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# PHILOSOPHICAL BOOKS

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## HOW IS MEANING POSSIBLE?

*General remarks*

Simon Blackburn's *SPREADING THE WORD* (Clarendon Press, 1984; 368 pp., £16 cloth, £6.95 paper) is a rich, difficult and curious book. Blackburn does not exactly intend it as an introduction to the philosophy of language. His Preface explains that the "keynote was to be *appreciation* of issues, not mere acquaintance with them". The reader was to be argued through the issues; and yet "it is written with an audience of beginners in mind". The expert already acquainted with the issues that Blackburn argues his beginners through might make the wry observation that Blackburn has been under the *impression* throughout of following such rules as are appropriate when one has an audience of beginners in mind; but that, by all public criteria, he has not followed them at all. Some surface trappings of a manual for gradual ascent are there: notes on further reading, and a three-page glossary of important technical and philosophical terms. But honesty compels the back-handed compliment that this is a book for experts. It takes the fellow-expert on a well-conducted ramble across the terrain, making clear where the boggy and the steep bits are; so that the fellow-expert can then go away and plan his own route with his own party of beginners.

The density of the material in the book prevents one from dealing with it all in the space available. I shall limit my detailed criticisms to the chapters that offer the most general investigation of the phenomenon of meaning. Otherwise I confine myself to such broad and summary commendation or criticism of other issues as I am able to give below. My title is taken from his second and third chapters, where the discussion is most clearly conducted in the spirit promised in the Preface. The questions he addresses in these two chapters, and continues to answer in the fourth ("Conventions, Intentions, Thoughts"), are about meaning. His next chapters, on realism and projectivism, form a transition to matters of truth and reference, discussed in the latter half of the book. I intend it as a mark of respect for the complexity and breadth of discussion throughout that I feel obliged, in order to do full justice to a significant part of the book, to focus my detailed criticisms on only the first broad grouping of issues. Blackburn's stimulating discussions in later chapters merit response at similar length, but that will have to be given elsewhere.

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# Basil Blackwell

Blackburn's style is refreshingly clear and entertaining. He has a definite conception of why the philosophy of language is important, and of what areas within it are *philosophically* (as opposed to merely technically) difficult. This he conveys to the reader with an earthy wit and inventive analogies. I confidently expect 'dog-leg', 'orchestral metaphor', 'beat cult', 'wordcraists', 'elephant-or-regress problem', 'going native' and other phrases of his to become common philosophical parlance. He is also a master of historical and conceptual vignette: his introductory perspective (Chapter 1) on how the focus of philosophical interest can shift around his triangle, and his grouping (in Chapter 5) of well-known "isms" that strive for analysis and reduction are but two examples of this. They are helpful for orientation and impart to the beginner a better sense of what philosophers take themselves to be doing — whether in the same conscious, comparative spirit that Blackburn displays in his own work, or as prisoners of their own period's dominant identification of, and approach to, the important issues.

The book is in two parts: *Our Language and Ourselves*; and *Language and the World*. They form two sides of the triangle within which Blackburn locates the importance and interest of the subject at the outset. Speakers and their psychology are at one vertex; language and the phenomenon of meaning at another; and the world in its basic metaphysical aspects is at the third. The theory of meaning is at the side connecting speakers with language; the theory of truth is at the side connecting language with the world. To these two Blackburn devotes his two parts. But the third side is the theory of knowledge, connecting speakers with the world; and although Blackburn does not create a third part of his book to deal with it explicitly, its central concerns pervade the discussions in his two main parts. For he is concerned to develop an epistemology of understanding; he is chary of verificationism; he is puzzled by the tension between physicalism and the realm of semantic facts; and he constantly helps himself to an unargued conception of there having to be facts of a certain kind *constituting* the state of affairs whose surface appearance is as of our words having meaning for us.

The scheme of the book provides him with an opportunity to advance, in Chapter 6, a substantive projectivist theory of value judgments, which he labels *quasi-realism*. Apart from this novel contribution, one may wonder what a book written with his purposes ought to contain. And here is where I justify my description of the book as curious. There is no discussion of the orderly fundamentals of speech-act theory: of mental and semantic contents, and the typology of forces of mental and speech acts in the tradition of Austin and Searle. There is no discussion of theoretical linguistics from Saussure to Chomsky: of whether a theory of grammaticality can avoid using semantic notions; of the status of linguistic universals and deep structures; of the relationship between logical and grammatical form. For example, although I would applaud Blackburn's delightfully brusque way with Fodor's language of thought (pp. 51ff.), I felt that the whole Chomskian tradition, with the innateness controversy

and its promising links with cognitive and developmental psychology, was sorely neglected at this point in Blackburn's discussion. The earlier brief account (p. 30) of Chomsky's psychological realism was not enough. At one other place at least (p. 121) he mentions important controversies that would fire the beginner's interest, but supplies no references to the literature. The controversies are the extent to which grammar is conventional as opposed to "wired in", and those over "whether some features of our descriptions of the world — such as the imposition of a particular geometry on space — are explained by the facts or are due to conventions of description". There is no discussion of detailed attempts such as those in the Davidson or Montague traditions to provide systematic theories of meaning for significant fragments of natural language. Because the line between philosophical logic and philosophy of language is not a hard and fast one, I was disappointed also not to find mention of such topics as relative identity, ontological commitment, referential opacity, modality and propositional attitudes: all of them topics that the philosopher of language must ultimately say something about if he shares Blackburn's ambition to cast light on semantic, metaphysical and epistemological issues simultaneously. Finally, there is no discussion of how considerations from the philosophy of language might influence our choice of logic.

