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Introduction

Quine and Davidson are among the leading philosophers of the twentieth century, and their current influence on analytic philosophy is second to none. The reason for this judgement is not just that many contemporary philosophers accept their findings. It is first and foremost that they have fundamentally altered the terms of debate within analytic philosophy. Even those who resolutely reject their views often define their own positions in relation to them. No philosopher can afford to ignore them, and their impact is strongly felt in other disciplines, notably linguistics and psychology.

As far as I know, this is the first book devoted to both Quine and Davidson. It is an attempt to elucidate and critically assess their contributions to the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind and metaphysics. I want to make out a case for the following claims:

First, these contributions are best seen in conjunction. Quine provides the acknowledged starting-point for Davidson. Davidson rejects aspects of Quine's position – especially his eliminativism, certain aspects of his extensionalism, his behaviourism and his empiricist invocation of neural stimulations. At the same time, he accepts many of Quine's fundamental claims – notably the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, and his suspicion of the notion of meaning. He also develops other Quinean ideas in powerful and illuminating ways, such as the thought experiment of radical translation, the connection between meaning and communication, and the attack on linguistic conventions.

Secondly, Quine and Davidson can profitably be seen as *logical pragmatists*. They have been influenced by logical positivism on the one hand, and by American pragmatism on the other. What holds together the

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apparently diverse strands of their work is a *philosophical anthropology*, a powerful conception of human beings and of human action. Both hold that human thought and human rationality are embodied in human practice, and especially in linguistic behaviour. For this reason, their philosophical anthropology in turn revolves around a conception of language. Furthermore, this conception of language combines the formal semantics developed by Tarski and Carnap with the pragmatist idea that language is essentially a form of human behaviour. They regard language as a process of communication and interaction, but insist that it can nevertheless be elucidated with the help of abstract logical calculi.

Thirdly, Quine's and Davidson's picture of human practice in general and of linguistic behaviour in particular combines profound insights with serious distortions. The distortions arise partly because of their acceptance of certain orthodoxies of formal semantics, partly because of their pragmatist tendency to reject any distinction between conceptual or philosophical issues and factual or scientific issues, and partly because Davidson occasionally veers from the Scylla of Quine's empiricism to the Charybdis of an excessive rationalism, for example in his principle of charity and in his denial of non-linguistic thought.

Finally, both Quine and Davidson try to accommodate higher phenomena such as meaning and thought within a naturalistic framework. Quine does so by impugning intensional concepts as unclear and non-factual, and by eliminating them from the 'canonical notation' of scientific philosophy. Davidson, because he acknowledges the legitimacy of intensional discourse, perforce does so in a more roundabout manner. He tries to extract ascriptions of thought and meaning from the physical facts he considers to be more fundamental, but in a way that stops short of downright reduction. Intensional notions are not part of the basic vocabulary by which we describe nature, but we are entitled to apply them to sufficiently complex patterns of physical phenomena, such as the sounds and movements of speakers. Though attractive and *prima facie* plausible, both these naturalistic projects are misguided in my view. There is nothing problematic about higher phenomena. They are just as real and factual as those described by the natural sciences, even though they presuppose creatures with a distinctive range of cognitive and linguistic capacities.

My primary concern is with the philosophy of language and its implications for the philosophy of mind, metaphysics and the nature of philosophy. This means that important parts of Quine's and Davidson's work

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will only be discussed in so far as they bear on these central topics. Quine's seminal contributions to formal logic are mentioned only to the extent that they impinge on his philosophical logic. Equally, Davidson's anomalous monism features mainly as part of the background to his brand of naturalism, his discussion of radical interpretation and his reflections on thought and language. Limitations of space have also prevented me from dwelling on the issue of scepticism. Furthermore, I shall ignore certain details. Thus I shall not attempt to cover all of Davidson's attempts to bring recalcitrant idioms of natural languages within the purview of a Tarskian truth-theory, leaving aside, for example, his account of metaphors. I shall also be brief about Quine's behaviourist theory of the onto- and phylogenesis of thought and language. In my view this is the least interesting and durable part of his work. It is largely speculative, these speculations have been forcefully contested by nativists, and to establish the truth of the matter one would have to draw on empirical research beyond the scope of this book.

