A Champion for Ordinary Language Philosophy:

When Words Are Called For by Avner Baz

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Avner Baz: When *Words Are Called For: A Defense of Ordinary Language Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012.

When Words Are Called For is a much needed defense of Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) as an approach to the resolution of philosophical problems. First, Avner Baz refutes arguments against OLP by critics like Searle, Grice and Soames. Next, he offers a critique of the reliance by analytic philosophers on 'intuitions' about whether or not an analysis of a troublesome philosophical concept, such as 'knowledge', applies to a certain case. Then, he is critical of each side in the debate between contextualists and anti-contextualists when it comes to the analysis of propositional knowledge claims. In doing all of this, Baz is thoroughgoing in his treatment of the literature, careful in his discussion of the views of others, and thoughtful about what he himself is claiming.

Baz employs several effective strategies in his counter-attack on critics of OLP. One attributes questionable assumptions to them, such as that every word and sentence has a meaning that in most cases is what the word or sentence picks out or expresses. Another accuses them of begging the question of whether a word or sentence has a meaning independently of any context of "significant use", when they claim that OLP confuses meaning and use. And another accuses them of attacking a straw man by attributing to OLP a theory of meaning, or of making usage the first and last word when it comes to a philosophical problem.

Today OLP seems little more than an historical curiosity to most philosophy, which explains why the ordinary language philosophers, like

J.L. Austin or Strawson, discussed by Baz flourished half a century ago. Since I know of significant OLP done in the interim, and since I count myself to be an ordinary language philosopher, I am troubled, as Baz is, by the apparent fate of OLP. And, although I understand that OLP is ignored today, except by historians of twentieth century philosophy, like Soames who are critical of it, I am also troubled by the fact that the only contemporary OLP that is to be found in the book is in the philosophizing of Baz himself.

Although Baz does some things that I find problematic, the critics of OLP are in no position to point this out because they do the same things. Baz utilizes questionable terms, such as "meaning" "pick out", and "express" in connection with a "word" or "sentence", but so do the critics of OLP. He is critical of the role the philosopher plays in determining the applicability of an analysis without considering why the analysis is being given, but then the opposition takes for granted the need for it.

However, he says things about OLP (or shows what he thinks it is when he philosophizes) that should stand on their own independently of their rhetorical effectiveness. This is true when he says that, "the appeal in OLP to the ordinary and normal uses of words comes in response to traditional philosophical difficulties" (p. 3). Here the questionable reference to "ordinary and normal uses of words" is supposed to be a correction of the opposition's misconception of OLP. And he does not make clear how traditional epistemological difficulties are somehow to be resolved by the analysis of propositional knowledge – the only difficulties he considers are with supposed applications of the analysis. And, since the only example of contemporary OLP he gives seems to be the example provided by his own philosophizing, if that philosophizing seems problematic, then so does the conception of OLP that he is defending.

Baz can be perceptive in giving a reading to an example, such as the one used by Charles Travis to illustrate epistemological contextualism. Odile is told by Hugo, "who is engrossed in his paper", that he needs milk for his coffee. She replies, "You know where the milk is". However, as Baz points out, Travis has misused his own example: Odile is not making a knowledge claim on behalf of Hugo, she is rebuking him and saying that he should get the milk himself (p. 148).

Baz also is right to criticize Peter Geach's reliance on an artificial example in support of his attack on a non-descriptive analysis of "I know that p".

> I know Smith's Vermeer is a forgery (p). I am no art expert (q). If I know that it is a forgery and I am no art expert, then Smith's Vermeer is a very clumsy forgery (If p and q, then r). So, his Vermeer is a very clumsy forgery. (So, r.)

Geach argues that the instantiation of "p" in the third premise is not offering assurance (or anything else non-descriptive), and so neither is its instantiation in the first one, because otherwise there would be an equivocation. Baz points out that Geach has only shown that we can "plug a sentence" into a valid schema. I would add that Geach is not entitled to conclude anything that applies outside of where that plugging in was done.

