COMMENT ON WILFRID SELLARS

Sellars’s theory, as Dennett reconstructs it, is that a hare is a tortoise in rabbit’s clothing. I must say that I’m in somewhat worse shape than Dan. I did not get six papers in advance. I got this one on Tuesday night and I left on Wednesday morning for North Carolina, so this comment is perhaps even more hallucinatory. I wish my hallucinations were as cogent as Dan’s.

Professor Sellars’s paper ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’ was one of the most important papers on the topic in recent decades, and I was happy to see him apply the insights of that paper to the topic of this conference. However, as Dennett has dealt with Sellars’ paper as it touches on the philosophy of mind, I shall not focus on those aspects here, except for this grunt of approval.

The device of dot quotation, although a bit ‘spotty’ at times, seems to me to be a good one. I don’t share Sellars’ nominalism in general. I don’t find quantification over expressions-cum-functions preferable to quantification over plain old sets and properties, and I don’t think that the last paragraph of Sellars’ paper, or rather the next to the last, answers the objections to the adequacy of nominalistic formulations that have appeared in the literature in the last ten years. But the general question of nominalism aside, I am pleased to join the happy chorus of those who don’t think meanings are objects. Not that one couldn’t identify them with objects, just that the identification will be even more arbitrary and unconvincing than, say, the identification of the number 1 with singleton the null set. Moreover, as already pointed out at this conference, identification of meanings with objects can easily give an illusion of uniqueness which the linguistic facts will fail to warrant.

Interpreting ‘A means B’ as ‘“A” means “B”’, with quotes around the B, is unsatisfactory, as Wilfrid points out, because (a) somehow the second just says that two words are synonymous, whereas the first seems to be intended to do a little more than that, and (b), although he didn’t mention it, you run afoul of well-known objections by Church. Interpreting it as
‘A is ‘B’*, where the dots turn B into what he called an illustrative sortal, is a neat solution to the problem, and it does avoid taking meanings as objects of any kind. Moreover, this solution to the problem does not depend on Wilfrid’s own theory of meaning, which will be the main topic of my comment. As long as we have some theory of what it is for a word to have a particular meaning, that is of whatever facts a normal-form description of a meaning of a word A might mention, then we can introduce a sortal ‘A’, for all words (where a word means something like a word plus markers indicating its sense and its dialect or idiolect) with that same normal-form description. The problem of semantics, I like to think, is not what the meaning of a word is, but what the normal-form description of the meaning of a word *should be*.

In summary, I’m happy with avoiding meanings, and names of meanings, if not with nominalism in general. Dot quotation is a fine device for doing this while avoiding Church. But it does not presuppose Professor Sellars’ own ideas about meaning.

One last preliminary point. I’m very happy to see Sellars focus on the notion of word-meaning. I don’t at all agree with Professor Davidson that word-meaning is only accessible as a dubious extrapolation from speakers’ dispositions to use sentences. I think that doctrine has two interpretations, under one of which it is vacuous and under the other of which it is false, and I rather suspect that Professor Davidson has in mind the interpretation that I think is false. I think that ignoring the segmentation of language, as it was ignored yesterday, is a fundamental error and accounts for a certain air of linguistic unreality which some of us noticed about yesterday’s papers, elegant and profound as they were. But this is not the place to discuss this issue, although I hope it will be discussed and thrashed out in some of our discussions. Incidentally, I also agree with Wilfrid’s criticism of Grice’s work.

This marks my areas of agreement with Wilfrid. I have general admiration for his philosophy of mind, agreement with a restricted nominalism, nominalism with respect to meanings. I’m in agreement on the legitimacy and importance of the notion of word-meaning. In the rest of this talk I want to explore one disagreement which may be productive. This is a disagreement over the conception of meaning.

This conception, which is sketched out on pages 421–6 of Wilfrid’s talk, is the conception of meaning as determined by a battery of rules. On page