In recent years there has been a veritable flood of secondary literature on Quine and Davidson, a flood that bears witness to the enormous importance and fecundity of their work. Any attempt to survey all of it would be futile. There are several collections of critical essays, which shed valuable light on Quine's and Davidson's work, especially when they include their responses. However, most of these essays concentrate on specific topics, rather than on general features of their philosophical systems.

There have also been several book-length studies, especially of Quine. Some of them are devoted to specific issues, but others try to present either Quine's or Davidson's work in its entirety, and to bring out the connections between the various parts (Gibson 1982; Hookway 1988 and Orenstein 2002 provide good introductions to Quine; Evnine 1991 does the same for Davidson). However, there is no book on *both* Quine *and* Davidson. Furthermore, the bulk of the secondary literature does not challenge certain basic assumptions of their work, assumptions that have become orthodoxies in post-positivist analytic philosophy. The objections raised in critical articles are sometimes convincing, but they are often scholastic and tend to concern details rather than the overall outlook. Understandably, most of the books have been written by followers with the aim of vindicating either Quine or Davidson.

In my view, by contrast, Quine's and Davidson's arguments are often uncompelling and their conclusions partly mistaken. Some contemporary practitioners believe that the hallmark of analytic philosophy is its

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preoccupation with knockdown arguments. This picture is lopsided. Like Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein, Quine and Davidson are great analytic philosophers, not because they have provided a series of indisputable demonstrations, but because they have questioned deep-seated assumptions in a way that is striking, innovative and illuminating. At the same time, I regard some of the assumptions questioned by Quine and Davidson as both sound and important. In sober philosophizing, we should not abandon intensional concepts, or the distinction between conceptual and factual issues, or the idea of linguistic rules, for instance, without compelling reasons. Quine and Davidson have not provided such reasons, or so I shall argue.

My own thinking on the matters under discussion has been influenced by Wittgenstein. This is no coincidence. At a tactical level, there are interesting similarities between Wittgenstein on the one hand, and our protagonists on the other, for example, between Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following and their discussion of radical translation/interpretation, or in their reactions to the analytic/synthetic distinction. There are also parallels at the strategic level. In strikingly different ways, all three are part of the so-called linguistic turn of analytic philosophy: they ascribe a central philosophical role to language, albeit for different reasons. Furthermore, all three propound conceptions of language and the mind that shun both Platonism and Cartesianism. Linguistic expressions acquire meaning not by being associated with either private mental processes or abstract entities, but by having a certain role within communication. Finally, in all of them there are important pragmatist themes, first and foremost the stress on the philosophical importance of human action. From a bird's-eye view of contemporary philosophy in the English-speaking world, the three may appear comparatively close, at least relative to the revival of traditional metaphysics on the one hand, and the dissolution of philosophy into research programmes in cognitive science and AI on the other.

The differences are equally important. Wittgenstein doggedly repudiates the assimilation of philosophy and science that Quine preaches, even though he does not practise it. He also develops a picture of human language and behaviour that eschews the austere naturalistic and behaviourist tendencies characteristic of Quine and, to a lesser extent, of Davidson. Finally, both of them set great store by the power of formal logic. The later Wittgenstein, by contrast, was sceptical about the philosophical value of logical analysis, notwithstanding the fact that his own *Tractatus* was one of the major inspirations behind formal philosophizing.

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In my view, Wittgenstein's work contains the seeds of powerful objections to important claims in Quine and Davidson. However, I shall not presuppose Wittgensteinian ideas in this book. Even when I use some of them, I try to develop them *ab novo*, out of a discussion of Quine and Davidson. Moreover, other thinkers are equally important to my case. There is an anti-naturalist tradition in analytic philosophy, which refuses to collapse philosophy (logic, semantics, epistemology) into natural science. Its godfathers are Kant, Frege and Wittgenstein, and it includes Carnap, Ryle, Grice, Strawson, Dummett, the later Putnam and contemporary Wittgensteinians. Quine and Davidson pose a powerful challenge to this tradition. In trying to meet that challenge, I also hope to develop afresh some insights of that anti-naturalist tradition.

