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Conventionalism

The daring idea that convention – human decision – lies at the root of so-called necessary truths, on the one hand, and much of empirical science, on the other, reverberates through twentieth-century philosophy, constituting a revolution comparable to Kant's Copernican revolution. *Conventionalism* is the first comprehensive study of this radical turn. One of the conclusions it reaches is that the term 'truth by convention,' widely held to epitomize conventionalism, reflects a misunderstanding that has led to the association of conventionalism with relativism and postmodernism. Conventionalists, this book argues, did not contend that truths can be stipulated, but rather, that stipulations are often confused with truths. Their efforts were thus directed toward disentangling truth and convention, not reducing truth to convention.

Drawing a distinction between two conventionalist theses, the underdetermination of science by empirical fact and the linguistic account of necessity, the book traces these notions back to their origins in Poincaré's geometric conventionalism. It argues, further, that the more ambitious conventionalism became in extending the scope of convention beyond its original application, the more vulnerable it became to the problems that would bring about its demise.

Conventionalism affords a new perspective on twentieth-century philosophy, several major themes of which are shown to arise from engagement with the challenge of conventionalism.

Yemima Ben-Menahem is professor of philosophy at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521826198

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First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Ben-Menahem, Yemima, 1946–
 Conventionalism / Yemima Ben-Menahem.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-82619-5 (hardback)

1. Convention (Philosophy) – History. I. Title.

B809.15.B46 2006

149-dc22 2005014333

ISBN-13 978-0-521-82619-8 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-82619-5 hardback

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For Hanina, who dares to challenge convention

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Preface

The cluster of problems surrounding the notion of convention and its counterpart, the notion of truth, have always been at the very heart of philosophical inquiry. This book examines a relatively recent round in this ongoing discussion, beginning with Poincaré and ending with Quine and the later Wittgenstein. It is only during this period that the notion of convention comes to be associated with an ‘ism,’ a distinct philosophical position. I will focus on the philosophy of science and mathematics, setting aside other realms of philosophy, such as ethics and political theory, in which questions about the role of convention also figure prominently. Although a wide spectrum of positions fall under the rubric “conventionalism,” all explore the scope and limits of epistemic discretion. On the prevailing conception, conventionalism has been taken to extend the scope of discretion to the very stipulation of truth. The thrust of the present study is a critique of this reading.

The various chapters of this book are largely self-contained, but when brought to bear on one another, they provide not only a new understanding of conventionalism, but a reframing of central themes of twentieth-century philosophy.

My debts to teachers, colleagues, students, and others who have written on the aforementioned questions are, of course, numerous. I would like to mention, in particular, Yehuda Elkana, Hilary Putnam, and the late Frank Manuel, who introduced me to the history and philosophy of science; my late physics teacher Ruth Stern, who imparted to her students a feel for the beauty of physics; and my late friends Amos Funkenstein and Mara Beller, who passed away at the peak of their creative careers. I am grateful

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Preface

to those who were kind enough to read and comment on various parts of this book as it developed: Gilead Bar-Elli, Hagit Benbaji, Hanina Ben-Menahem, Meir Buzaglo, Itamar Pitowsky, Hilary Putnam, John Stachel, Mark Steiner, and Judson Webb. Nessa Olshansky-Ashtar, who edited the manuscript, helped in streamlining many of my formulations. I have also benefited from Yves Guttel's help with some of the French texts and from comments by the (anonymous) referees of Cambridge University Press, *Synthese*, and *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*. I thank *Synthese* for permission to reproduce here material originally published in "Explanation and Description: Wittgenstein on Convention," *Synthese* 115 (1998) 99–130 and "Black, White and Gray: Quine on Convention," *Synthese* 146 (2005) 245–282; I thank *BJPS* for permission to reproduce material from "Convention: Poincaré and Some of His Critics," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 52 (2001) 471–513.

Lastly, I owe a debt of love to my late parents, Elizabeth and Joseph Goldschmidt, who taught me the joy of learning; to my children, Shira, Ofra, Yair, and Shlomit, who taught me the joy of motherhood; and to Hanina, who makes life and philosophy so much more enthralling.