In saying "there is no discussion" I do not of course mean that Blackburn writes as though he is unaware of the issues, nor that the issues do not ever surface in the text itself. What I mean is that there is no organized discussion for the beginner, setting up detailed problems and examples, motivating a choice of terminology, setting out basic insights and general principles, pursuing their consequences, anticipating objections, and making broader connections. Where this sort of expository structure does inform the text, the beginner will need to have it pointed out; for the book is *difficult* insofar as it is not always clear what the overall direction of argument is as we savour the entertaining lines that must make it up. The beginner, especially, could do with some clues in advance as to how Blackburn intends his lines to converge on the right terminus.

Otherwise, Blackburn's neglect of the topics noted in the previous paragraph is here recorded more for information than for negative criticism. To have addressed them all would be to have made the already long but readable book a mammoth and unaffordable tome. Perhaps we can look forward to a companion volume, one which will use the deep philosophical foundations laid in *Spreading the Word* to erect theories more attentive to the technical details of a familiar problems-based curriculum.

What topics with well-known labels does Blackburn cover with both informative insight and well-placed emphasis? The following incomplete list will forestall any attempt to represent him as sinning by the above-mentioned omissions: compositionality and creativity; understanding; interpretation, translation; innatism and behaviourism; functionalism;

images and ideas: recognition and manifestation; rule-following; Goodman's paradox; privacy and practice; first and third person perspectives; Fregean occasion meaning; meaning nominalism, conventions and communal meaning; thought and talk; realism and truth-conditions; reductionism and the paradox of analysis; holism; evaluation and projection; supervenience; bivalence; correspondence, coherence and pragmatist theories of truth; Tarski's method; demonstrative reference and singular thought; essentialism about natural kinds; the contingent *a priori*.

The problems that emerge from Blackburn's introductory chapter as the deepest ones are as follows.

1. What conception should we have of speakers, their language, and the world they inhabit? How are we to conceive of the way in which a physical, natural world contains anything as strange as the fact that one thing can think of others? How do the facts (about physical systems, or natural, behaving animals) determine or permit the facts about thought and meaning?
2. What is it to know what a sentence means? What kind of fact is it that members of a linguistic community give a meaning to each of their sentences and to the terms contained in them? What is it in the mental life or behaviour of a group which makes it true that their words mean what they do?
3. Does the language user "know" the syntactic and semantic rules of his language? Do they have any psychological reality?
4. Do moral and aesthetic judgments mark objective features of reality?
5. What is the source of necessary truth? Is it linguistic convention?
6. What are the categories of linguistic expression in a natural language, and how do expressions of different categories combine to form complex meaningful wholes?

His next two chapters, jointly titled "How is meaning possible?"; are devoted, respectively, to dismissing innate representative media but allaying scepticism about rule-following. The first of these has as its motif the dog-leg. The second tries to get straight about bent rules. Each is open to important objections, to whose detailed development I now turn.

#### *Detailed criticisms*

In Chapter 2, Blackburn attacks dog-legged theories. In these, "words are thought of as reinterpreted into another medium, such as that of Ideas, whose own powers explain the significance words take on" (p. 40).

The form of a dog-legged theory is that we understand the way in which words have significance in two stages: they are associated with elements of an interpreting medium. . . , and the elements of this medium have their own representative powers. They have "lines of projection" onto the world whereby they signify aspects of it. (p. 43)

Ideational and imagist theories are obviously dog-legged, and Blackburn advances well-known criticisms very cogently. But then he goes further: he detects dog-leggedness in the project of radical interpretation; and he detects it also in theories, such as Fodor's, that postulate an "innate representative medium" or "language of thought". His failure here to include Fregean senses as knees of dog-legs is startling. Senses as Frege intended them (and not as Dummett has recommended that they be reinterpreted) are intermediaries *par excellence* of the kind Blackburn's general arguments should be directed against. For there is no requirement on the part of dog-legged theories that their postulated intermediaries be *in the head*, in Putnam's phrase. Fregean senses, subsisting in a third realm, and accessible to us only when clothed in the garb of sentences, form a line of classical resistance to Blackburn's general argument that deserves a special mention.

I shall deal now with Blackburn's attack on mental representations; but with no special emphasis on their *innateness*.

As Blackburn notes (p. 43) the line of thought leading to a dog-legged theory originates in the contingency of the word — meaning bonds of our language. It then moves from the requirement that we *know what* our words signify to the mistaken demand that we have some *way of representing* to ourselves what they signify. Progress will only be made, it is thought, if the latter ways involve items that are *essentially* representative. And then "the representative nature of the intermediary elements plays some part in explaining our own understandings".

Our own understandings of *what*? Of our *speech*: of the words of our public language. It requires further argument that the intermediary elements — the items of the interposed representative medium — *themselves* have to be "understood" in anything remotely like the sense in which our words and sentences have to be understood. (I talk of the medium as "interposed" rather than "innate" in order to bring out only what is essential in the defence of one kind of dog-leg.) How indeed can one demand an understanding of the intermediary elements when they are not items of a public medium? Now to be sure Wittgenstein said at paragraph 141 of the *Investigations* that it is "absolutely inessential for the picture to exist in his imagination rather than as a drawing . . . in front of him" (a quotation to which Peter Lamarque drew my attention in this connection). But I would reply that the drawing in front of him poses the same problem of interpretation as a public utterance of a sentence; and that, when driven back into the imagination as a mental picture, it (the "remembered drawing") carries with it a problem of interpretation only insofar as remembered words ringing in one's ears would do also. The items of the interposed representative medium do not, however, have to be pictorial or iconic. They are of quite a different category from the "after-images" of inspected drawings or of public utterances; or indeed, of the mental pictures *conjured up* by the person Wittgenstein describes as thus trying to discover what he means by 'cube'. There is *no* requirement, on the part of dog-legged theories in general, that their postulated items