Questions of inspiration aside, the aim must of course be to criticize Quine and Davidson in a way which is rationally compelling. Ideally, such a critique should be immanent: rather than confront opponents with dogmatic assumptions of one's own, one should point only to internal inconsistencies in their positions. There are limits to such a procedure, especially when one is dealing with extremely sophisticated and resourceful thinkers like Quine and Davidson. Sometimes there is no alternative to resting one's case with assumptions that strike one as plausible. But I shall try to work my way towards fundamental objections by starting out from internal tensions and unclarities. In this way, the book should be of interest even to those who remain unconvinced by my more sweeping criticisms, or to those who would attack Quine and Davidson from a perspective that is more rather than less naturalistic than their own.

On some points, I shall argue, Quine and Davidson are simply wrong. This creates a problem. Being simply wrong is the fate of lesser mortals. Great philosophers instead suffer the indignity of being constantly misunderstood. In this time-honoured tradition, Quine, Davidson and their followers occasionally seem to think that any radical criticism must be based on misunderstanding. The risk of misinterpretation is real. But part of the blame must lie with our protagonists. They have many philosophical virtues. Yet excessive sensitivity to tensions in their own work, whether they be synchronic inconsistencies or diachronic changes of mind, is not one of them. Nor is this to be expected in such original and prolific authors. Commentators who believe that one must never ascribe inconsistent views to an author have, I suspect, never bothered to reread their own writings.

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Austin once remarked: 'There's the bit where you say it, and there's the bit where you take it back' (1962: 2). In the case of our protagonists, the latter bit is often temporally remote from the former, and not advertised as a recantation. Both of them command an attractive philosophical style; indeed, Quine's prose is among the chief glories of analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, their manner of presentation can be confusing. It is often unclear how the various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are meant to fit together. They also have a habit of approaching the same topic from slightly divergent angles, which may leave readers in the lurch over whether any substantial change of mind has taken place.

In such cases it is preferable to focus initially on the original statements, which are straightforward and provocative, and to postpone discussion of subsequent modifications. Philosophers can be assessed not just for what they meant to write or should have written, but also for what they actually did write. Quine and Davidson are justly famous or infamous for views which are both extreme and extremely interesting, for example that the unit of justification is the whole of science, that words have meaning only in the context of a sentence, that there is no difference in principle between logic and physics, that intensional vocabulary has no place in the description of reality, that there is no fact of the matter as to what we mean or refer to by our words, that there is no such thing as language, etc. While it is important that they have modified *some* of these claims, it is equally important to subject the original claims to critical scrutiny. For these claims have exerted a tremendous influence within analytic philosophy and beyond. At the same time, I have tried to do justice to the complexity and development of their positions, and I have provided copious quotes and references, so that readers can judge for themselves.

My ambition is to present and criticize Quine and Davidson in an unassuming and uncluttered manner. The book is aimed mainly at graduate students and professionals. Yet it also aspires to be accessible to undergraduates in their final year who have no prior acquaintance with Quine or Davidson, provided that they are familiar with the predicate calculus.

I am mainly interested in the relation between Quine and Davidson, and in the substantive merits of their positions. For this reason, the chapters are divided not according to author, but according to topic. Some of these topics turn out to be mainly Quinean (ontology, analyticity, indeterminacy), others predominantly Davidsonian (meaning and truth, meaning and understanding, thought and language), and for yet others they both are equally important (truth, radical translation/interpretation).

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The topics are presented in rough chronological order. But there is also a natural progression. After a partly historical introduction (ch. 1), we start out with the ontological and metaphilosophical concerns that first brought Quine to philosophical fame (chs. 2 and 3), and then tackle the concept of truth (ch. 4). This provides the essential background for Quine's and Davidson's account of meaning (ch. 5), which in turn is intimately connected to their discussion of radical translation/interpretation (chs. 6–7). Finally, we consider the implications of that discussion for the nature of linguistic communication (ch. 8) and the relation of thought and language (ch. 9).

