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Reviewed by Cory F. Juhl

Review: Carnap, Quine, and Putnam on Methods of Inquiry, by Gary Ebbs

Cory F. Juhl

Gary Ebbs has published a book of essays on philosophical developments pertaining to Carnap, Quine, and Putnam. The essays collected in this book provide further insights into the views of these three great analytic philosophers, as well as some further elaboration of Ebbs' broadly Quinean views of meaning, truth and reference. The chapters proceed from topics most focused on Carnap, through those in which Quine is the central figure, and finishes with chapters on Putnam. Along the way there are chapters comparing, explaining, and elaborating the methodological views of the three figures. Ebbs presents a sympathetic reconstruction of Carnap, but in the end sides with Quine where the two disagree. Ebbs also believes that Putnam improves on Quine's picture in some ways. Several chapters elucidate how Ebbs finds ways to either better understand Quine's responses to objections, or to improve further on a broadly Quinean picture. According to Ebbs, as he outlines in the introduction, all three figures agree on some Carnapian theses. The four agreed-upon theses are: that we can do no better than start 'in the middle', i.e., with our current best theories and methods for revising them; that none of our current beliefs are unrevisable or guaranteed to be true; that traditional philosophical methods, particularly 'conceptual analysis', should be abandoned in favor of explication; and that a central task of philosophy is to replace problematic but useful terms and theories with new terms and theories that are as clear and pragmatically valuable as those within our clearest and least problematic scientific theories.

Ebbs explains how Quine and Putnam develop the insight that we can, as Carnap proposes, reject 'first philosophy' without Car-

nap's appeal to analyticity or linguistic frameworks. Quine accepts that we can use sentences to make assertions and disagree and revise our beliefs without presupposing that the meanings of our sentences are fixed by semantical rules. In addition, Quine accepts that the Tarskian explications of satisfaction and truth are clearer and more appropriate for 'serious philosophical work' than intuitive or commonsense notions of truth or meaning.

Ebbs then shows how to further develop the Quinean minimalist explications of meaning and truth in a way that incorporates valuable insights of Putnam's, including the theses that there are 'transtheoretical' terms whose references remain the same across radical theoretical changes and that such terms are of fundamental importance to our practices; that an account of rational inquiry must fit with these practices; and that there are statements that can be given up on the basis of experimental results only as a result of radical theoretical innovations, and that such statements are of 'logical and methodological significance, and not mere psychological interest'.

Before saying a bit more about chapters 5, 8, and 10, I will quickly mention the contents of a few other chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 elaborate aspects of Carnap's views and his fundamental methodology. Chapter 3 compares Carnap and Quine on the question of truth by convention and provides a novel account as to how this matter is best understood within the overall dialectic between them. Chapter 6, 'Reading Quine's Claim that Definitional Abbreviations Create Synonymies', defends Quine's view that stipulative definitions for purposes of abbreviation 'creates' synonymies against 'entrenched' attacks from Quine's opponents, according to which such an allowance for stipulated synonymies contradicts Quine's general attacks on synonymy. Chapter 7 considers the question whether first-order logical truth can be defined in purely extensional terms. This chapter, which will be of interest to philosophers of logic and philosophical logicians, considers an objection from Strawson according to which

... The problem is that there is apparently no way to guarantee that the sentences of languages regimented in the pragmatic way that Quine recommends are unambiguous without relying on assumptions about meaning that Quine officially rejects. (156)

Ebbs argues that Quine's response was not satisfactory, but that there is a way to defend Quine's extensional definitions of logical truth without appeal to assumptions that there are meanings that determine extensions. Chapter 9, 'Conditionalization and Conceptual Change: Chalmers in Defense of a Dogma', shows how a Quinean can respond to Chalmers' argument on the basis of Bayesian conditionalization that is intended to undermine a standard Quinean view concerning universal revisability, that any statement is rationally revisable on the basis of evidence. Chalmers argues that there are statements *S* such that no rational revision that preserves the content of *S* can lead to changing one's subjective probability assignment to *S* from high to low. Ebbs' response appeals to:

1. a difference between forms of rational revision, according to which it is sometimes rational to completely revise one's probability assignments, including one's priors, on the basis of theoretical and conceptual innovations; and
2. a difference between types of meaning or content invariance, 'translational' vs. 'conceptual role' invariance.

