

Class 17 - Deflationism

I. Meaning minimalism

Stephen Schiffer was a proponent of IBS, when and after he worked with Grice at Oxford in the 1960s. His first book, *Meaning*, was the most sophisticated defense of the IBS programme.

But, Schiffer became disillusioned with IBS.

His second book, *Remnants of Meaning*, was a rejection of the basic premises of the IBS programme.

In the end, he presented what he calls the no-theory theory of meaning.

Mark Johnston defends a similar conclusion about meaning, but from a different perspective.

Both Schiffer's later view and Johnston's view can be classified under the broad heading of minimalism, or what I will call deflationism.

The deflationist, inspired by the later Wittgenstein, thinks that there is no unique essence to meaning.

It might be that there are lots of different kinds of meaning.

It might be that meaning is a kind of illusion, a term of folk semantics that will be eliminated by mature theories of language and thought.

The deflationary perspective is a sharp contrast to the Fregean view of meaning.

For Frege, and other philosophers who sought substantive theories of meaning, the goal was not merely a theory of the particular language we use, nor even a universal theory of language, but answers to the most important philosophical questions.

Johnston starts his article by presenting the Fregean view he opposes.

Analytic philosophy distinguishes itself from other philosophical traditions by its claim that neither metaphysics nor epistemology but philosophy of language is first philosophy, which is to say the area of philosophy in which the fundamental question of objectivity is most directly and explicated and answered... [L]anguage is not a mere code in which we cast our thoughts but is the essence of thought (Johnston, 29).

If it turns out that there is no essence to meaning, as the deflationist claims, there would consequently be no essence to thought or objectivity.

If Fregean hopes for semantics were unrealizable, then no progress would have been made on nineteenth century idealism.

We could be back in the arms of the absolute!

The deflationist, of course, thinks that there are alternatives to idealism in the absence of a full-blown theory of meaning.

In particular, we might console ourselves with extensionalist theories of truth and reference.

But, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

II. IBS and propositional attitudes

We have already looked a bit at the central problem for IBS.

The proponent of IBS envisions all semantic facts to be reducible to psychological facts.

Any claim about meaning should thus be expressible exclusively in mental terms.

In particular, sentence-meaning is explained in terms of speaker-meaning, and speaker-meaning is explained in terms of the beliefs of the speaker and his/her audience.

When we try to explain the mental states of belief and other propositional attitudes, though, we seem to need to appeal to semantic facts about the propositions that people believe.

Consider:

1. Izzy believes that a monster named Boris is under the bench.

1 seems to be a relation between Izzy and the proposition:

2. that a monster named Boris is under the bench

But, 2 is explained, in IBS, by Izzy's beliefs when using 1.

Thus, the IBS account of meaning is circular.

In *Remnants of Meaning*, Schiffer presents a complicated argument against using propositions as the things to which believers relate.

A proposition will be structured.

One element of that structure might be either a subject or a mode of presentation of a subject; another element might be either a property or a mode of presentation of a property.

The Fregean argues that 2 is built out of the mode of presentation of Boris and the sense of the sentential function 'x is under the bench'.

The Russellian argues that 2 is built out of Boris himself and the property of being under the bench. (We call this directly-referential proposition Russellian, though you might prefer to think of it as Millian).

Schiffer claims that neither of those options work.

If the propositionalist theory of believing is correct, then the proposition that provides the complete content of Tanya's belief either contains (so to say) doghood or else contains a mode of presentation of it; but there are arguments to show that neither of these alternatives pans out (Schiffer, 5).

I'll omit Schiffer's arguments against propositions, here, though they are a fine couple of paper topics.

The point of Schiffer's arguments against propositions is to undermine the claim that belief is a relation between a believer and a proposition.

There are plenty of other reasons, consistent with Schiffer's central commitments, to that same end.

For one, Johnston points out that externalism opposes the view that my belief is a grasping of some sense which determines the reference of its component objects.

