

FOREWORD

Philosophy is a dirty job. Cleaning up the confusions and obstinate misunderstandings of less philosophically astute folks would be hard enough without having to contend with all the dust kicked up by the efforts of other philosophers, vying with each other to do the same job better. Then there is the relentless tug of received opinion, creating “fixed points” that are better ignored – if only you could persuade others of this. In this churning melee of would-be conceptual cleansers, Ruth Garrett Millikan stands out, quite literally, as a calm, resolute, resourceful defender and developer of a growing family of insights – the Millikan vision, you might call it – that puts a surprisingly large number of contentious and utterly central issues in a better light: How can our words have meanings? How can our brains represent the world? How can knowledge be acquired in perception and passed on in communication?

This volume reveals the range and power of her vision, while also highlighting just how difficult it is to keep the alluring misconceptions at bay. Millikan’s “take” on the issues is typically so orthogonal to the prevailing presumptions that she has had to devise a special vocabulary to keep her readers from falling back into the bad habits of thought she is exposing: *Normal* (with its capital N) and *proper functions* and the *concept/conception* distinction, to name some key examples. Some of these innovations have worked better than others, and she has revised Millikanese over the years to deal with the most persistent miscommunications. (We can expect more improvements in the future. Her much-misunderstood use of the term *empirical concept* may soon be replaced by a neologism: *unicept*. Stay tuned.)

There is nothing new about philosophers insisting on creating proprietary idiolects – think of Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger – but unlike some of the others, she takes on the burden of *explaining* why her innovations are good moves, instead of simply *brandishing* them, as philosophers often do, leaving the task of comprehension as an exercise for the uninitiated. This constructive spirit is well exhibited in the essays here and especially in Millikan’s responses, but one can hear a few echoes of the ferocious reactions her work triggered in the early days. I recall all too well the colossally rude dismissiveness she encountered in some quarters when she first presented her revolutionary arguments, so I particularly relish my role here in setting the stage for her vindication. On the strength of

this volume I would say that she has finally succeeded in domesticating her critics, always setting a good example of how to conduct oneself in discussion.

I have often told the tale of how I came to learn of Ruth and her work, and I gather the tale has taken on a life of its own, as retold tales do, with mutations and embellishments – including some of my own, I now see – so this is a good place to try to set down the unvarnished truth, as I reconstruct it thanks to the fact that my correspondence over the years now resides, alphabetized in yearly cartons, in Tufts’ library. It was short work, recently, for an archivist to extract all my early correspondence with Ruth, from her very first letter of February 12, 1979:

Dear Professor Dennett:

Enclosed is a manuscript completed just before reading your ... *Brainstorms*. Both my colleagues here at Connecticut and I had considered this paper of mine to be hopelessly maverick.... But the orientation is strikingly like that of *Brainstorms*, certainly if you contrast it with current approaches in the philosophy of language.... My view of representations has a different slant from yours. I am not sure *how* different in the end, but would be immensely pleased to have your view of the matter....

Sincerely,
Ruth Garrett Millikan

Hopelessly maverick, but strikingly like my own orientation? I was not sure I wanted to give this unsolicited manuscript from an unknown author so much as a skim. It could well be an unintended *reductio ad absurdum* or parody – the line is sometimes hard to draw – of my work. The letter and manuscript had been forwarded to me in Oxford, where I was spending a sabbatical, so months had passed in those pre-email days, but skim it I eventually did, and wrote back in May, apologizing for not doing it justice because of deadlines I faced: “I could easily see the convergence in our work that prompted you to write, and my initial reaction is that your fundamental idea about the evolution of linguistic features is perfectly plausible and well worth pursuing.” Not much encouragement, I now see, but enough, thank goodness, to keep me on her mailing list. Her swift reply revealed that the “warm response” of Philip Pettit, who was visiting at UConn then, “has encouraged me that it may be of some value.” Good eye, Philip! Soon (October 25, 1979) she began to “inundate” me with drafts. Later, in March, 1980, she reciprocated my cautious blessing of her work by providing a much needed boost to me, after I had sent her a draft of “Beyond Belief,” which was tormenting me that year.

Dear Dan Dennett,

Thank you for the packet of ideas. The argument that *de re* and *de dicto* aren’t two kinds of belief seems to me to be right on and to cut through to what needs to be explained *much* better and more fully than has been done before....