According to Ebbs, we can come to see that sentences that were accepted prior to an innovation or radical theory change (which are appropriately translated homophonically across the change and so *translationally* content-invariant) were false or improbable, even though the conceptual roles of the sentences or terms are very different prior to the change versus after the change. In chapter 11 on Putnam and the contextual *a priori*, Ebbs suggests a modification to Putnam's characterization and defense of the contextual *a priori*, statements which are such that we don't currently see how they could possibly turn out to be false. Ebbs

argues that we are entitled to accept such statements even if we are unable to cite any reasons in their support or evidence that they are true, but that Putnam's explanations of such entitlements fall prey to objections that Ebbs' alternative approach does not.

I will now say a bit more about three chapters. Chapter 8 concerns a fundamental point in the dialectic between Quineans and their opponents. It concerns whether Quine needs to defend the claim that all statements are revisable, where universal revisability is understood in a particular way. A claim that Quine is widely taken to be committed to defending appeals to Quine's closest surrogate for sameness of meaning, homophonic translatability. The commonly attributed commitment says that for any sentence *S* that we currently accept, there is some possible future theoretical development in which we rationally find ourselves committed to denying *S*, or accepting $\sim S$, *while translating S homophonically across the change*. This commitment might be thought to be required via something like the following exchange: Quine says that any statement can be revised on the basis of new evidence or theoretical innovations, and hence no statement is analytic, where analytic statements are not revisable on the basis of evidence, since they are true solely by virtue of their meanings, independently of any empirical evidence or theoretical innovations. The opponent gives purported examples of analytic statements. The Quinean presents a possible situation in which the corresponding sentences would be taken to be false. The opponent responds that in such situations those sentences would not mean the same thing in the imagined situation that they mean in the current situation. They continue by claiming that it's trivial that any *sentence*, or sequence of words, could be used to assert non-analytic claims, and so in that sense it is also trivial that any sentence is revisable. What the Quinean needs to do in order to convince us, these opponents say, is to show that any sentence can be given up *while meaning the same thing that it did before being given up* or before being re-

jected/disbelieved. The Quinean might then complain that this requirement is question-begging, since the Quinean does not accept meanings. The opponent then reminds the Quinean that they are committed to accepting a kind of surrogate for synonymy, namely, homophonic translation. The Quinean, earlier in the (decades-long) arguments about analyticity and meaning, in order to capture some ordinary distinctions between cases in which we would all agree that someone means something different by a word or sentence than someone else, noted that in such cases Quineans can easily capture what is going on by saying that often the best translation of the word that the one person is using clearly is or is not the homophonic translation. Given that Quineans are already committed to such a distinction, even they should grant that there is a difference between cases in which we should translate words homophonically and cases where we should not. Thus, even the Quinean should accept that there are cases in which a sentence *S* is accepted at one time, and $\sim S$ is accepted at a later time; and in some cases we would take a homophonic translation to be the best one whereas in others we would take a non-homophonic translation to be best. Thus, the opponent might conclude, the Quinean, in order to provide an interesting (non-trivial) and convincing sense in which any sentence *S* can be revised, should agree that this universal revisability claim should be understood in the nontrivial sense that any sentence *S* that is currently accepted is such that in some conceivable situation we could accept $\sim S$, *while translating the words homophonically*.

