Editorial
The Political Turn in Foundational Theories of Meaning

Alex Davies

Department of Philosophy, University of Tartu

This special issue collects papers attempting a political turn in foundational theories of meaning. In the philosophies of mind and language, there has indeed already been a remarkable turn toward the political in recent decades. Think for instance of the literatures on the political dynamics of speech acts, the semantics and pragmatics of slurs, the adequacy of certain words' meanings for (political) purposes and what would be better alternatives. But notice that with the exception of studies of hermeneutical injustice (e.g. Dotson 2012, Fricker 2007, Pohlhaus 2012), and of the invocation of semantic externalism in defence of a particular counter-intuitive theory of gender and race word meanings (Haslanger 2012), these literatures tend to fall on one side of a distinction drawn by Speaks (2019): they are predominantly theories (or fragments of theories) of meaning, in that they describe what the meanings of particular expressions (and in the case of mind, concepts) are—albeit in all of meaning's varieties; content and force, semantic and pragmatic. But on the other side of Speaks' distinction lie *foundational* theories of meaning. These latter theories describe not, which meanings expressions have, but rather, "the facts in virtue of which expressions have the [meanings] that they have."[1] And yet, "the facts in virtue of which expressions have the [meanings] that they have" could themselves have political implications and dynamics and the theories about these facts politically suspect assumptions. What kind of thing might there be to find here?

Corresponding author's address: Alex Davies, Department of Philosophy, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia. Email: alex.stewart.davies@gmail.com.

[1] I have changed Speaks' talk of "semantic contents" to "meanings" because theories of meaning are just as much about pragmatics, conversational dynamics, implicatures, and the rest as they are about the semantic content of expressions. Generally speaking, you cannot successfully defend a semantic hypothesis without fending off, and integrating it with, pragmatic alternatives and partners.

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Think of the phenomenon of semantic deference brought to the attention of the philosophical community by Tyler Burge (1979) and Hilary Putnam (1975). They marshalled evidence and argument for the thesis that some words have the meanings that they do because of deference given to special members of a linguistic community: those special persons have more sway over the content of the speech community's words than all other members of the community. Burge and Putnam (and nigh on everyone else) assumed that, insofar as there are such special persons at all, they are people who deserved it: experts—people in an epistemically superior position with respect to others. But what if these special persons do not in fact occupy such a position? What if they are not *able*, but just the proverbial king?

In a speech given in December 1999, the then president of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves (1999) spoke of the fact that the word "Baltic" (and its translations in languages besides English, and their cognates) had been applied to the Baltics as an outside imposition. The word groups together countries that share little, but which have been, (to speak euphemistically) "handled" by outside powers as a single homogeneous unit. As Ilves noted, "[a] brief excursion into the history of the Baltic idea is useful."

For centuries, a feudal class of Germans (left over from the Northern Crusades of the 12th and 13th Centuries) ruled over the native Estonian and Latvian populations, who functioned as serfs in three provinces: Estland (northern Estonia), Livland (southern Estonia and northern Latvia), and Kurland (western Latvia). This serfdom lasted centuries longer than in Western Europe—right through to the 19th century.

These three provinces began to be referred to as a single unit, viz. as the Baltics, neither because native Estonians and Latvians saw themselves as a single entity, nor because those ruling the provinces saw themselves as similar to one another (on the contrary: they were highly provincial). Rather, the category originally came into use because outsiders noticed the commonality of their predicament (Piirimäe 2017, 59). But as Russian nationalism rose, and as German pride grew under Bismarck's unification, the descendants of the crusaders in the three provinces began to see themselves as a common unit, with common interests and a common identity. They themselves then began enthusiastically using the term to denote themselves. Those who were their serfs, and those who saw the Germans as their oppressors, were, by and large, not those who sought to develop and apply such a category:

> There was an attempt in 1879 by an Estonian journalist Harry Jansen to launch the concept "Baltia" that would unite all three ethnic groups in the provinces (Estonians, Latvians, and Germans), proclaiming that "we are all 'Balts.'" But he was sharply rebuffed both by Germans—who could not imagine sharing political power with peasants—and by more radical Estonian nationalist "awakeners," who refused any coop-

> eration with the historical "oppressors," as the Germans were widely viewed up to World War II. (Piirimäe 2017, 61)

A little later in time, efforts were made within Germany during the first world war to campaign for the annexation of *Baltikum* on the ground that, *despite* the fact that the local people of Estonia and Latvia were Estonians and Latvians, they nonetheless shared a common German culture (Piirimäe 2017, 64). But as before, Estonians and Latvians did not want such an annexation. It would only have meant the empowering of the German lords in the region, rather than Estonians and Latvians themselves.