have to be recurrent contents of consciousness, or objects of introspective awareness. Why should they not fulfil their roles or functions in a manner entirely inaccessible to the understander's consciousness? Can one not imagine finding neuropsychological evidence that they do? Thus it can be maintained that it is not in general the case that the same "problem of interpretation" arises for them as arises for the public sentences associated with them. It is what one person makes public by addressing it to another that has to be understood. Part of what it is to understand words is to grasp their representative powers. But it does not follow that harbouring or possessing or being in states of mind (say) with representative powers is impossible unless we are also conscious of the contents of those states and "understand" *their* representative powers. Thus I think Blackburn is wrong to describe the search for the intermediate medium as a search for one containing items

whose *mere presence* ensures that [they] also [represent] the right [things]. There must be a *medium which carries its own interpretation with it*, so there is no possibility of misunderstanding what is thought of, once it is present. (p. 44)

Items in the medium, I repeat, do not have to be *understood* at all when serving some role in an explanation of how we understand our words.

Just as inappropriate is the thought that we *use* items of the postulated medium in the same way that we *use* the words of our public language. Thus Blackburn:

We need to know that we are interpreting the words via the right intermediary. But knowing that we have *used* the right intermediary for a word is no easier than knowing that we are using the word itself to apply to the right kind of thing. (p. 49; my emphasis)

*We* don't use the intermediaries; we use only our words. The intermediaries, if they exist at all, *function within us* without the benefit of public exposure. But this is not to render them as nominally insulated beetles in boxes. The postulated intermediaries play a theoretical role, a role created in response to the surface phenomena of meaningful traffic in words. They may even admit of neurological reduction one day in a future science of fractals and holograms or engrams; and I do not think it is helpful for philosophers to advance analyses that would foreclose such avenues of investigation. Sometimes the dog's knee has explanatory muscle attached.

Thus I think Blackburn is too ready to give a dog-leg a bad name. At least one dog-leg in the contemporary literature, already hinted at above, seems immune to his criticisms. It recognizes that word — meaning bonds are contingent. It takes seriously the possibility that cognition of a propositional kind could precede possession of a full-blown natural language. It is physicalistic. I refer to a functionalist theory of mind as a programme governing transitions among logical states; states which can be realized in different ways in different brains, but which can be

individuated as loci in the programme by virtue of the position they occupy within the whole system. The system is designed to mediate between *perception and sensation* (the exogenous and endogenous "inputs") and *action and state-revision* (the exogenous and endogenous "outputs"). Now Blackburn himself conceded that "This scientific version of a dog-legged theory cannot be ruled out of court" (p. 54). Yet his final objection to it boils down to this:

... it shares with the absolute starting-point of the enquiry the need to see some *kind of fact* that is missing: the element of organization, or function, or whatever it might be which makes it true that a given internal structure has a given significance, which it transmits to words which are transformed or mapped into it. But why shouldn't the missing kind of fact which endows it with its representative powers *directly* infuse ordinary straightforward language with its significance? (p. 54)

I would have thought that the answer to this last rhetorical question was obvious from what Blackburn had observed earlier. There is, namely, a felt need to capture both the relative *invariance under translation* from one language to another of the senses of sentences (or functional roles of correlated contents), and the felt *contingency of the coding* provided by any one natural language. Moreover, the functional account, according to which sentences mean what they do by being compiled on to contentful states of a functional programme, allows for more delicate discrimination between effable and implicit belief (or desire or intention ...). It avoids the dogma of analytical philosophy: that our only access to thought content is via contentful talk. It opens up the philosophy of language to fruitful empirical contacts with developmental psychology, theoretical linguistics and evolutionary theories of cognition. Moreover, whatever insights of a "genuinely" philosophical kind are to be had from the narrower, word-fettered approach Blackburn recommends, can surely be recaptured and relocated within the wider functionalist account just sketched. One might agree with Blackburn that "The transformation into elements of underlying machinery is ... part of a *causal* explanation of how this functioning takes place, but not part of a *philosophical* account of what the functioning actually is" (p. 55). But here 'underlying machinery' is ambiguous. He may be referring to the neural networks of particular brains, in which case the explanation offered is indeed causal. But if for 'elements of underlying machinery' one reads 'states (or loci) of the underlying functional programme', then I maintain that the account has as good a title as any to the label *philosophical*. If not, then Blackburn owes us some idea of what he would regard as a properly philosophical account of such matters.

Blackburn is not alone in failing to appreciate the philosophical point of a functionalism properly supported by an emphasis on *agency*. Searle is another, with his recent attacks on the so-called strong AI view that intelligence is just a matter of symbol transformation. Both are right in

thinking that intelligent thought cannot be a matter of symbol shunting alone. But why discard the real insights from functionalism just because some of its so-called supporters put it forward in such an unviable, truncated form? One can agree that the content of a functional state cannot be a matter only of its "horizontal" connections with other states. Of course there have to be "vertical" connections as well. These vertical connections come through the activity of an organism — the agent — in a world in which it has to receive and process information (by sense perception), and *act* in order to achieve its goals. The link between perception and action is absolutely crucial. Unless we can see the programme "running" in an agent, we have no way at all of identifying any of its states as contentful, nor of identifying the particular contents they might have. Sensing and moving are preconditions for thought. One need only reflect on the analytic equilibrium demanded of ascriptions of perceptual content and intentional action. One cannot represent an agent as intending actions whose linguistic description is logically and conceptually complex and varied, unless one can represent the agent as capable of correspondingly refined perceptual discriminations. Likewise, there is no point in crediting an agent with highly refined perceptual powers and beliefs unless one can also represent its actions as guided by intentions of a correspondingly complex kind.