Few of the enormous number of speakers capable of having beliefs about dogs have figuring in their psychology occurrent or dispositional determinants of the kind *dog*. Ordinary speakers are capable of having beliefs about dogs in part because they could offer some constraints on what it is to be a dog, in part because they possess a reliable but not infallible capacity to recognize dogs and in part because they intend in their use of the term 'dog' to fall in with the conventional norms, whatever they are, that govern the use of the term. Hence in order to have beliefs about dogs one need not implicitly or explicitly know anything like necessary and sufficient conditions for being a dog (Johnston, 34).

Even if cats turn out to be robots, and I think that cats are animals, I still have beliefs about those things. My beliefs about arthritis, or water (as in Twin Earth examples), do not depend on my having full knowledge of the referents of the objects of those beliefs.

But, if my belief were just a relation to a proposition, then it would seem that I should be able to grasp all the components of that proposition.

Given the commitments of IBS to a compositional meaning theory, it would seem even more important that I be able to grasp, fully, the facts about the component parts of any proposition.

We will return to the claim that a compositional meaning theory requires structured propositions.

To oppose the view of belief as a relation between a believer and a proposition, Schiffer could also have appealed to general Quinean arguments against intensions.

Why can't there be a systematic account of the semantics of the vast fragments of natural languages which are free of propositional attitude terms? All that seems to have happened is that the Gricean reductionists have caught up with Quine (Johnston, 35).

But elsewhere, Schiffer expresses concerns about Quine's argument from identity conditions.

One alternative to taking belief as a relation between a believer and a proposition which Schiffer explores is to take the objects of belief to be sentences in our language of thought, which is sometimes called *Mentalese*.

We will not pursue the problems of taking propositions as sentences of *mentalese*.

For more on these questions, see Schiffer's article "Propositional Content" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, which is on reserve in the library.

Lastly, one could take beliefs and the other propositional attitudes as basic and unexplained.

Certainly, I felt that the project of defining the semantic in terms of the psychological was fairly pointless if one was then going to view propositional attitudes as primitive and inexplicable... What could be the point of trading in facts about *meaning* for facts about the *content of beliefs* if one ends up with nothing to say about the latter? (Schiffer, 2)

Thus, Schiffer discards IBS, and with it all hopes for a substantial theory of meaning.

III. Remnants of meaning

Schiffer's precis of his second book serves as an outline of an argument for deflationism. He first characterizes the core tenets of the IBS theorist.

IBS1. There are semantic facts, including facts about meaning.

IBS2. Natural language has a compositional meaning theory. (Compare to Johnston, p 31.)

IBS3. Meanings determine truth conditions.

IBS4. It would not be possible for us to understand indefinitely many novel sentences without a compositional meaning theory.

IBS5. There are belief facts.

IBS6. Token physicalism: mental facts are (in some sense) physical facts.

IBS7. Believing is a relation between a person and a thing that the person believes.

IBS8. Physicalism: semantic facts are not irreducibly semantic and psychological facts are not irreducibly psychological.

IBS9. IBS: the semantic reduces to the psychological (and eventually to the physical).

In *Remnants of Meaning*, Schiffer argues against each of these theses.

You could write a term paper on pretty much every chapter of the book.

We have already discussed the difficulties with the conjunction of IBS1, IBS2, IBS3, and IBS4, in assessing the propositional attitudes.

Let's look briefly at the physicalism underlying IBS6 and IBS8.

IV. Physicalism and the mind

The IBS theorist is driven by a desire to reduce semantic facts to physical facts, by way of mental facts.

Physicalism is the claim that everything there is is physical.

There are different ways to interpret what it means to be physical.

P1. Being a commitment of a mature physics.

P2. Having spatio-temporal location

P3. Being an element of the causal nexus

Perhaps a better way of understanding physicalism is to see what kinds of things a physicalist might reject: Cartesian souls, abstract objects like sets or meanings, God.

Hobbes was a physicalist, and there were others in the history of philosophy.

But until the twentieth century, a physical explanation of the mind was the central barrier to physicalism.

Claims that the mind could be explained in terms of the body seemed outlandish.

Behaviorism was the first physicalism theory of the mind.

Behaviorists (e.g. John Watson, B.F. Skinner) identified mental states with behavior.

Sophisticated behaviorists (e.g. Gilbert Ryle) added dispositions to behave.

