• Influences on Ziff’s Views about Semantics
  • Ordinary language philosophy especially as practiced by J. L. Austin
    • "A Plea for Excuses"
    • "Three Ways of Spilling Ink"
  • Linguistics
    • De Saussure’s Structuralism
    • Chomsky’s generative grammar
    • These approaches are hard to combine
• Among my encounters with Paul Ziff
  • He came to one or more philosophy talks at Swarthmore probably 1959-60
    • I remember him objecting to Philippa Foot, that she could not account for a broken knife
    • The era of philosophical gun fighting
    • Experiencing this at Princeton
      • Paul Benacerraf
      • Robert Nozick
  • Relevant background of mine
    • I learned about linguistics and Chomsky at a course taught by Henry Hiz at Penn, summer 1959.
    • As a graduate student at Harvard Philosophy (and especially MIT Linguistics) 1960-63 I studied with great care Ziff’s Semantic Analysis
      • I studied with Chomsky
      • I had a part-time job in Victor Yngve’s Mechanical Translation Lab
      • My first publications argued that a generative grammar did not need transformation rules and could use only phrase structure rules
    • Benacerraf led a seminar on Ziff’s book at Princeton before I arrived
      • Benacerraf and I discussed Ziff’s book after I arrived.
      • We taught a seminar together in philosophy of language
    • I taught a course in generative grammar
      • And have been trying to get a linguistics department at Princeton ever since
  • Ziff published a paper in Foundations of Language, "About What an Adequate Grammar Could Not Do"
    • This was the first article in the first issue, published in 1965
    • I wrote a response, "About What an Adequate Grammar Could Do"
    • In an official Princeton Department of Philosophy photograph, Donald Davidson is joyfully showing me an issue of Foundations of Language that had just arrived containing Paul Ziff’s rejoinder "Some Comments on Mr. Harman’s Confabulations."
  • One central issue was whether the grammar of a language includes the vocabulary.
    • Ziff had seemed to be thinking of a grammar as taking something like the form of grammar that Chomsky was discussing
    • Chomsky’s grammars included the words of the language fragments he was discussing.
    • Ziff argued that grammar should not include words
      • The grammatical representation of these words might included various features
• Among my encounters with Paul Ziff, Ziff published a paper in Foundations of Language, "About What an Adequate Grammar Could Not Do". Ziff argued that grammar should not include words. One reason was that you can know the grammar without knowing all the words of a language. This seems right as a remark about the ordinary notion of grammar. But Chomsky’s notion of grammar was and is a technical use:
  • The grammar of a particular person’s idiolect
  • Or better: an I-grammar
  • An aspect of a particular individual’s mind

• Ziff and I were among the participants at a wonderful several week conference at the Minnesota Center for the Philosophy of Science here in Minneapolis in 1968. Keith Gunderson was the or an organizer. Others attending included (I think)
  • David Lewis
  • Hilary Putnam
  • Zeno Vendler
  • Jerry Fodor
  • Charles Chastain
  • Who else?

• My own presentation began by mentioning several "truisms". Ziff suggested that they were better called "falsisms".
• Needless to say I enjoyed his comments.
• I had a wonderful time with Ziff during those weeks in Minneapolis.
• After that I saw him more or less regularly at APA meetings and later at Chapel Hill.
• I tried to read everything he published.

• Ziff’s contribution to semantics
  • His book, Semantic Analysis
    • He says he had a view about the phrase "good painting" means in English
      • "good" means answering to certain interests
    • He wondered what led him to say this, which became the final chapter of Semantic Analysis
    • Working backward from that he ended up with book

• Method
  • He defended a kind of structuralism for words
    • Consider a particular occurrence of a word in a context
    • Compare what happens if that word is replaced by various other words.

• Deviance
  • We do not have data about what is grammatical or not, we can only have data about whether a given utterance is more or less deviant
  • Falsity is one sort of deviance, but not the only sort
  • Obvious truth is another, calling for construal
    • "Business is business"
  • Deviance comes in degrees
  • Ziff talks about the importance of not having a tin ear
Ziff is anti-metaphysical: seems to think metaphysics always arises from linguistic confusion.

Importance of "coherence"

Some theses:
- Occam's eraser: do not multiply dictionary entries beyond necessity
- Different uses of "know" exemplify not different meanings but different senses of the word.
  - The meaning of a word can be characterized as a set of conditions associated with the word
  - When one uses the word, some subset of these conditions is invoked.
  - The particular subset constitutes the sense of the word in this case

His book, Epistemic Analysis, is concerned with the analysis of knowledge and contains much linguistic discussion.

Chapter 1: Linguistic Preliminaries
- Chapter 2: Actives and Passives
- Chapter 3: Reference
- Chapter 6: Knowledge
- Chapter 7: Knowing How
- Chapter 10: A Position to Know
- Chapter 11: Analysis

Some theses:
- Actives and passives are not always synonymous
- "The" contrasts with "some" rather than "a".
- Distinguish "false" from "not true" or "untrue". "False" involves a factor of deceit.
  - "A false front" vs. "an untrue front"
  - "He is not a true friend" vs. "He is a false friend"

Ziff is anti-metaphysical: seems to think metaphysics always arises from linguistic confusion.

Cf. Carnap?