Chapter 1, 'Logical pragmatism', sketches the two main sources of Quine's and Davidson's work, logical positivism and American pragmatism, and indicates how they combine to form what I call logical pragmatism. It provides an initial sketch of Quine's naturalism, distinguishing epistemological naturalism, the claim that there is no knowledge outside of natural science, from ontological naturalism, the claim that there is no reality other than that investigated by natural science. This position is contrasted with Davidson's combination of an ontological monism with a conceptual dualism, and with his attempt to extract higher from lower level phenomena. I end by suggesting that both positions revolve around a philosophical anthropology that involves a striking conception of human behaviour in general and of linguistic behaviour in particular.

Chapter 2, entitled 'Ontology', turns to Quine's naturalistic conception of ontology as spelling out and reducing the ontological commitments of science. It defends a version of his standard of ontological admissibility – 'No entity without identity' – while raising various objections to his criterion of ontological commitment, according to which we are committed to all and only those things that feature as values of our objectual quantifications. This criterion of ontological commitment is irredeemably intensional, contrary to Quine's preference for a purely extensional ontology; it wrongly sets aside singular terms and the existential implications of predicates and sentences; it is also wrong in holding that we treat everything that we refer to or quantify over as existent. Such findings lend support to a deflationary approach to ontology, according to which reference to and quantification over abstract objects, 'intensions' included, is harmless, calling for clarification rather than elimination. Finally, I shall argue that Quine's method of logical paraphrase is at best a contribution to conceptual clarification, not to the scientific investigation of reality he seeks to emulate.

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Chapter 3, 'Analyticity, apriority and necessity', tackles the source of Quine's naturalistic conception of ontology, namely his attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction, and his more general claim that from a logical point of view there is no qualitative difference between the empirical propositions of natural science and the allegedly a priori propositions of logic, mathematics and philosophy. Quine undermines many received versions of this distinction, including that of the logical positivists. At the same time, his famous circularity charge against analyticity, namely that it can only be explained through other intensional notions, is itself circular; it assumes what it purports to establish, namely that intensional notions are obscure. Furthermore, one can distinguish between conceptual and factual propositions without subscribing to the dubious idea of 'truth by virtue of meaning' or running foul of Quine's epistemic holism, in so far as the latter is warranted. Ultimately, Quine's attack on analyticity rests on an austere behaviourism which denies that language is structured by rules or conventions; but this rejection of normativity cannot account for logical connections or meaningful discourse. The final section underwrites, if not Quine's specific attacks on modal logic, then at any rate his more general rejection of essentialist metaphysics.

The next chapter is devoted to the topic of truth. Tarski's semantic theory of truth provides the basis not just for Quine's and Davidson's accounts of truth, but also for Davidson's whole philosophy of language, and with it for the formal semantics that has come to dominate analytic philosophy. It is customary to regard Davidson's discussion of truth as a mere prolegomenon to his theory of meaning. But while meaning is Davidson's ultimate concern, he has recently devoted a lot of space to truth in its own right. Together with Quine's treatment, these remarks form an important topic, and one which I hope to elucidate more thoroughly than previous secondary literature.

I first introduce Tarski's semantic theory and its reception by Quine and Davidson. I further argue that as an account of truth the semantic theory suffers from even greater limitations than they have been willing to admit, yet without subscribing to Davidson's recent claim that the concept of truth is so basic as to be indefinable. The sequel attacks an idea shared by all three, namely that the bearers of truth and falsehood are sentences, while at the same time defending Davidson's neo-pragmatist claim that the notion of truth is essentially linked to human activity. Next, I applaud their twofold – although by no means unequivocal – repudiation of both correspondence and epistemic theories. I end by arguing against Davidson

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that the proper moral is a minimalist account of truth, though not the one implicit in Quine's disquotational theory.