Now the computational metaphor of mind can only be applied against this background awareness of what the functional role of a programme consists in. It does not consist merely in the web of horizontal connections with other states. For they are all contentless if there are no vertical connections. But, once the vertical connections are supplied, they all come alive; they are immediately and holistically infused with content, as the states of an embodied mind, or mindful body, sensing and acting within a world external to it. So Blackburn is disregarding the rightful emphasis on agency when he complains that the elements postulated on the computational account "do not also have a God-given 'vertical' connection with the world outside the mechanism, in virtue of which their mere presence suffices to explain how we understand our words" (p. 53). He then immediately goes on to say that

We *can* impose the vertical connections, just as I can impose the instruction that the movement of the box of tissues is to represent the sinking of the Titanic, e.g. for the purpose of some game, or some description of events. (pp. 53–4)

This is such a sickly cousin of the sorts of vertical connection that seriously come under consideration on the full functionalist account that it fails to make any philosophical point stick. Who needs *us* to impose the vertical connection — or God to impose it, for all that? Is it not plausible that we have our cognitive faculties and abilities to deal with symbolic representations of the world entirely as a result of natural selection? The maturation of cognition studied by Piaget and others, and the empirical

details of language learning, are the Haeckelian obverse of the evolutionary coin.

The power of the computational or full-fledged functionalist view is perhaps not fully appreciated by anyone for whom the famous Turing test has come to represent the computational view of the essence of representation. Intelligence — or thinking — cannot simply be a matter of manipulating representations (shunting symbols), if there is nothing in the Turing *Gedankenexperiment* to support the presupposition that *there is any representation going on at all*, at least on the side of the computer. Recall the set-up: the human interlocutor sits at a console, conversing with the machine by typing in English sentences and waiting for the machine to type back its "replies". According to Turing, the machine passes the intelligence test if after thousands of hours of conversation the human being has no reason to believe that he is not in communication with another (English speaking) person. The point of my emphasis above on the importance of *agency* is to show up the conceptual inadequacy of such a test. The only "actions" that the machine performs are the "linguistic" ones of responding to conversational moves by the person. The only "perceptions" that the machine has are the typed inputs from the person. With such impoverished input and output it hardly merits the status of human-like agent. It is no more than chips in a vat. We are therefore quite justified in withholding attributions of intelligence, rationality, contentful thought and consciousness from the machine. This is not to make it utterly mysterious why we should relax that withholding when a brain of human design, made of meat or metal, is lodged in the head of a human-like agent that perceives what we perceive and acts the way we act (in all the necessary generality). Why should we not agree that intelligence, rationality, thought and consciousness all supervene in an emergent rush on the proper prerequisites: the demands, namely, that the agent perceive and act so as to penetrate our own life-form by being one among us — sharing our table, so to speak, and not just the main frame?

In Chapter 3 Blackburn "centres upon straightforward, simple applications of predicates to things: the description of things as red, blue, buses, heavy, expensive, and so on" (p. 69). The conception under scrutiny is that of the master of the predicate *following a rule* in order to determine whether to apply the predicate or withhold it as the question or need arises. Blackburn is eventually to reach the conclusion that even an isolated individual — a born Crusoe — can be credited with rule-following behaviour, provided he has appropriate techniques or practices for achieving particular ends. Blackburn is not impressed by the Wittgensteinian demand for a wider community within which the individual is accountable for his application of the rules in question.

In thus focusing on what I shall loosely call simple observational terms Blackburn is obviously not unmindful of the variety of other rules that one would have to call upon in order to sustain a conception of linguistic

meaning as arising out of (community-wide) rule-following. Other rules that would have to be built in to the full picture would include the rules of inference in the underlying logic of natural language, both for the logical operators and for analytical connections among predicates; the rules of grammar and categorial connections that may be identified in response to his question 6 above; and the rules of discourse (of a Gricean kind) constraining the range of appropriate moves in conversation. All these rules bring with them special problems not shared by the others. But Blackburn — rightly — chooses to focus on the purest possible case of rule-following: simple predications on observed objects.

He distinguishes three views, the last two of which Wittgenstein himself could not see his way clearly to distinguish (cf. *PI* 143: “. . . there is no sharp distinction between a random mistake and a systematic one . . .”). These are the *right-rule* view, the *bent-rule* view, and the *no-rule* view. The labels are self-explanatory, so I shall not repeat the explanations given in the text (pp. 70–71). Blackburn rehearses Wittgenstein’s point that introspective deliverances cannot tell the master which of these three views is the correct one as far as his mastery of a given predicate is concerned; the master’s mental contents cannot be assembled to fashion the fact which determines which hypothesis is true. This is the “negative point” and it is well developed. But Blackburn wants to supplement it with a positive point — “in other words, to find out what makes true the right-rule view, rather than the bent-rule view, or the no-rule view” (p. 74). And so he looks, as look he must, at Goodman’s paradox and its consequences for the problem of the meaning of observational predicates. Now Wittgenstein never had the benefit of Goodman’s bent “secondary quality” predicates as a sharpener of semantic insight. Neither Wittgenstein’s own bent numerical series of *PI* 143 and 185ff. nor Blackburn’s similar numerical example (in the vein of Kripke’s ‘quaddition’) is at all like ‘grue’. It is therefore particularly interesting to see what any neo-Wittgensteinian makes of the problems that the Goodmanian predicates pose. Besides looking at the Goodmanian “colour” predicates in this connection, Blackburn considers the possibility of someone following a bent rule for adding 2. This rule enjoins one to add 2 until one reaches 186, and to add 7 thereafter.