Ebbs says that he, like many others, thought that this interpretation of the dialectical situation was correct, but eventually came to think that Quine's revisability claim should be understood differently. Ebbs argues that Quine's universal revisability claim should be understood as: 'No statement that we now accept is guaranteed to be part of every scientific theory that we later come to accept' (168). Ebbs argues for this by appealing to various passages in Quine's writings, along with some con-

clusions that it is plausible to think that Quine presupposes as established at various stages of the dialectic. An initial response to Ebbs' proposal might be to complain that 'statement' is insufficiently clear. If we mean 'sentence', then Quine's opponents have granted that principle, but that it is of no interest. Suppose, though, that we imagine a situation in which later theorists point to an earlier accepted sentence and ask themselves, 'Do we still accept that?'. Suppose that they all agree that they would no longer accept that. They might mean something like, 'that sentence *S*, used as they did at that earlier time, cannot be translated as anything that we currently accept'. The question whether there is a homophonic translation of *S* such that they accept either *S* or $\sim S$ might be answered negatively (for both *S* and $\sim S$). In such a case, there would be a sense in which the earlier 'statement' was revised or given up, in that 'it' is no longer accepted to the extent that nothing that they currently accept is taken to be a good translation of *S*. This sort of belief revision would be sufficient for Quine's purposes, even though the situation did not count as a shift to accepting the negation $\sim S$. The details of Ebbs' arguments are difficult to capture in this brief summary. Nevertheless, I hope that I have conveyed both Ebbs' position and a sense in which his proposal might seem more plausible than it might initially appear. To the extent that it can be defended, Ebbs has discovered an interesting Quinean position to defend that is not as strong as the one standardly accepted as one that Quineans must defend. It allows Quineans, Ebbs argues, to remain uncommitted as to the standard attributed commitment involving homophonic translatability across the change. This point is a place where both sides have taken to be at the forefront of the continuing battle, so any progress here is significant.

In chapter 10, 'Truth and Transtheoretical Terms', Ebbs considers Putnam's notion of 'transtheoretical' terms and how Putnam deploys examples of such terms as a way of objecting to Quine's picture of language and theoretical change. Putnam argues that in actual practice, contrary to some commitments of both logi-

cal positivism and also Quine's deflationary approach to truth and reference, theorists who have very different theories often appear to disagree as to the truth of some sentence *S*, or as to whether some object has feature *F*. Putnam thinks that this shows that Quine's deflationary picture of truth and reference is inadequate to understand truth and reference as they are deployed in scientific practice. According to Ebbs, Putnam thinks that our practice with transtheoretical terms undermines Quine's deflationary picture of truth and reference and shows that we require a more substantive account than Quine can provide. Ebbs agrees with Putnam that Quine's picture requires supplementation to deal with transtheoretical terms and statements, but that, contrary to Putnam's conclusion that a 'substantive' account of truth and reference is required, the resulting picture can remain fundamentally deflationary. Ebbs reformulates Putnam's objection to Quine as follows:

Quine's indeterminacy thesis implies that our actual identifications of agreement and disagreement are dependent upon arbitrary choices between equally acceptable translations. . . This undermines our confidence in our actual identifications of agreement and disagreement, and thereby threatens to sever the vital link between our understanding of truth and our actual practices. . . (215)

In response, Ebbs proposes a deflationary view that treats as fundamental our actual practices of identifying agreements and disagreements. He notes that in actual practice, we trust our judgments as to when we are using the same words, when we disagree, when we make assertions, and so on. We do not require, Ebbs argues, an account that justifies this practice or that explains what disagreement is, or what word sameness is, in more fundamental terms. So long as we continue to trust our practical judgments in these matters, we thereby retain a sufficient grip on truth and reference for the purposes of scientific inquiry, according to Ebbs. As I understand Ebbs, he thinks that our competence in the practice of science, including language

competence such as our word identifications and our recognition of assertions and disagreements, is sufficient for our yielding an adequate grasp of truth and reference for the purposes of our scientific investigations. Ebbs does not take himself to have established this deflationary view. Rather, he conceives of his elucidations as attempts to motivate the view by showing us how we can do without more substantive metaphysical accounts of truth and meaning.

