Rule-Following and Realism. by Gary Ebbs
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EBBS'S aim is to "come to terms with and move beyond currently entrenched ways of looking at central topics in the philosophy of language and mind" (1). The entrenched perspectives are Metaphysical Realism, the view that "we can make 'objective' assertions only if we can 'grasp' metaphysically independent 'truth conditions'", and Scientific Naturalism, "Quine's view that 'it is within science itself that reality is to be identified and described'" (1). Ebbs intends to replace these with what he calls the "Participant Perspective," from which alone, he says, a satisfactory understanding of our linguistic behavior can be had. His work constitutes, I think, a stimulating and highly original contribution to the field.

In part 1, Ebbs argues that Metaphysical Realism and Scientific Naturalism underlie, respectively, Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following and Quine's thesis of the Indeterminacy of Translation. In different ways, each view prompts the question, What facts make our words mean what they do? While Kripke starts from a rich conception of meaning and reaches the skeptical answer that no facts could endow our words with such meaning, Quine begins with a conception of what facts there are and concludes that these can not determine a unique meaning for our words. Though their arguments differ, Ebbs contends, both "Quine and Kripke view our linguistic behavior from perspectives external to our ordinary linguistic practices" (64). From this common perspective our assertions and judgments "appear as lifeless signs that can be interpreted in a number of different ways" (37). Overcoming these unacceptable answers thus requires, according to Ebbs, abandoning this external perspective altogether.

In part 2, Ebbs locates the current popularity of this external perspective in a rejection of Carnap's analytic/synthetic distinction. On his interpretation, Carnap's view that disagreements can be understood and resolved only from within a shared language precludes an external perspective on one's own language. The power of Quine's charge that no scientific sense can be made of Carnap's key notion of a semantic rule encouraged Scientific Naturalism. And, interpreted as a claim about the metaphysics of truth, Putnam's charge that no sentence is immune from possible disconfirmation gave life to Metaphysical Realism. However, Ebbs argues, a close
reading of the texts shows that Putnam based his charge on features of our actual practices of agreement and disagreement, tacitly assuming a Participant Perspective on our linguistic practices.

In part 3, Ebbs articulates this Participant Perspective by linking his reinter-pretation of Putnam’s charge with Putnam’s, and then Burge’s, arguments for anti-individualism. Ebbs develops a “deflationist” anti-individualism based, not on claims about the metaphysics of truth or meaning, but on careful observation of what Putnam called the “division of linguistic labor.” He ends the book by arguing that viewed from this Participant Perspective, current concerns about self-knowledge are misplaced, Nagel’s metaphysical claims about an Absolute Conception of reality are incoherent, and Kripke’s and Quine’s views on meaning can be satisfactorily denied.

As Ebbs warns, most of the book consists of detailed interpretations of fairly familiar texts. His strategy is to show how the External Perspective emerged out of various misinterpretations and how, properly read, these texts support the Participant Perspective. Part 2, in particular, surveys relatively familiar positions in the debate over analyticity in great detail. The survey is philosophically sophisticated and displays an impressive knowledge of the texts. But one wonders whether its level of detail is really necessary, especially if, as Ebbs contends, the current appeal of the External Perspective is rooted in misinterpretations. For one already committed to that Perspective will not likely be moved by textual arguments alone.

More importantly, though, even if there is a historical link between the debate over analyticity and the External Perspective’s current appeal, the question characteristic of it has independent appeal. All will agree that my words could have meant something other than they do. Had things been different, I might have spoken a different language and had different beliefs. Given this, it seems perfectly natural to wonder what it is about how things are, or were, that explains these contingent facts about me? Raised in this way, the question characteristic of the External Perspective has no direct relation to the notion of analyticity, or to Carnap’s interpretation of it. Indeed, one might have thought that, rather than in emerging out of a commitment to Metaphysical Realism or Scientific Naturalism, it was in trying to answer this question that Kripke and Quine adopted these views. So I am not sure that Ebbs has located the only, or the most important, source of the External Perspective’s appeal.

Ebbs’s notion of a Participant Perspective is elusive. He contrasts it with what he calls the “first person phenomenological” perspective Kripke asumes in his discussion of rule-following (sec. 129). The latter, Ebbs says, “directs our attention to the wrong place, and leads to a distorted picture of what is required for following a rule” (298). But it is not clear whether the Participant Perspective differs in not being “phenomenological” or in not being from the first person. Since, as Ebbs notes, Kripke allows one to
appeal to any fact in answering his question, and so to one’s participation in a linguistic community, the difference can not be in what these perspectives allow one to see. And the Participant Perspective is obscure if it is not meant to be a first-person perspective. Ebbs might have sharpened the contrast by, for instance, discussing from the Participant Perspective the idea, discussed in chapter 1, that one feels guided by the meaning of a word.

Ebbs also contrasts the Participant Perspective with Quine’s naturalistic one (secs. 110–11, 133). Ebbs considers a disagreement among a group of dancers over how to dance the eightsome reel. The dancers cannot agree on a unique description of it, but reach agreement by comparing performances of it. By taking a Participant Perspective on the dance, Ebbs explains, the dancers resolve their disagreement. By contrast, visiting anthropologists, unfamiliar with the dance and relying only on the dancers’ behavior, would not, Ebbs claims, understand either the disagreement or its resolution. Quine’s naturalistic perspective on our linguistic practices is, Ebbs suggests, like the anthropologists’ perspective on the dance. But this analogy does more to highlight the problem Quine has raised, it seems to me, than to resolve it. For one wonders precisely how the anthropologists and dancers differ. Do the dancers know something the anthropologists don’t? If so, is it something the anthropologists can discover by observing the dancer’s behavior? If not, then how did the dancers learn it? Or is the difference one of practical ability? If so, then what is the analogue in the case of language. In either case, how does this difference prevent one from taking an external perspective and asking after its origins?

The most stimulating and impressive sections of the book, in my view, are Ebbs’s discussions that assume the Participant Perspective. In chapter 9, he argues that, seen from the participant perspective, current concerns about how to reconcile self-knowledge and anti-individualism are misplaced. The skeptic, he argues, assumes that from the fact that my words might have meant something other than what I now take them to mean, it follows that they might actually mean something other than what I now take them to mean. But, Ebbs argues, this latter is not a coherent possibility. He concludes chapter 9 by considering Nagel’s claim that obtaining an Absolute Conception of Reality might require concepts that are beyond our ability to grasp. Ebbs agrees that the possibility of error shows that our “understanding of objectivity is not limited by our present substantive beliefs.” But, he argues, our understanding of how we might be mistaken is so limited. “We lose all grip on truth and falsity when we try to imagine a representation completely independent of all our substantive beliefs” (294). These replies are sophisticated and, I think, very promising. Ebbs’s views on these issues, and the notion of a Participant Perspective that informs them, are important and deserve close study.

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