I shall consider both kinds of bending. I shall argue that Blackburn applies one Wittgensteinian palliative too credulously, and fails to apply the most powerful Wittgensteinian remedy at all. The result is the wrong course to the right conclusion.

First, the Goodmanian predicates. Recall that Goodman’s original definitions were:

$x$  is grue iff  $x$  is examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is green  
 or  
 $x$  is not examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is blue.

$x$  is bleen iff  $x$  is examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is blue  
 or  
 $x$  is not examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is green.

The problem was that every emerald that has been examined has (at the time of writing) been examined before the year 1986 and, in being found to be green, has *ipso facto* been found to be grue. Thus the hypothesis “All emeralds are grue” is, on the face of it, just as well-supported as the hypothesis “All emeralds are green”. Yet we find the latter much more compelling or natural or justified. On what foundation does this intuitive preference rest? The usual response to the “gruester” who states his hypothesis thus baldly (using the neologism ‘grue’ with the definition just agreed above) is that he is postulating a *change in colour*. After the year 1986, should he speak truly, the first hitherto unexamined emerald to be examined will turn out to be *blue*. So truth triumphs by a discontinuity in Nature. Now it is highly unlikely that *that* would happen, so this crude thought goes; that gruester fellow has a very complicated view of the world. Our homely view of emeralds being green will, if true, be true much less melodramatically: Nature will carry on smoothly through the cut-off time, as it were.

Now ironically Blackburn is the one who has been laying stress on the value of going native, and ignoring the opinions of others who regard one as a bit crackpot in doing so. If he can work his way into the musical scheme of the pibroch, then (and I choose my injunction carefully, mindful of where I am as I write this) he should be able to work his way into the gruester’s way of seeing things (or greeing things, as the case may be). But Blackburn advances arguments hardly more sophisticated than the one just given on behalf of the “normal” against the gruester.

First, let us see why that argument doesn’t work, before seeing how it is applied in Blackburn’s hands. Note that the definitional scheme above is thoroughly *symmetric* insofar as the familiar predicates ‘green’ and ‘blue’ can be recovered from the unfamiliar ones by means of exactly similar definitions, to wit:

$x$  is green iff  $x$  is examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is grue  
 or  
 $x$  is not examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is bleen.  
 $x$  is blue iff  $x$  is examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is bleen  
 or  
 $x$  is not examined before the year 198(6) and  $x$  is grue.

The gruester can therefore, by parity, level against the normal exactly the same kind of complaint: the normal postulates a change in Nature. For, in order that the normal’s hypothesis be true the first hitherto unexamined emerald examined in 1986 will have to prove to be bleen. So he is postulating a change in *grueler* (as opposed to colour). You may reply, “Weird!” But the whole point is that our system of *colour* concepts



is being challenged by Goodman's paradox as in any way privileged or *asymmetrically* distinguished by considerations of simplicity of prediction etc. Change can only be judged relative to a scheme of concepts (a point well developed by Elliott Sober in *Simplicity*); and if these happen to be gruler concepts, no change will be discerned where, relative to a scheme of colour concepts, change will most emphatically be discerned. But whose vantage point is the privileged one? We are threatened by a thoroughgoing relativity.

It does not help to search further for the elusive asymmetry by exploiting putative nomological links. For consider one way the normal may try to ram his point home. He points out that for him green light has a certain wavelength, and blue light another (the physics is actually more complicated, but we need not worry about that at this point). So the gruester is now postulating a *change in wavelength* when . . . etc. Unfortunately this won't work. For the gruester replies that there will be no change in *wavelength* . . . All right then, what about the numbers on the calibrated scale? Isn't the needle going to jump from one to another? No, says the gruester, the needle will register the same grumber . . . And so the grification goes on. (Compare the similar move by Kripke, from 'quaddition' to 'quounting' and beyond, at p. 16 of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.) To sustain the original symmetry of definition of one pair of predicates in terms of the other pair, one rings the grifying changes all the way up through the conceptual scheme. So far the informal discussions of Goodman's paradox in the literature have conspicuously failed to serve up a single impossibility proof to quash such a claim on behalf of the gruester.

Now I claimed earlier that Blackburn hadn't appreciated the true force of the paradox, and it is time now to justify this claim. The example Blackburn actually uses is the bent predicate that I shall call 'rellow'. It is made up from 'red' and 'yellow' in the obvious way. Its bent *Doppelgänger* is 'yed'. It remains also to put a final twist on the problem. I represented the gruester as one doggedly determined to persevere in his applications of the explicitly hybrid, weird-sounding concoctions 'grue', 'bleen', 'rellow', 'yed' etc. The *real* problem for interpretation arises when we consider the following possibility: might not someone in our midst be a 'hidden gruester'? Might he not, when *saying* 'green', actually be *meaning* 'grue' (etc. etc. for other words perforce grified in order to maintain definitional equilibrium)? Note that this is a different way of posing the problem from Kripke's. For Kripke's sceptic "questions whether my present usage agrees with my past usage, whether I am *presently* conforming to my *previous* linguistic intentions" (*op. cit.*, p. 12).

To distinguish hidden gruester sayings in what follows, I shall render the familiar predicate in upper case letters. Thus the hidden gruester says 'All emeralds are GREEN' — speaking our language phonetically, but not, as the capitalization indicates, semantically. If there be such a fellow, how would we know him for what he is? It will be somewhat difficult — for he will have "shared" all our explicit judgements on past occasions,

for example, to the effect that such-and-such an emerald is green. (I shall now be sparing with scare quotes, in order to pose the problem most carefully.) It may be that we shall only find him out for the semantic deviant that he is — the "bent-rule" follower — once the cut-off time has passed.