Ebbs explains that he formerly thought that use-facts explained meaning, but that reflection on various thought experiments led him to reject his former view that use-facts determine meanings or contents. One argument that may be helpful to sketch briefly for motivating Ebbs' 'no use-basis' view is the one that he presents at length in his earlier book *Truth and Words*. We are asked to imagine two planets with two communities of speakers whose use of 'gold' up to the year 1650 are identical. In 1650, on both planets, (what we call, respectively) platinum and gold are often described as bits of 'gold', leaving aside for the moment whether correctly or incorrectly. Each planet has a duplicate human who is named 'Locke', and Locke holds up a platinum ring and says, 'This ring is made of gold'. On the first of the two planets, shortly after Locke's statements, some mountains containing large quantities of platinum are discovered, and by the time chemistry is developed a couple of centuries later, the word 'gold' has been used indifferently to refer to gold or platinum. On the second of the two planets, the expedition to explore the platinum-laden mountains does not take place due to chance weather events or what have you. By the time that chemistry develops on the second planet a couple of centuries later, most applications of their term 'gold' that are taken to be true apply to gold rather than to platinum. The community on the first planet, including the expert chemists, agree that their word 'gold' indifferently applies to gold and platinum (i.e., what we would call 'gold' and what we would call 'platinum'). They, looking back on Locke's statement in 1650 while holding up

his ring, say that his statement was true. Speakers on the second planet, looking back at their respective Locke's statement, classify it as false. Ebbs argues that standardly accepted considerations pertaining to semantic 'externalism' should lead us to conclude that both communities are correct. Since by stipulation, their respective uses of 'gold' when their respective Lockes made their statements were identical, the extension of the word 'gold' at the time did not depend upon their uses of 'gold' at that time. It would take us too far afield to explain why Ebbs concludes this, including his arguments that future uses don't determine past extensions. But the thought experiment permits him to make a powerful case that there is no use-based account explaining why our words mean or have the extensions that they do. Ebbs' defense of Quinean deflationism against Putnam's attack continues the elucidation of the Quinean picture that Ebbs develops in earlier writings.

The last chapter that I will discuss is chapter 5, 'Quine Gets the Last Word'. For a philosopher who is interested in the debates between Quineans and their opponents, and more generally in understanding how thought and language fit within a broadly naturalistic framework, this chapter is at the core of the matter. In this chapter Ebbs considers two standard, 'entrenched' objections to Quinean views:

1. that without meanings, there is no way to make sense of how we use language (in making assertions, for example); and
2. that Quine's 'naturalized epistemology' is descriptive rather than normative, and so does not provide us with any guidance or justificational basis of the sort that traditional epistemology is taken to provide or is intended to provide.

Ebbs thinks that these two entrenched objections are at root the same, by analogy of course to Quine's claim that the 'two' dogmas of empiricism are at root the same. As Ebbs sees Quine's

minimalism about truth, meaning, and justification, he thinks that we as competent inquirers take ourselves to agree or not, make assertions, and justify our claims satisfactorily or not, and that there is no 'higher' arbiter or basis for justification outside of these practices. We make what are taken to be discoveries and other assertions, provide what we take to be evidence for or against what we take to be assertions, adjudicate what we take to be disagreements about scientific matters, and correct our errors via broadly scientific methods. There need be no general principles that are prior to this practice on which the justification for the practice rests in order for the practice to continue and even thrive. Versions of this response are made to objections by Grice and Strawson, by Kripke, by Searle, and then along the epistemology front by Kim and by Nagel. These are deep waters, and Ebbs attempts to counter all of these objections as at root structurally similar, in that they impose what he and Quine see as unnecessary or spurious additional requirements, but that Quine's opponents take to undermine the minimalist picture that attempts to do without them.

Ebbs repeatedly takes Quine to say that there is no need to posit 'universal, context-independent standards for exercising scientific judgment' (122), or that 'there is no need for a fully general, discipline-independent account' of what it is to be justified (124), or that we should 'abandon the assumption that there are substantive general principles for evaluating and justifying assertions' (126) beyond the ways that we learn to do so by immersion in the practice and becoming a competent member of a discipline. It is unclear, though, what motivates a kind of context-sensitivity in particular, as opposed to, say, a kind of particularism or even a form of agnosticism about such general principles. For example, moral particularists say that we can be competent at making moral judgments in an open-ended class of situations, without requiring these facts or our judgments about them to be backed or justified by general or universal principles, principles that are true in all situations. One way of pursuing