However, when Baz insists that the example must be a "stretch of discourse that we clearly and unproblematically understand" (p. 60), his reference to it as "discourse" is puzzling, and so is his assumption that there is anything to understand other than that it instantiates a valid schema. Also questionable is his apparent assumption that what is written on the blackboard or logic textbook is not the inference itself, but something that is being used to instantiate it.

When Baz tries to imagine someone to give the forgery argument, Baz points out that the third premise is false as it stands – if, for example, the speaker had watched the forgery being painted, then her knowing that it is a forgery is irrelevant as far as its clumsiness is concerned. And Baz is insightful when he says that we philosophers read its "intended point" into the conditional by thinking of the speaker as saying that (even) he can tell or see that it is a forgery (p. 68). Baz concedes that "I know" sometimes means "even I can tell" can be

cited to argue that the Austinian claim that "know" is commonly and ordinarily as assurance needs to be qualified. However, as Baz points out, it does not show that "I know" (always) is descriptive.

Baz goes on to claim that telling by seeing is (a way of) coming to know, and not of knowing. This distinction reflects the need for subtlety, as he recognizes, but it also requires imagination. Since the forgery is a secret, the forger might ask the speaker how she came to know. "I could tell just by looking". This response seems to question the forger's assumption that, for example, someone gave away the secret. However, Baz has not imagined her saying that she has come to know it or her saying that he does know it; how Baz could know either one by looking at the case from the outside is unclear.

Since Baz warns us about it when he takes up Gettier examples, we can criticize him when he does not imagine how we can have the question at issue or how we might answer it, a crucial move of OLP. However, it is a move that Baz does not seem fully committed to making.

> Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen and that she has replaced it with Pontiac, another American car. Does Bob know or only believe that Jill drives an American car?

He tells us nothing about why the question of what she drives or whether it is American has arisen, or even whether it matters that Gettier introduced the example half a century ago. Instead, Baz imagines that we philosophers ask this question.

And he claims that in asking it we must be seeking "assurance" about Jill's owning an American car, and asking whether Bob "is in a position to offer it". And, Baz argues, that is not something we could be doing. After all, any reader of the example knows that Jill owns a Pontiac and hence an American car, "on the basis of an assurance that in earthly matters only God could provide" (p. 108).

However, a God-like assurance is subject to interpretation, as is true of what the storyteller says. Consider, for example, the talk of what she "drives". Is that different from talk of what she "owns"? Or, consider the talk of Bob's not be aware that the Buick was stolen. "Aren't you aware of what happened to her Buick"? "No", Bob says. And then he is told about the theft. "I saw her driving a Pontiac, but at the time I didn't think it could be her, so I decided that it was someone else". So, Bob was not aware, but knew; or, was not aware and did not know"? Since Baz dismisses the question about whether Bob knew, Baz must not have considered such a possibility.

Significantly, Baz does not have Bob claim to know in the story.

Instead, Baz intervenes and points out that we, who have no part in the story, have no need for assurance about what Jill drives. Baz does go on to consider how someone in the story, "Agent", could count on the assurance being given by Bob, which requires that Agent know the "basis" for any claim to know made by Bob or on his behalf. Here, too, Baz does not try to tell more of the story to make clear what Agent is asking. And, presumably, this is because Baz knows what "know that" is (commonly or ordinarily) used to do, namely, offer assurance.

Earlier, I offered a diagnosis for why Baz fails to do certain things that I think an ordinary language philosopher should do, namely, apply OLP to the terms he uses; investigate why philosophers offer analyses of propositional knowledge claims; and refer to contemporary ordinary language philosophers. My diagnosis was that he fails because he is trying to beat the opposition at its own game.

Another explanation is that OLP may be more difficult to understand and defend than Baz seems to realize. How far do we have to go in asking when what we say as philosophers would actually be said; what are we to do as philosophers that OLP would not find problematic? This is not something we philosophers would want to try to answer, and that may explain why Baz avoids doing ordinary language philosophy in a way that invites the asking of it.

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