Unshadowed Thought, by Charles Travis

Reinaldo Elugardo, University of Oklahoma
Robert J. Stainton, Carleton University

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This is a very poorly written book. It is highly repetitive and verbose. Moreover, despite the repetition, it is fundamentally unclear—both because of unhelpful and unexplained terminology, and because of its distinctively tangled prose. Here is one (not particularly egregious) example of the latter:

The commonsense idea is that when things are as we think, what is thus so is nothing other than what we thus think so; and so what is so (that such-and-such) is what we think (that that). So what we think could do no other than be made so by what in fact makes it so; that such-and-such. (145)

We note these unhappy facts about style not only to warn prospective readers about what they will have to slog through, but also because our remarks on the contents of the book should be read in light of its singular unclarity. In particular, because the book is so hard to understand, we remain quite unsure whether, in the end, we have properly disentangled Travis’s target, or his proposed alternative.

That warning issued, Travis’s stated target apparently has two parts: first, that sentences have truth conditions (and predicates have satisfaction conditions); second, that when someone thinks something, she is related to a particular structured representation that expresses what she thinks (xi). This is big game indeed. Seemingly, the Frege-Montague-Lewis and the Tarski-Davidson traditions in philosophy of language are to be rejected, as is the whole Fodor-style representational theory of mind.

We gather that the two parts of the target come together in the rejection of a single idea: that linguistic expressions, and propositional attitude states, correspond to “shadows,” which is the term that Travis borrows from Ludwig Wit-
“Shadows” would seem, then, to be a very important notion. Oddly, but consistent with the book’s overall lack of clarity, Travis merely drops hints about what shadows are supposed to be, as the book progresses – leaving it to the reader to put the hints together. For purposes of reconstructing his views, however, we have compiled immediately below what seemed to be the key features of shadows. Among other features, shadows: are expressed by expressions; are the intermediaries between signs and facts; don’t need to be interpreted; do not admit of “understandings”; determine which things reasonably “count as” such-and-such; are verified (or falsified) by the facts, without appeal to further factors (for example, disambiguation, linguistic or nonlinguistic context); are not context-sensitive; have their meaning-properties essentially; are meaning-entities (shadows don’t have meanings, they are meanings); are subject to just one way of being counted. Having clarified a bit what they are, is Travis right to reject “shadows” for language and thought? Our view is that he may well be right, at least about many cases—though it’s rather less plausible that no sentence or mental state can express a “shadow,” since ‘The number four is larger than the number two’ doesn’t seem immediately subject to Travis-type concerns. But, we hasten to add, it doesn’t much matter anyway. The reason is that his notion of a “shadow,” once one manages to sort it out, brings so much with it that it is a highly implausible construct. To mention just one reason, it should come as no surprise to anyone that “what reasonably counts as X” (which, for Travis, is far too intimately related to “understandings of X,” “how ’X’ is interpreted,” “what satisfies ’X,'” etc.) will typically be sensitive to many things, including in particular the purposes of the particular agents who will be using the object. (Who will be surprised that what counts as, say, a weapon varies from one context to another?) It is, therefore, thoroughly unshocking that, in many cases, there is nothing expressed by expression types, in a context-insensitive way, that settles for every object whether it counts as such-and-such. (One reason this is unshocking is that there is typically a distinction between being and counting as, and the most a truth-conditional semantics can be asked to do is determine the extension of a predicate—not what “count as” falling under it. More on this below.) Of course, as a result, there isn’t just one context-independent way to count the things that “reasonably count as weapons.” Our reaction is not “We disagree” but rather “So what?” Travis seems to think that the lack of “shadows” bodes ill for truth-conditional semantics. That, as noted, is his stated first target. But it’s not obvious why one would think this: truth-conditional semantics is about the meaning of expression types, not about which items would reasonably count as verifying speech acts involving sentence such-and-such. The content of a speech act is patently an interaction effect that depends on far more than what any sensible person would want to pack into the semantics of the expression type. Granted, there is an initially plausible worry lurking about. As noted, Travis is surely right that “what counts as φ” isn’t settled by expression meaning alone; but, at least
in many cases, being \( \varphi \) and counting as \( \varphi \) might be thought to collapse. This looks plausible, in particular, for patently human-dependent predicates like ‘philosopher’, ‘bargain’, ‘funny’, etc. But then we can mount the following argument for those predicates:

(P1) Expression meaning never determines what counts as \( \varphi \).
(P2) In some cases, being \( \varphi \) is the same as counting as \( \varphi \).
(C) In such cases, expression meaning does not determine which things are \( \varphi \).

Thus, it seems, expression meaning actually fails to yield an extension and counter-extension, at least in many cases. What this argument establishes, however, is (at best) that a context-insensitive bivalent semantics cannot be given for all natural language predicates. It does not threaten the whole Fregean/Davidsonian project. Allow a third truth value—for cases in which the predicate’s application is interest-relative, and the relevant interests aren’t determinate—and the worry is soothed. Thus, while Travis’s first stated target looks like big game (namely, both the entire Fregean and the Davidsonian traditions in philosophy of language), what he actually aims at—and may even hit—is comparatively small potatoes (namely, the idea that expression types themselves inevitably determine “understandings,” “what counts as what,” without help from context).

This disappointment regarding what the target actually turns out to be holds with respect to the second target as well: the representational theory of mind. We started by noting that the book is poorly written in terms of style. It is not well written in another sense as well: the scholarship is far too narrow, being restricted almost exclusively to (over-long) discussions of Oxbridge and Harvard/Princeton philosophers. There is no absolutely no reference to relevant empirical work, nor even any mention of the many recent philosophical proposals about propositional attitudes that, without drawing Travis’s apparently radical conclusions, nevertheless explicitly endorse context sensitivity—for example, Mark Crimmins and John Perry;\(^3\) Richard Larson, Peter Ludlow,\(^4\) and Gabriel Segal;\(^5\) and Mark Richard.\(^6\) The result is that many concrete projects and theories in philosophy of mind or cognitive science are, so far as we can tell, left completely untouched by Travis’s arguments. (Indeed, Travis doesn’t even draw on other deflationary philosophical accounts of thinking that might complement his own views—for example, that of Arthur Collins.)\(^7\)

To sum up, then, because the book is so poorly written, it is very hard to know precisely what Travis is attacking. But, as far as we can tell, it doesn’t much matter whether his attacks succeed, since he himself seems to be stalking a mere shadow. Indeed, it might not be an accident that Travis almost never says whom he is attacking, and almost never quotes any supposed opponent. All of this is disappointing from a philosopher who has written what we consider to be very important works—for example, “On What Is Strictly Speaking True”
and “Annals Of Analysis.” Our take-home message, then, is that readers should study those works, and avoid this one if they possibly can.

REINALDO ELUGARDO and ROBERT J. STAINTON
University of Oklahoma (Elugardo)
Carleton University (Stainton)

Notes
2 For related insightful discussion of asking too much of truth-conditional semantics, see Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore, “Radical Pragmatics versus Truth-Conditional Semantics,” American Philosophical Association, Central Division, Cleveland, Ohio, April 2003.


The unit of metaphor isn’t always a complete sentence; often it is a single word or phrase. In such a case, the word or phrase in question makes a nonstandard, metaphorically determined contribution to the propositional content of the sentence in which it appears, a content whose other ingredients are determined in routine ways by routine recursive procedures of truth-conditional semantics. In this respect, metaphor belongs to semantics. In other respects, it doesn’t belong to semantics at all. To identify what Yeats contributed to the content of his own sentence when he wrote

(1) An aged man is but a paltry thing,

we must know that putting a tattered coat on a stick is one way to make a scarecrow, that scarecrows mimic living things using nonliving materials, that scarecrows often fail to scare crows. Such knowledge isn’t part of linguistic competence; we don’t possess it in virtue of having *tattered, coat*, etc. in our working vocabularies.