Thank you, Ruth! I needed that. The letter went on for pages of insightful questions and criticisms that preview some of her more recent discussions of the relations between representations and the world they mesh with. (“Those possible worlds. I sense that you have your doubts too? One trouble with them is that they offer no friction, no resistance,

hence no foothold or ‘constraints’. Are worlds with phlogiston and witches in them possible worlds?”) She ended the letter by urging me *not* to read the manuscript she had recently sent me, of which she was “ashamed,” and especially to ignore her definition of “proper function” therein. She was replacing it with a better version (“medium bulky” – uh-oh) that would soon be sent to me.

The next mailing, in November of 1980, included drafts of the first chapters of a book, “... now (provocatively) titled *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories*.” (The title was, of course, perfect. That’s exactly what the Millikan vision is about.) She added:

I find that I have to rewrite and rewrite and, especially, *expand* before anything that I have to say becomes understandable. Exhausting work! And painful, since I have so much already thought out and drafted that I want to communicate about but that will undoubtedly have to go through a long long series of revisions first.

The bulky chapters began arriving. I read them in the summer of 1981 and thought they were terrific, though in need of further editing. With Ruth’s permission, I sent them to my friend and publisher, Harry Stanton at Bradford Books, MIT Press, urging him to triangulate my enthusiasm with at least two other referees, since maybe I was hopelessly maverick myself, and shouldn’t be trusted. Fred Dretske and Hector-Neri Castañeda were the other philosophers Harry consulted – a wide tripod indeed – and they were equally enthusiastic, so Bradford Books became the home of her landmark book. I did some energetic editorial work on it with her and wrote the foreword. Ruth and I had still never met, or even, I think, talked on the phone. When she learned that we were finally going to meet at an APA division meeting cocktail party, she sent me a note warning me – in case I had been encouraging her over the years under the misapprehension that I was taking a sweet young thing under my arm! – that she was older than I was, a mother with grown children. I had already figured that out; nobody could have written LTOBC without mastering – *overcoming* might be a better term – the literature, and spending years of hard thinking putting the pieces in the right places.

And ever since she built her wonderful Millikan machine, it has proved to be a prodigious generator of further philosophical enlightenment, requiring some maintenance and improvement to be sure, but as robust and extensible as any explanatory system in philosophy. The key to its power lies in its unwavering – and demanding – biological naturalism; she never lets you forget that minds aren’t magic, that they have to have evolved just the way hearts and livers had to evolve. Many would-be naturalists among philosophers of mind and language have underestimated the necessity of seeing these issues from the *reverse engineering* perspective of evolution by natural selection: What do these things have to do to earn their keep, and how could they possibly come to do it?

Just as important, what *needn’t* they do? Much philosophical theorizing attributes stupendous powers to mental events and dispositions that are strictly gratuitous, which is a good thing, since they are almost certainly impossible. I have come to recognize in recent years that perhaps the central revolutionary idea Darwin gave us, his “strange inversion of reasoning” (Dennett 2009), is the idea of *competence without comprehension*. We tend to think – especially if we are philosophers – that competence must *flow from* comprehension,

that first we need to comprehend *in order* to be competent. (“Meaning rationalism” was Millikan’s term for this ubiquitous conviction in LTOBC.) No, it’s the other way around, actually: our comprehension is the product of cascades of semi-comprehending, pseudo-comprehending, uncomprehending competences that we are endowed with, first by natural selection and then by learning and cultural – especially linguistic – redesign.

Perhaps Millikan’s key insight is that our ability to identify and reidentify things and properties in the world, without which we could not acquire the knowledge and comprehension we have, starts with an innate perceptual proclivity to (try to) identify distal things, a competence that we exercise without knowing – or having to know – how or why it works. Upon this evolved foundation the structure of the distal world shapes our empirical concepts, letting us learn what we ought to learn first about the world we live in. As she says, “... the ability to reidentify things that are objectively the same when we encounter them in perception is the most central cognitive ability that we possess” (OCCI, 109), and this ability – having, in her sense, a *concept* of a thing – does not depend on any particular *conception* (definition, intension, mode of presentation, etc.) we may have of it.

As she has insisted, “Failure to account for our capacity to represent individuals in language and thought has been, perhaps, the most serious failing common to contemporary naturalist theories of content” (VOM, 43), and it has been her achievement to repair that failing. The result is not a minor difference in outlook among philosophers of language and mind: either you are with Millikan – you get it, and see that one way or another a brand of “teleofunctionalism” is the only way to make sense of meaning – or you are doomed to recycle the pre-Darwinian fantasies that have continued to beguile so many deep thinkers for more than a century after the *Origin of Species*. Millikan may be the maverick, but the hopelessness lies on the other side of the fence.

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MILLIKAN

AND HER CRITICS

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