But for Blackburn the matter can apparently be more swiftly resolved. He says (pp. 81—2)

... although these mistakes [...] may at a time be undetected, they are in principle detectable. They involve different dispositions and ways of talking and acting, *in advance* of different occasions of application of a term. So since my companions show no undue interest in 1886, no undue fear lest next year's motor cars will have round wheels, no concern to lay in a stock of observed, yellow, bandages to match 1886 blood, I know them not to interpret the words in the bent ways defined. (My emphasis)

This passage is a good example of a failure to appreciate how thoroughly going the symmetry is. Let us look just at the colour example (since I am not at all sure how to grify a primary quality, such as shape). Why *should* the gruester be concerned (as Blackburn thinks he ought) to lay in a stock of observed, yellow bandages to match 1886 blood? Suppose I'm the gruester and it's your blood whose spilling after 1886 may have to be catered for with nice matching bandages. Suppose I've seen the very blood which might be spilled. You may have transparent flesh, for example, with your blood clearly visible in your veins and arteries. I predict that in 1886 your blood will be rellow, just as it is now. (I do this thus explicitly, or by using the word 'red' in my bent way: your blood will be RED.) So I want rellow bandages to match it, should it spill. Observed, yellow bandages won't be any good — because they're *yed*. (Or, as I might say in my concealed bent way, YELLOW.) So if I've seen your blood before 1886 I won't be laying in observed yellow (yellow for you, the normal, that is) bandages to match it. Now suppose I haven't seen your blood, and indeed have no chance of doing so until after 1886. I believe (being a good inductivist) that it's rellow (ahem, RED) — just like all other blood I've seen before now. So once again, I shan't be interested in observed yellow — that is, yed (ahem, YELLOW) bandages to bind your future wounds.

I conclude that a hidden Gruester could be a quartermaster for the Red Cross.

What was Blackburn's other example? The fellow who adds 7 to 186 when he should be adding 2. Blackburn sniffs him out as the bent understander that he is in advance of his "reaching 186" except in his thinking about the future. The stratagem is to tell the fellow to carry bricks two at a time up a ladder. There's a pallet of 480 to be brought up the scaffolding in this way. Around lunchtime, (on his 94th trip, to be exact) the hidden gruester will all of a sudden be burdening himself with 7 bricks instead of the handy two. So he complains at being given this

otherwise unexceptionable task, to which a normal understander would simply knuckle down, thanking God it's Friday. The truth about a gruester must, it seems, out, and conveniently early on in our deliberations over the question whether he follows the same rule as we do.

But Blackburn's conceptual point is all too swiftly made. He has chosen a nice, low number in 186. Navvies, secretaries, bank clerks, authors and a host of others all do a lot of things at least 186 times. It is eminently possible to get such a gruester to "come out", as it were. But that is just like using, today, the first published definition of 'grue', in which the year referred to was actually 1984! On the original definition, we'd have discovered all the hidden gruesters by now. For they would have been going around suffering, not from culture shock, but from world shock. They would have revealed themselves as having attached very different "rules", "concepts", "meanings" or what you will, to the innocent words 'blue', 'green', 'red', 'yellow', etc. of our homophonically public language. Our predictions (that is, the statements we made by using those words with their straight meanings), for what they are worth, were right.

*But so were (and perhaps are!) the PREDICTIONS of the (hidden) 1986 gruesters.* And they have not yet had their come-uppance. Perhaps, instead, we will have it. The philosophical problem is only properly alive with a cut-off time sufficiently far ahead. 1984 won't do, it's upon us (at the time of writing). 186 won't do, it's too small. And indeed, with *any* "cut-off" predicate in the Goodmanian definitional scheme — it does not have to involve temporal reference, or position in a series — all we have to ensure is that that predicate is or has been true of any instance of observation, any calculation, any event mentioned in a counterfactual antecedent, or in the condition of a conditional threat or promise or bet . . . etc. Take all English speakers through history to the present time. Take every occurrent thought, every assertive utterance, every counterfactual speculation, etc., etc., that has ever occurred in the minds or on the lips of any of them. Choose a cut-off predicate true of all those events (real or imaginary). Bring them all, I shall say, within the *entertained horizon*. Then bend the predicates beyond that horizon, *à la* Goodman, and pose the possibility of hidden gruesters in our midst. Blackburn's way with them will then not be so swift or successful. And, on their behalf, I resolutely maintain the symmetry that Blackburn, on behalf of the normal understander, is mistakenly unwilling to concede.

Is this, then, not a disastrously sceptical response to the problem of bent predicates? It is. And all Blackburn can say in response to the possibility of a concealed mutually bent community (a possibility I have tried above to make much more vivid than he does) is the following: "Of course, we do not believe ourselves to form a concealed mutually bent community, partly because we believe in the common nature of mankind, and perhaps for the anti-nominalist reasons I developed in the last section." (p. 89) But those anti-nominalist reasons, developed on pp.

79—82, are precisely the anticipated struggle with seven bricks and the considered choice of colour of bandage. I have tried to show how thin they are. We appear to be left with a belief in the common nature of mankind. I submit that this is not a very powerful answer to the deeply unsettling case put forward by the semantic sceptic. In other words, as I said above, Blackburn's Wittgensteinian palliative ("Imagine what he'd do if we asked him to . . .", be this in the life form of builders or Red Cross quartermasters) is too weak. What, then, would be the strong Wittgensteinian remedy that I alluded to in its stead?