Similarly, during the Soviet occupation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania the three countries were treated as one and the same for oppressive purposes:

> The Soviet Union applied almost identical policies toward all three states, starting from the ultimatums for military bases in 1939, staged "revolutions" in 1940, the granting of "Soviet republic" status after the incorporation, and ending with mass deportations in the 1940s, as well as collectivization, nationalization, and other Sovietization practices. (Piirimäe 2017, 69)

Thus, a long-term feature of the label "Baltics" (its non-English equivalents, and cognates) has been the imposition of that label by occupiers (either the German feudal class occupying Estonia and Latvia, or the Soviets).[2] The ability of these occupiers to get others to see this part of the world in terms of such a label did not stem from their possession of a sharper eye with which to recognize the self-standing facts concerning states and their boundaries. Rather, their ability to do this quite clearly stemmed from their immense power over the peoples between whom the label does not distinguish, and because it served their (the occupiers') interests to divide this region of the world using the label.

Why do such processes not figure in mainstream theories of "the facts in virtue of which expressions have the [meanings] that they have"? You can draw your own conclusions. I am inclined to think that this has much to do with the broadly comfortable, and relatively homogeneous (U.S.) American existence of those Hilarys and Tylers of philosophical lore, and what is likely,

[2] There have been, and are, periods during which the Baltic label has been embraced by Estonians and Latvians. These periods include: the interwar years when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania sought an alliance with other countries more or less geographically connected to the Baltic sea, an alliance which could withstand the might of Germany and Russia (an attempt which, we now know, failed); the period of resistance in the 1980s that eventually ended with the end of the Soviet occupation and included such things as "the Baltic chain"; and then again, several years later, once the achievements of the three countries became a way to take ownership and reconfigure the Baltic brand away from the immediate Soviet, and the more distant feudal, past.

as a result, to occur to them. Be that as it may, it is this kind of potential that has been neglected and to which the papers in this collection turn their attention.

Alex Davies, Lauris Kaplinski, and Maarja Lepamets "Meta-Semantic Moral Encroachment: Some Experimental Evidence" present experimental evidence that bears upon the truth of a meta-semantic proposal recently put forward by Díaz-León (2016). Díaz-León proposes that the contextual factors that bear upon which content a word has in context include moral and political factors. This, if correct, would suggest that a distinction that has been commonly drawn within the literature on conceptual engineering (and in parallel: semantic engineering) is to some degree false; namely, that distinction between which concepts and word meanings we have and use, and which concepts and meanings we should have and use. Davies, Kaplinksi, and Lepamets find evidence consistent with the proposal but the evidence is only of a weak effect. The effect is not of a size sufficient to warrant the kind of conclusions in aid of which Díaz-León had made the proposal.

Esa Díaz-León "On how to achieve reference to covert social constructions" argues against Ron Mallon's (2017) attempt to show that expressions like "race", "gender" and "sexual orientation" cannot refer to social constructions which are wrongly taken to be biological kinds. Mallon attempts to show that because speakers would be quite generally mistaken about that which they are talking when they use such expressions, standard theories of the meanings of these expressions predict that reference to such constructions is not possible. Díaz-León shows how such theories can indeed permit reference to such constructions by showing that there are more options available to the social constructionist than Mallon considers.

Jeff Engelhardt "Ideal DoLLs as Ideology" addresses precisely the issue raised by "Baltics" described earlier in this introduction: Engelhardt argues that those defending semantic externalist foundational theories of meaning (directly: K. Anthony Appiah, Tyler Burge, Sally Haslanger, and Hilary Putnam) are defending ideal theories that elide the role played by things other than epistemic superiority in the determination of word meaning.

Cathal O'Madagain "Epistemic Injustice at the Conceptual Level: Are We Entitled to Our Own Concepts?" describes a hitherto unconsidered kind of epistemic injustice—one that arises at the level of concepts but which is different in character from hitherto acknowledged forms of epistemic injustice at the conceptual level. Recognition of this kind of epistemic injustice requires acceptance of a thesis that O'Madagain (with Égré) (2019) has defended elsewhere: viz. that the relative quality of a concept compared to another is an objective matter. This allows recognition of epistemic injustice committed not only in episodes of communication but wherever in one's

own thinking one uses concepts where one should have deferred to another knower's concepts.

Joey Pollock "Conceptual engineering and semantic deference" argues that successful ameliorative conceptual projects require eschewing the semantic deference characteristic of semantic externalism. Semantic externalism may seem to offer the possibility of bringing about ameliorative conceptual change in a way that circumvents the intellectual autonomy of those who have the concepts in question. For if externalism is true, then it is possible to change what concepts a person has by changing circumstances of which those who have the concepts are not directly aware. However, Pollock shows that many ameliorative conceptual projects require an understanding of the reasons in favour of the change—if those projects are to be successfully brought to completion. This fact rules out the aforementioned possibility seemingly afforded by semantic externalism: viz. the circumvention of thinkers' intellectual autonomy.

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