For the behaviorist, pain is not an irreducibly mental state, but the disposition to scream, cry, wince, etc.

It is plausible that all of those behaviors, being observable properties of observable objects, can be explained in terms of physics, unlike our conscious mental states.

Unfortunately, there also seem to be mental states, like belief, that have no corresponding observable behaviors.

The behaviorist's appeal to dispositions mitigates the problem of describing mental states with no attached behavior.

I can be in pain but not scream or wince.

If I have a disposition to scream and wince, then the behaviorist can ascribe to me the pain, even with no attached behavior.

Similarly, my belief that there is a woodchuck living under my shed may be explained by my filling in holes around the shed, placing heavy objects where those holes had been, and ranting about woodchucks.

Unfortunately, the behaviorist's account of dispositions did not satisfactorily capture the causal role of mental states.

It seems more accurate to say that my pain causes me to behave in various ways than to say that my pain is my disposition to behave in those ways.

Furthermore, behaviorists denigrated the role of neural structures in explaining and predicting behavior.

It became clear that the brain has a central role in our explanations of minds.

In contrast to behaviorism, philosophers including J.J.C. Smart and U.T. Place developed what became known as identity theory.

Identity theory interprets mental states as causes of behavior.

The identity theorist's claim is that every token of a mental state is strictly identical with a token of a physical state.

Identity theory simply claims that sensations are brain processes.

The identity theorist urges us to see the identification of sensations with brain states like any other common theoretical identification in science, like the identity of water with H₂O.

Thus, identity theory is a version of token physicalism about the mind.

The identity theorist thinks of behavior as caused by thought, but not as constitutive of it.

Still, identity theory agrees with behaviorism that mental states are linked to behavior.

Identity theory defines, or picks out, mental states in terms of the behaviors they cause.

Unfortunately, there are significant problems with identity theory, as well.

Most seriously, it denies that anything without a human brain can have mental states.

Robots with advanced artificial intelligence (as in *Blade Runner*) might turn out to have minds.

There could be alien creatures with the intelligence of humans, but with a different architecture.

Identity theory is thus too chauvinist an analysis of the mind.

IBS is not committed to identity theory, but to the more general thesis that every mental state corresponds to a physical state.

Token physicalism is essentially a denial of Cartesian dualism.

IBS is, in this sense, a physicalist theory.

If IBS is incompatible with physicalism (say because IBS needs non-physical propositions or mental states) then many philosophers would choose physicalism over IBS.

Schiffer's abandonment of IBS for the deflationist no-theory theory of meaning is in no way an abandonment of physicalism.

Instead, it is an expression of his belief that physicalism is incompatible with an inflationary theory of meaning.

V. What we need from a theory of meaning

Johnston mainly agrees with Schiffer about meaning deflationism, but he takes a different route to his conclusion.

The main difference between Schiffer and Johnston concerns whether there can be a compositional meaning theory.

Schiffer thinks that deflationism entails that there is no such meaning theory.

Johnston thinks that deflationism is compatible with a weak version of a compositional meaning theory.

Further, Johnston thinks that Schiffer's arguments against propositions are too strong.

We can have propositions, without holding either that they are ontologically serious (spooky entities) or that they play the deep explanatory role that Frege thinks that they do.

We saw, in §II above, that Schiffer had concerns about all accounts of the structures of propositions.

He concluded that there could be no compositional meaning theory.

The desire for a compositional meaning theory comes from our ability to understand indefinitely many novel sentences.

If we are going to give up compositional meaning theories, we have to cede the claim that we can understand those novel sentences.

Such understanding seems axiomatic.

Schiffer is willing to bite the bullet.

Johnston thinks that we can have a compositional meaning theory, even if propositions are unstructured.

[G]rant that propositions are not structured meanings and yet still aim for a compositional semantics which uses singular terms such as ‘the proposition that p’ understood as denoting unstructured entities (Johnston, 37)

The conflict between Schiffer and Johnston is a deflationist family squabble.

They really agree on so much that Johnston’s claim looks more like a friendly amendment than a fundamental difference.