My Review of Epistemic Analysis
- This brilliant, difficult book is premised on the sensible idea that "the verb 'know' is best conceived of as a single word, with a single fundamental meaning, but a variety of senses" (p. 10). An analysis of "know" must therefore indicate the common meaning exhibited by different senses of "know," as in remarks like 'Jack knows that Alice is here," "Sam knows George," and "Mary knows how to play tennis." Ziff argues that to know something (in any of these senses), one must be in a position to know it, and there are both similarities and differences in what is required to be in such a position depending on which sense of the word is in question. To be in a position to know that Alice is here is to be in a position which facilitates avoidance of error with respect to whether or not Alice is here. To be in a position to know George is to be in a position which facilitates overcoming his privacy and encountering him. To be in a position to know how to play tennis is to be in a position which facilitates concern with the ability and success in acquiring it.
Ziff suggests intriguingly, if obscurely, that coming to know something in any of these senses always involves an increase in "global coherence." What does this mean? For one thing, a speaker's remarks are incoherent if there is no way to identify words in what he is saying, or, although words can be identified, no syntactic structure can be identified, or no meaning can be attached to his remarks. A series of numbers is coherent if the relation between a given number X in the series and the next number Y in the series by virtue of which Y is the next number in the series after X is always the same relation, for example, the next number in the series is the next even number among the natural numbers, or the next number in the series is the next prime number. Other factors that are relevant to coherence include inferential relations, consistency, and completeness.

Now the local coherence of a person's beliefs is not always increased by learning something new. What the person learns may contradict other things the person believes. But Ziff holds that even in such a case there is an increase in global coherence. Where does this added coherence come from? According to Ziff, one source is this: If Jack knows that Alice is here, then Jack would state that Alice is here if Jack were concerned to state the truth with respect to whether Alice was here (in the absence of countervailing factors like Jack's tongue being torn out or his being so psychologically upset by this truth that he refuses to believe that Alice is here). It increases coherence for Jack to have this disposition because it is more coherent to state the truth than not to. "When a statement is true, the truth conditions associated with the statement are identical with a set of conditions that are in fact satisfied. Making a true statement instantiates this identity and thus, in contrast with making a false statement, constitutes an increase in coherence" (p. 123). Ziff argues that, just as truth is more coherent than falsity, existence is more coherent than nonexistence. So, where knowing that P requires that it be true that P, knowing George requires that George exist. (If George dies, I can say I knew George, not that I know George.) Furthermore, according to Ziff, to know George is to have a more coherent conception of the universe than not to know George.

Furthermore, learning to do something clearly increases coherence because, as Ziff observes, such learning is a process in which matters are unified, organized and coordinated. Turning specifically to knowing that P, Ziff asserts that to be in a position to know that P is to be in a position such that any possibility of error with respect to P may safely be discounted. We can assess whether positions are of greater or lesser safety and we have a view as to how much safety is needed. Suppose that K, in position Sk, accepts p and J, in position Sj, accepts not-p. Then Ziff supposes there is an "open set" of conditions 0 such that Sk is safer than Sj if and only if the union of 0 with Sk plus p is more coherent than the union of Sj plus not-p. I take it that the conditions O are conditions we know to be associated with safe positions. These conditions form an "open set" in the sense that they change over time as new risks develop and we learn more about old risks. We learn about what is required by finding out that certain positions led to error. According to Ziff, "if in position Si, I judge that p, but p proves not to be the case, then henceforth Si must be judged an unsafe position" (p. 192). The book is rich with insights about the passive construction in English, reference, hypostasis, evidence, and many other subjects. It is marvelously written, philosophical poetry.

- Let me end by quoting from my report on an early version of Ziff's book on morality
- He has a sharp analytical style, a keen ear, a nose for nonsense, and a delicious writing style that reminds me of Samuel Beckett. In the present manuscript, he is at the top of his
The manuscript develops an original conception of morality, with many interesting criticisms of standard conceptions. It is Ziff’s first extended discussion of ethics, as far as I know. It is true that Semantic Analysis ends with a brilliant discussion of the meaning of the word “good” in English. But until now Ziff’s studies of normative issues have been largely concerned with issues in aesthetics, as in his interesting Antiaesthetics. This manuscript is about ethics and morality, not value or goodness in general. More precisely, it is about a particular morality, namely, Ziff’s own morality, although it is almost entirely about aspects of that moral outlook that a reader is likely to find in his or her own morality.

You will have to excuse me for being totally enthusiastic about the present manuscript. It’s a major work. Ziff is a both a marvellous writer and a brilliant analytical philosopher. The manuscript is very enjoyable to read and highly instructive. I read it twice just for the pleasure of doing so and have learned a great deal from doing so. I know I will learn more in reading and thinking about it again.

The manuscript is full of very interesting insights bearing on contemporary issues in moral philosophy, such as whether it matters when a good thing happens (disputing claims by Rawls, Parfit, and Sidgewick), the principle of utility, fairness (including a conclusive demolition of the argument that the duty to vote rests on a supposed duty of fair play), moral principles, how moral considerations are to be weighed against each other (including a marvellous discussion of the sorts of consideration involved in deciding whether it one is warranted in keeping a particular promise), etc.

The manuscript is not, or not merely, or not really, an academic discussion of current trends in morality; as I said, it offers a highly original approach to the subject. Properly appreciated, it could lead to great changes in how philosophical ethics is done. I hope and expect that the manuscript will interest ordinary readers as well as students of philosophy and their teachers.