I shall develop my answer by means of an analogy. Why, for a Wittgensteinian, is it senseless to pose the possibility that *your* red might be *my* green and *vice versa*? It is because the only grip we have on the idea that *others* enjoy colour qualia is sustained by the public use of our colour words, and by this alone. We find ourselves in agreement on both the logical geometry of colour words and on their application to publicly observable objects. We agree in judgments about after-images as well. For example, if I stare at a yellow surface for some time and then turn my gaze to a white screen, I report a blue after-image, as you do. I do not know how far one should demand agreement in what I call the "logical geometry" of colour words, in order to be satisfied that we are party to the same system of colour concepts. I am reasonably confident that we should both agree that nothing can be red and green all over, but I find myself disagreeing with Wittgenstein's own claim (in *Remarks on Colour*) that it is a conceptual impossibility that there be a transparently white pane of glass. (That, however, is material for another paper!) The present point is that, even *given* all this public agreement, since it is *all* we have to go on in crediting each other with inner experiences of colour qualia, we are unable to imagine what could *count* as evidence for or against the claim, or *what kind of fact it could be*, that you and I have mutually inverted spectra. All possible publicly available evidence fails to sustain the possibility of settling the question *either way*.

Apply this line of thought now to the problem which troubled Blackburn. How can I be sure that you mean what I do by the word 'green'? How can I be sure that we follow the same rule in applying and withholding it? The way (I think) to avert the scepticism that seemed to follow from my more enthusiastic prosecution of Goodmanian considerations is to take the line just developed for the inverted spectrum problem and apply it to the bent rule problem. Such rule as may be followed rests, for its identity, on the sum total of publicly displayed agreement to the present time in the way we have used the word. We made so bold as to drive the entertained horizon out of semantic sight, in order to sustain the possibility of such undetected and ramifying bendings as are needed in order to sustain the claim of symmetry and equal title of the bent rule to the role of "right rule". But we are thereby hoist with our own petard. There is now no evidential basis (this side of the entertained horizon) on which we can rest the claim of rivalry, or indeed even be sure *who is following which of the purportedly distinct rival rules*. In developing the

whole mad Goodmanian possibility above, *I* — when speaking from the point of view of the “normal” — might “really” (?) have been a hidden gruester!! And if I were, I would have been posing the possibility in this last sentence of having been a hidden GRUESTER!!! Or *you* (whom I have been trying to disabuse of your doggedly “normal” semantic sanctimony) might “really” (?) have been a hidden gruester all along. But can we really make sense of this ‘might’?? The distinction between straight and bent rules starts to crumble. We realize that these last two possibilities are just as senseless as the supposed possibility that your green might be my red and *vice versa*. Given the postulated range of public agreement in our use of words in the face of *the* world, the grid of meaning ought not to be drawn so fine that we delude ourselves into imagining the possibility of so permuting and bending our concepts and rules that concealed mutual bending remains an unexercised spectre.

In Chapter 4 (“Conventions, Intentions, Thoughts”) Blackburn cuts a simplifying swathe through the delicacies of reciprocal belief and intention spawned in the post-Grice literature. There are several important analytical definitions: of action intended to induce belief (AIIB, p. 111); Gricean AIIB (p. 112); open Gricean AIIB (p. 116); convention (via a reformulation of Lewis’s definition, p. 120); and regard—display convention (p. 126). The *openness* of Blackburn’s favoured candidate for meaning analysis is what shuts the door on the ramifying levels of reciprocity that seem so artificial to the outsider who has not worked his tortuous way into the literature on the topic. He describes a delightful piece of Nagel gazing:

... in a restaurant I try to attract the attention of a pretty woman. I want to look at her. I want her to see that I want to look at her. I may want her to see that I want her to see that I want to look at her ... is it really plausible that when our eyes meet in full mutual awareness, I (and she) have an endless stock of wants? The ideal of full openness is more simply captured if we add the want that nothing about my wants be concealed.

It would seem that the road to modesty in the theory of meaning takes many a lascivious turn. So Blackburn fine-tunes the famous third clause of the Gricean template so as to require (for openness) that the action be performed by a speaker who *wants all his intentions in so acting to be recognized*.

(Recognized, presumably, by the audience — but we can forgive Blackburn this embarrassing omission after the above encounter in the restaurant. It is fervently to be hoped that his earlier claim that

if I ask you to imagine a bed without an attractive member of the opposite sex in it you may, temporarily, be unable to do so. But you do not temporarily lose your ability to understand, and *believe*, that there are such beds ... (p. 48; my emphasis)

is not falsified by our discovery above of what happens when dons don’t dine at high table.)

Blackburn’s wanton GAIBs, if successful in the one-off case (another unfortunate phrase in this context), “can become entrenched, so that a group comes to possess a reliable and regular way of signalling and transmitting information” (p. 117). This is now, according to the revised programme of linguistic nominalism, the conventions governing linguistic meaning arise. But he also thinks that

a community might entrench a meaning, communicating that *p* when they say or utter *x*, although *habitually and regularly* when they do so they have devious intentions, concealments, and stratagems up their sleeves, falling short of openness. For example, there is no regularity or habit or convention that when a young man says “Of course I’ll respect you in the morning,” he wants all his intentions in saying it to be open to view; in fact (as a matter of statistics) the sentences may be used mostly by people with various deceptions in hand; yet for all that his utterance means that he will respect the girl in the morning, and this is what he has said. (p. 118)

It would appear that the road from restaurant to digs is paved with changed intentions. But where does it lead us as far as the programme of linguistic nominalism is concerned? Blackburn now inclines to the view whose best expression by far is to be found in McDowell’s “Meaning, communication and knowledge” (in van Straaten’s collection, *Philosophical Subjects*, 1980), to which there is no reference; namely, the view that “The detour through Grice’s mechanism and through openness does not ... yield anything which belongs to the essence of linguistic meaning” (p. 118). That is, he sees the growth of conventions as fossilizing linguistic meanings directly from one-off AIIBs without going through the Gricean hump of GAIBs. The latter’s openness, or wantonness, appears to play no role in the growth of linguistic meaning. He is advocating, in other words, what I have called the *second scenario*: the one according to which the Gricean analysis tells us more about what it is to be human, than about what it is for humans’ utterances to mean what they do (see Tennant, “Intentionality, syntactic structure and the evolution of language”, in C. Hookway, ed., *Minds, Machines and Evolution*, 1984).