I share [Schiffer’s] view that the correct theory about meaning would be in a certain sense no theory but a statement of the obvious coupled with resistance to the urge to find a hidden and substantial nature for meaning to have (Johnston 42).

VI. The deflationist’s no-theory theory of meaning

Schiffer develops the deflationary perspective out of the failure of IBS.

Johnston’s article lays out in more careful detail the positive deflationist claims.

He presents several platitudes which any theory of meaning must yield.

If ‘S’ is a declarative sentence of L then ‘S’ in L means that p iff in using ‘S’ in the assertoric mode L-speakers would thereby assert that p.

If ‘S’ is an interrogative sentence of L then the declarative form of ‘S’ in L means that p iff in using ‘S’ in the inquisitorial mode L-speakers would thereby inquire whether p.

If ‘S’ is an imperative sentence of L then the declarative form of ‘S’ in L means that p iff in using ‘S’ in the directing mode L-speakers would thereby command that p (Johnston, 39).

These platitudes, Johnston argues, are satisfied by a minimalist, or deflationist, theory of meaning.

Furthermore, we do not need any other, deeper, account of meaning.

Johnston presents four elements of his minimalism.

J1. *Meaning has no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover.* All we know and all we need to know about meaning in general is given by a family of platitudes of the sort articulated earlier.

J2. Those platitudes taken together exhibit talk about the meaning of an expression as reifying talk about the potential of the expression to be used to assert, command, ask about, etc. various things.

J3. *So understanding the meanings of expressions is not something that lies behind and is the causal explanatory basis of the ability to use the expressions* to assert, command, ask about, etc. various things. Rather it is constituted by this ability.

J4. So a theory of meaning could be at most a statement of propositions knowledge of which

would enable us to come to acquire the practical ability. But in this regard a translation manual could serve almost as well. Hence the interest of a theory of meaning is minimal and certainly *no interesting issue about objectivity, realism or the relation between the mind and reality can be raised by considering questions about the form of a theory of meaning* (Johnston, 38; emphasis added).

J1 is an anti-essentialist, anti-Fregean claim that a meaning theory really just yields facts about meaning, and not deeper facts about thought itself, or metaphysics.

Theories of meaning will not guide our uses of language.

There are many different ways to have meaning, and thus many different theories.

They all just come along for the ride, as we communicate.

We can see in J2 and J3 a line from Wittgenstein through Strawson to the deflationist.

Recall that Strawson criticized Russell for making sentences prior to assertions.

J2 urges that Frege made an error of reifying meanings, an error against which Quine warned when he defended meaningfulness without meaning.

Johnston's claim is that the use of expressions precedes their meanings.

J3 further alleges that the use of expressions constitutes their meaning.

Meaning, rather than guiding use, is a consequence of use.

Lastly, J4 claims that the theory of meaning is independent of any metaphysical theory.

All that a theory of meaning will do is yield some ordinary platitudes about the uses of expressions and sentences.

It can not go beyond those uses, since use is all there is to meaning.

Even if Johnston's characterization of deflationism is clear, it is not an argument.

It seems to me that his argument is sort of Ockhamist.

The Fregean reifies meanings, and uses them to explain communication.

Johnston argues that we can have a meaning theory which satisfies the platitudes, and which neither reifies meanings nor asks them to play a causal role.

He is not opposed to abstract objects, per se.

But, a theory with less potent posited entities is preferable.

The temptation to look to the right-hand sides of these biconditionals [the platitudes] for an analytic reduction of the notion of sentence meaning is easily dissipated. For the right-hand sides taken together just describe various determinate ways of using 'S' to mean that p. So far from offering hope of a reduction of talk of sentence meaning, the platitudes simply show how we can get from 'S' having the potential to be used to mean that p to 'S' meaning that p. It is just a simple paraphrase which gets us to reifying talk about the meaning of 'S' being p. But if this is the conceptual provenance of talk about the meaning of 'S' then we should suspect any attempt to represent grasp of *the meaning of 'S'* as the causal explanatory basis of the ability to use 'S' to assert, command, inquire concerning, etc. p (Johnston, 39).

VII. Question

Is Quine a deflationist about meaning?