, what is real are linguistic dispositions; these may be described by various postulates about reference, but these postulates do not describe real facts over and above the linguistic dispositions; hence, they have no explanatory value.

It seems that Davidson explicitly accepted Quine’s thesis about the inscrutability of reference, but on the other hand he also wanted to use distal causes of utterances or dispositions as guides to reference. This might help in some cases, but not in many others, e.g. where demonstratives are involved – as in ‘That’s blue’ – or when utterances seem to be about such entities as numbers, Homer, or the equator (see p. 136–7). And in general, there is no objective way to identify referents; a Davidsonian has to rely upon intuitive judgements. Kemp concludes that

whereas Quine stays proximal in refashioning an account, not of reference, but of *referential language* as I have called it, and therefore can *explain* what he is doing, Davidson ultimately simply *uses* the intuitive concept of reference in his distal account, and thus helps himself to a notion which in the final analysis he cannot explain except in terms of the interpreter’s semantical judgement. (p. 140)

So, a Davidsonian theory of meaning is based partly upon an interpreter’s semantic judgements. Such judgements are subjective. Therefore, Davidsonian theories of meaning do not attain scientific *objectivity*. (By contrast, Quine’s principle of charity has no scientific or theoretical function; it is just a practical help in the search for smooth dialogue.)

Naturalism.

Naturalism, according to Quine, is the view that *science* (in a wide sense) is the basis for ontology and epistemology – and thereby also for the philosophy of language. And, as Kemp says, science for Quine refers to “a continuum of rigour, objectivity, and explanatory potential, with mathematical physics at one end, and history, grading off into journalism, common sense, and gossip, at the other” (p. 16). Moreover, claims and theories are only “scientific” in Quine’s sense if they are testable – at least indirectly – by intersubjective, *empirical evidence*, and potentially interrelated, by *explanatory connections*, in a single “web of belief” (see p. 17–8).

Science tells us that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors (which are in turn shaped by physical and biological evolution). Consequently, somewhat analogously to how classical empiricism sought a firm foundation for science in immediate experience (sense data), Quine's naturalism aims at explaining how science is the outcome of sensory stimulation. In particular, then, the philosophy of language should explain how our use of language and our linguistic dispositions are based upon sensory stimulation. This project has no need for the notions of meaning, reference and truth. These notions are not meaningless nonsense – they can be of some use in everyday life – but they do not stand for anything real and they have no place in objective science.

Such, roughly speaking, is the message of Gary Kemp's book. There are also many interesting details and a few minor errors. (As an example of error, there is a reference to Quine's "doctrine of gradualism" on p. 177. The reference is to "PT p. 100", i.e. Quine's *Pursuit of Truth*, 2nd edn. p. 100, but there is nothing about gradualism there. The reference should probably be to Quine's *Philosophy of Logic*, p. 100, but what Quine says there does not quite correspond to what Kemp says in the text. Another example is on the bottom of p. 80, where Kemp has four occurrences of lower case 's' instead of capital 'S' in a schema.)

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