But I think Blackburn misses, at this crucial point in his argument, the contribution to be made by the *full* Gricean recognition-of-intention (whether open or finitely stratified) in the analytic archaeology of meaning. Consider his puzzling omission of *system* at this vital juncture. ‘Take the young beau’s words ‘Of course I’ll respect you in the morning’. This is no one-off composite that just *happened* (despite the desperately missed openness on the salient occasions) in Lewis-like way to acquire the articulated meaning that it possesses in our language today. It derives its meaning from the repeatable contributions that its component words can make to sentences in which they occur, and also from the way they happen to be combined in this sentence. How did those individual

words get their regular meanings, and how did those modes of combination come regularly to affect the compoundings of meaning in the way that they do? If the sentence in question were the only context in which *those* words ever occurred, then — even if, miraculously, its repeated use in the mouths of amorous but not fully open intenders conferred upon it its present meaning — that meaning could not be regarded as *composed* out of the meanings of its individual words.

This, then, is the crucial lacuna in Blackburn's account of how, allegedly, thinner intentions can fully fertilize our linguistic innovations. It won't do. Those intentions will not support the tree-like structures of constituents within sentences. I have argued (*loc. cit.*) that the meanings of sentences generated by *recursive* grammars could only have arisen as a result of the dawning of fully Gricean light on our ancestors' protolinguistic interactions. I agree wholeheartedly with Blackburn that "it is plausible to see language as a development of animal signalling systems, whose prime evolutionary purpose is the transmission of information, enabling one animal to use a display by another as itself a sign of something" (p. 123). But I disagree strongly that we can come all the way to structured meanings without at any point availing ourselves of the full Gricean machinery. Indeed, it is not at all true of a properly worked out Gricean approach that it "ignores or distorts the compositional character of language" (p. 127). I shall not repeat my argument here. I think only that it is a pity that Blackburn's Homeric struggles over the place of system produced no analogue of it.

I hope that my reader, having come this far, is partly to the S/p regard—display convention according to which I have high regard for Blackburn's display in having said so much about relatively little of it.

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[Simon Blackburn will reply to Neil Tennant's review in the next issue of this journal. — *Ed.*]

*John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England*

By CHARLES B. SCHMITT

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There are many philosophers who were in their own times highly regarded, but who are now remembered only by a small handful of specialists. John Case (c. 1545—1600) wrote a series of philosophical works which were published in edition after edition during his lifetime and in the thirty years after his death. None of them has been reprinted since, and I imagine that few readers of this journal could name even one of them. Some aspects of Elizabethan culture have received an enormous quantity of scholarly attention, but the philosophy of the period has been very little studied.

Dr Schmitt's claims on behalf of Case and his milieu are fairly muted:

"an interesting, if not precisely fascinating mind" (p. 4); "One can certainly not claim that English Aristotelianism of the period 1575—1650 ranks as one of the creative high points of Western philosophical history" (p. 8). These rather dampening remarks are probably advisable and are certainly justified. Case does not emerge from Dr Schmitt's exposition as a very interesting thinker. He may have been one of the most original and important English philosophers of his age, but as Dr Schmitt freely admits, "most of the science and philosophy being done in England at his time was extremely derivative" (p. 223). An unkind but not, I think, an unfair assessment would be that Case was a third-rate philosopher who wrote a fair amount and who thus stands out from his fourth-rate contemporaries who wrote almost nothing.

There are many different approaches to writing about the history of philosophy. Some writers ignore the historical background almost completely and argue with their chosen author almost as though he had appeared at a modern seminar. Dr Schmitt's approach is very different. Case's biography is carefully analysed and his thought is placed within a historical context which is described with great richness of detail. As a work of scholarship this is an exceedingly impressive book. Dr Schmitt moves easily and with obvious confidence through a world of authors whom few other men can have read, and deploys a great mass of varied documentation with considerable skill. The descriptions of the changes in the kinds of logic and philosophy taught at Oxford during the first three-quarters of the sixteenth century is admirably done, as is the account of Case's own life and of the situation at Oxford during the period when his works were written. One is left with a clear picture of the intellectual decline of the university from the time of Ockham, Burley and the Mertonians, of the hiatus caused by the series of religious changes after 1533, and of the revival of Aristotelianism which started in the 1570s and continued until the new dislocations produced by the Civil War. Unfortunately one obtains a less than clear impression of the intellectual content of this revived Aristotelianism, either as it appears in the writings of Case himself, or in those of his contemporaries.

Apart from one chapter (Chapter V: "John Case on Art and Nature") Dr Schmitt avoids any close discussion and analysis of the details of Case's thought. This means that a number of potentially very interesting problems are hardly discussed. Where for example did Case stand in the old debate about the nature of universals? We learn that "his knowledge of the so-called nominalist tradition is quite extensive" (p. 168) and that he was "particularly scornful of the Scotists" (p. 209), but we do not learn whether Case actually committed himself to the nominalist position. The young Thomas Hobbes came up to Magdalen Hall only a few years after Case's death, and it would be very interesting to know whether the uncompromising nominalist views expressed subsequently by Hobbes had any close parallel in the scholastic philosophy which he was taught in his youth.

Minor errors and misprints creep almost inevitably into even the most