EVANS, Gareth (1946-1980)

Gareth Evans (Michael Gareth Justin Evans) was born in London 12 May 1946 and died in London on 10 August 1980. He was educated at Dulwich College (1961-1962) and later at Oxford, where he was heavily influenced by his teacher, P. F. Strawson. In 1963, Evans won the Gladstone Open Scholarship in History at University College, Oxford. In 1965 he passed his PPE (Philosophy, Politics & Economics) exam prelims with distinction and in 1967 he was first in his class in the PPE finals. He won a Senior Scholarship at Christ Church, Oxford. He won a Kennedy Scholarship in 1968, allowing him to spend academic year 1968-1969 in the United States at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley. Evans returned to Oxford where he would be a Fellow from 1969 to 1979. In 1979 Evans was elected to the Wilde Readership in Mental Philosophy. On 2 June 1980 Evans was diagnosed with cancer and on 11 June 1980 he was privately married to Antonia Philips in the University College Hospital.

Evans best known work, the posthumously published *The Varieties of Reference* was an incomplete manuscript at the time of his death and edited by John McDowell. The primary significance of *Varieties* is for the philosophy of language but it has had significance for the philosophy of mind as well. The varieties referred to in the title are varieties of referring expressions, that is, expressions understood as distinct from predicates and quantificational phrases in virtue of their distinct contributions to the semantic values of sentences. The primary semantic value of a referring expression is its referent, the thing it refers to. Following Frege, some philosophers have argued that referring expressions have a sense in addition to a referent, where a sense is conceived of as the mode of presentation of the referent. According to Evans, the two main varieties of referring expressions are those whose semantic values include Fregean senses and those whose semantic values do not include Fregean senses. Proper names, Evans argued, are referring expressions that lack Fregean senses, since they can be understood without any description being associated with the referent in the mind of the speaker or hearer. Referring expressions that have Fregean senses, according to Evans, include demonstratives (“that book”) and indexicals (“I”, “here”). Additional examples of referring expressions with Fregean senses include expressions Evans called “descriptive names”. According to Evans, descriptive names are names that, unlike proper names, can be understood only if one knows some associated description. Evans thought that descriptive names were rare and that examples included names that were stipulated, as in his example “Let us call whoever invented the zip ‘Julius’” (*Varieties* p. 31). Evans thought the key feature that distinguished demonstratives and indexicals on the one hand from descriptive names on the other was that demonstratives and indexicals are, in Evans phrase, Russelian. A Russelian expression is an expression that, if it is empty (if it fails to refer) then it is meaningless. However, in holding that demonstratives and indexicals have Fregean senses, Evans incurs the obligation of saying what those senses are. Evans holds, following Perry, that no description can capture the content of a demonstrative or an indexical. However, whereas Perry saw this as an argument against the positing of
Fregean senses for demonstratives and indexicals, Evans supplies an account of non-descriptive senses. Evans’s quest for non-descriptive senses for demonstratives and indexicals led him to one of his most central and influential views, namely, that there exists such a thing as *non-conceptual content*. Non-conceptual contents are mental representational contents that can be grasped by a subject even though that subject lacks the concepts we would employ in attributing that content. For example, the perceptual state of an infant may represent the presence of an object colored with a certain shade of red, say vermillion, even though the infant is insufficiently sophisticated to have a concept of vermillion.

Only 34 at the time of his death, Evans short life gave rise to remarkable philosophical contributions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford, 1982).


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