Chapter 5, 'Meaning and truth', briefly discusses Quine's approach to reference, meaning and use, as well as his contextualist claim that sentences rather than words are the primary vehicles of meaning. It then moves on to Davidson's project of a theory of meaning for natural languages, and his thesis that such a theory is furnished by a Tarskian truth-theory. I acknowledge that there is a connection between meaning and truth-conditions, while also raising several qualms about the way in which Davidson develops this connection. The final section discusses the obstacles to applying a truth-theory to natural languages. I remain sceptical about the attempt to read the predicate calculus into natural languages, and in particular about Davidson's attempt to bring non-declarative sentences within the range of a truth-conditional theory through his paratactic theory of mood.

The next two chapters turn to the topic for which our protagonists are currently best known, namely radical translation (Quine) or radical interpretation (Davidson), that is, the interpretation of a completely unknown language. Quine and Davidson use this heuristic device to ensure that we approach linguistic behaviour from an austere perspective, one which does not presuppose those semantic notions which they regard as problematic. In Quine, this approach is behaviouristic. It is supposed to clinch his attack on intensional notions like analyticity, because it leads to the thesis that translation is indeterminate – incompatible translations can be equally compatible with the semantically relevant facts – and hence to the conclusion that there are no criteria of identity for meanings or intensions. In Davidson, radical interpretation serves the purpose of showing that one can construct a truth-conditional theory of meaning for a natural language without assuming any prior understanding of its speakers.

Chapter 6 'Radical translation and radical interpretation' is devoted to the hermeneutic credentials of these two projects. It argues that neither radical translation nor radical interpretation are feasible methods for translating from scratch. They are either unsuitable to the task, or trade on assumptions that prevent them from being truly radical. I start by introducing radical translation and Quine's famous thesis that it is indeterminate. Next I argue that Quine's behaviourist method cannot even reach the meagre results he countenances, without tacitly relying on hermeneutic methods and intensional notions he officially disowns, not least because the pivotal notion of assent must itself be both *intensional* and *intentional*.

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Davidson tends to accept this point, but he holds on to the idea that we can identify assent without any prior assumptions about the native interpretees (e.g. concerning their perceptual capacities, desires and forms of communication). Instead of assuming that the natives share most of our beliefs, as his principle of charity bids us, we should assume that they share with us certain basic human capacities and propensities. The need to make specific anthropological assumptions counts against the Davidsonian project of deriving interpretations from basic physical data. It can also be invoked against the Quinean indeterminacy thesis.

To do so is the purpose of chapter 7, 'Indeterminacies'. I begin by denying Quine's notorious claim that radical translation 'starts at home', which implies that even utterances of one's own language are subject to indeterminacy. Next I defend the indeterminacy thesis against some *prima facie* plausible objections, namely that it is self-defeating, that it confuses the epistemological question of whether we can identify meanings with the ontological question of whether they exist, and that it rests on a misguided third-person perspective according to which semantic properties must be manifest in behaviour. I for my part attack the indeterminacy thesis by adopting a more realistic approach to translation from scratch, and by questioning its semantic and methodological assumptions. The so-called 'argument from below' for the inscrutability of reference can be blocked by taking into account the common human nature that unites us with the natives, and by abandoning the contextualist dogma that only the properties of whole sentences but not those of their components are semantically relevant. Quine's so-called 'argument from above' can be reduced to a harmless instance of the underdetermination of theory by evidence. Instead of *establishing* that there is no fact of the matter as to what our expressions mean, the indeterminacy thesis *presupposes* that all facts are physical. This physicalist assumption renders Quine's attack on intensional discourse circular once more, and it is inherently dubious.

Chapter 8 looks at the way in which Davidson uses radical interpretation to shed light on 'Meaning and understanding'. It starts out by arguing that the appeal to radical interpretation and its corollaries cannot solve the frequently diagnosed 'extensionality problem', namely of transforming an extensional theory of truth-conditions into a theory of sentence meaning. The next section is devoted to the debate between Dummett and Davidson over whether a theory of meaning should be 'modest'. I side with Dummett in renouncing 'explanatory modesty': the theorems of a theory of meaning must not be disquotational trivialities, but should explain

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