a line broadly similar to Ebbs might be to adopt particularism about judgments concerning truth, reference, disagreement, assertion, or what have you. Particularism is taken by at least some particularists to be compatible with realism about the relevant features that the judgments concern. It is not clear that appeal to domain-specific principles is distinctively motivated, as opposed to a denial that there are any general principles, domain-specific or otherwise. Another available avenue that seems compatible with the core of Ebbs' approach is to simply remain agnostic as to whether there are any universal principles or 'first philosophy'. If the participants trust some principles that are taken to be understood as universal, then that is part of their practice, and might then be taken to be, like Ebbs' basic judgments about truth, assertion, disagreement, etc., part of the 'competence' that actually, practically guides the practitioners. One might retain minimalism not by denying the existence of such principles, but by merely not requiring any such principles for the general picture. It is unclear to me what motivates Ebbs to adopt a strategy of denying universal principles but accepting domain-specific (general within that domain?) principles, as opposed to either adopting particularism on one hand, or (better, it seems to me) to not make general pronouncements from outside the practice as to whether some particular class of constraints must be present. Perhaps Ebbs is simply describing the current situation as he sees it, without intending these features to be required for the broadly deflationist Quinean picture. But the arguments in support of the explanatory minimalism about semantic features, that there is no need for a use-based, or indeed any naturalistic, explanation of extensions, reference, or truth might be granted even in the face of continuing suspicions concerning the 'no first philosophy' plank of Ebbs' and Quine's positions.

It is also unclear whether on Ebbs' view we have rejected 'first philosophy' or have retained it. To the extent that we rely on or trust our reflective judgments as to justification, reasonableness of assertion, or what have you, and do not attempt to base this

trust on empirical evidence, have we thereby engaged in 'first philosophy'? Saying that there is nothing 'over and above' our trust in our own reflective judgments does not yet distinguish Ebbs or Quine from what was supposed to be an opponent such as Thomas Nagel (in his book *The Last Word*, from which the title of chapter 5 presumably originates). Nagel, as I understand him, will grant that we trust and should trust our best reflective judgments as to whether we are justified on some occasion, and say that indeed there is no 'higher' arbiter, including further empirical research. Upon examining Ebbs' picture, which places our trusted judgments as fundamental, I worry that I have a very tenuous grip on what counts as 'inside' the practice versus 'outside' of it in such a way as to clearly discern that Nagel engages in 'first philosophy', whereas Ebbs does not. Relatedly, I remain uncertain whether Ebbs is correct that the 'first philosophy' proponents are motivated by at root the same concerns as the analyticity/meaning proponents. It remains unclear to me whether I can see Quine as a proponent of a kind of first philosophy, such that our best reflective judgments on our inquiries show us that meanings and analytic truths are dispensable to that project. The arguments for dispensing with meanings and analyticity are highly theoretical and require reflective judgment. It is a project of inquiry, for which rational judgments are indispensable, a proponent of first philosophy might claim, and not a mere sequence of psychological or causal reactions. Whether anything Ebbs says requires us to give up the idea of such a difference, so fundamental to Nagelian first philosophy, remains obscure to me.

A final question concerns how Ebbs' proposal that we trust our judgments of sameness of word, of satisfaction, of disagreement, and so on, motivate his 'no account of extension determination' picture as opposed to various substantive accounts. It can seem as though once we allow ourselves to simply trust our judgments in the absence of evidential support, then whatever mythology is in place for scientific practitioners is simply part of what is

trusted, and what accounts for or constitutes the community members' grip on or grasp of truth and satisfaction and related notions. I am unsure what Ebbs would or should say here, but my best guess given my current grip on his perspective is that he will argue against the plausibility of the various inflationary myths embedded within some scientific practices and give arguments that any such myths are unnecessary for a scientific practice that is at least as rich and flourishing.

All in all, the essays in this book provide novel insights along a number of fronts that will be of great interest to a wide range of philosophers of language, mind, logic, and science. Ebbs has written some very interesting and penetrating works on the deepest questions concerning language, thought and world, and this latest work adds to that distinguished collection.

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