

Christopher Gauker, *Words without Meaning*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. pp. xxi, 299.

Words without Meaning is an extremely ambitious investigation into the nature of language and thought. It pursues a negative project and a positive project. The negative project is to argue against what Christopher Gauker calls “the received view of linguistic communication.” The positive project is to delineate an alternative. Gauker’s positive view is an original and intriguing contribution to the existing literature.

As characterized by Gauker, the received view encompasses several distinct doctrines: (1) Various mental states, such as beliefs, possess propositional content. (2) Expressions in a natural language possess meanings. (3) Speakers of the same language share a common understanding of these meanings, and they can thereby employ the language to communicate propositions to one another. (4) “The central function of language is to enable a speaker to reveal his or her thoughts to a hearer.” For instance, the primary function of assertion is for “the speaker... [to] reveal to the hearer that he or she has a belief with a certain propositional content” (3).¹

Gauker is surely correct that (1)-(3), or doctrines much like them, constitute some kind of orthodoxy among analytic philosophers both past and present. It is less clear that (4) enjoys anything like the same orthodox status. Many contemporary philosophers would doubtless urge that the primary function of assertion is not to reveal anything about one’s own mental states, but rather to describe the subject matter of one’s assertion, which typically will be both extra-linguistic and extra-mental.²

¹ (3).

² For instance, see John McDowell’s “Meaning, Communication, and Knowledge,” in *Philosophical Subjects*. Ed. Zak van Straaten. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

In Chapter 2, Gauker argues against (1)-(4). He devotes most of the chapter to critiquing the following two theses: (5) Beliefs are relations to mental representations that carry propositional content. (6) Thought is explanatorily prior to language, in the following sense: we can first explain what it is for thought to possess propositional content, and we can then treat language as somehow inheriting content from thought. One worry about this chapter is that (1)-(4) do not in any obvious way entail (5) or (6). As a purely sociological matter, the existence of mental representations is controversial even among philosophers who would find (1)-(4) congenial. Similarly, it is unclear why (1)-(4), even when supplemented by (5), entail (6). Why couldn't one accept the existence of mental representations but maintain that they possess content only by virtue of their relations to linguistic practice? (Gilbert Harman advocates a view along these lines.)³ Of course, there are many contemporary philosophers who espouse (5) and (6), such as Jerry Fodor. It is an interesting project to argue against these philosophers. But in doing so one does not thereby argue against (1)-(4).

Viewed on its own terms, Gauker's argument against (5) and (6) may also face some difficulties. Much of Gauker's discussion concerns what he calls "the cartographic theory of mental representation." According to this theory, we should "explain the content of our mental states by an analogy to cartographical representation."⁴ Gauker urges that the cartographic theory is "the primary source of inspiration" for most proponents of (5) and (6). He then argues that the cartographic theory is hopeless. Whatever the merits of the cartographic theory, I see little evidence that it commands

³ See "Language, Thought, and Communication," in *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 66-182).

⁴ (34).

widespread allegiance, although it certainly enjoys a few proponents.⁵ Thus, it is difficult to see how one undermines (5) and (6) by rebutting the cartographic conception.

In Chapter 3, Gauker introduces his own positive view of linguistic practice. He offers an essentially pragmatist account: speakers aim to assert those sentences whose assertion will yield desirable consequences. In Gauker's rendition, every conversation has certain goals, which are generally shared by all participants in the conversation. These goals determine what Gauker calls a *context of utterance*: the minimal set of sentences such that actions taken in accord with that set tend to advance the goals of the conversation. A sentence is *assertible* just in case it belongs to the context of utterance. (Here, I greatly oversimplify.) Gauker describes this approach as eschewing notions like "propositional content" and "meaning." Alternatively, one might describe Gauker as rejecting not those notions themselves but rather a truth-conditional construal of them. Gauker, who is a deflationist about truth, rejects referential semantics in the tradition of Frege and Tarski. Yet he recognizes that we "need to find a semantic property of sentences that we can define recursively for all sentences of a language."⁶ He just thinks that assertibility, rather than truth or satisfaction, is the desired semantic property.

Gauker elaborates his approach into a theory of logical consequence. He also applies his pragmatist framework to various linguistic phenomena, including quantifier domain restriction, presupposition, and implicature, each of which receives a separate chapter. In each chapter, Gauker argues that the received view of linguistic communication cannot accommodate the relevant phenomenon nearly as satisfactorily as

⁵ For instance, see Frank Jackson and David Braddon-Mitchell's *The Philosophy of Mind and Cognition* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996).

⁶ (283).

his own alternative approach. These chapters contain many interesting and novel proposals.

In the book's final chapters, Gauker extends his account from language to the mind. As already indicated, Gauker rejects the popular view that mental activity involves causal interaction among propositionally contentful mental states. He hypothesizes that a finished theory of the mind will posit only *non-propositionally* contentful mental states, such as mental images.

How can Gauker reconcile his rejection of the propositional attitudes with the undeniable fact that we frequently attribute beliefs to one another? In response to this worry, Gauker sketches assertibility-conditions for *belief-attributions* along the following lines: "X believes that *p*" is assertible iff *p* is assertible on X's behalf. Thus, when we talk about beliefs, we do not describe some antecedently given realm of propositionally contentful mental states. We merely make certain moves within linguistic practice, moves governed by Gauker's theory of assertibility-conditions. Hence, contrary to doctrine (6), philosophers should not try to elucidate belief independently of linguistic practice.

Gauker's book develops a radical new theory of language and mind, with applications to a wide range of diverse phenomena. One worry about Gauker's approach is that it is simply too radical. If we reject the orthodox picture of mental activity as involving causal interaction among propositionally contentful states, can we do justice to mental phenomena? For instance, can we formulate adequate psychological explanations for observed behavior? And can we retain the traditional conception of human thought and action as *rational*? To be fair, Gauker acknowledges these criticisms. He responds to them by denying that we possess an intuitive "folk psychology" through which we

explain and predict behavior in terms of propositional attitudes. But many philosophers will find it difficult to concur.

These worries are reinforced by the details of Gauker's account. As we have seen, Gauker explains linguistic meaning in terms of conversational goals. But what fixes the goals of a given conversation? The most natural response would be: the propositional attitudes of participants in the conversation. Gauker cannot offer this answer. To do so would be to explain language in terms of propositionally contentful mental states. I suspect that Gauker faces a dilemma: either his account of conversational goals must invoke serious intentional psychology, thereby subverting one of Gauker's principal theoretical aims; or else Gauker must settle for some kind of behavioristic proxy, thereby travestyng the rational structure of quotidian linguistic interaction.

Gauker's book is a remarkable achievement: remarkable for developing such an unorthodox view in so much detail; and even more remarkable for doing so with such brevity and efficiency. I heartily recommend *Words without Meaning* to anyone interested in pragmatist meaning-theories or, more generally, in the relation between language and thought.

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