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Chapter 7 Meaning and Naming: How Language Bites on to the World

In discussing the Theory of Types in Chapter 6, I explained why Russell declared it meaningless to say that a class either is or is not a member of itself. I believe this was the first time that "meaningless" was so used: aren't the words themselves clearly meaningful? Common sense would agree with Mill and Frege that the meaning of a sentence ought to depend only on the meaning of the words that constitute it; but Russell showed that there may be grammatical sentences, and thus apparently meaningful sentences, without meaning. *For this reason, the distinction between the truth and falsity of a proposition is less basic than the distinction between a significant (true or false) sentence and a meaningless series of words; before considering whether a statement is true, one must first determine if it is meaningful.*

The Meanings of "Meaning"

What does *meaning* mean? At least eight senses may be distinguished:

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1. *Indication*. "These black clouds mean rain."
2. *Cause*. "What do these footprints in the sand mean?"
3. *Effect*. "This means war!"
4. *Intention*. "I meant to stay home and study."
5. *Explanation*. "What does this phrase in *Finnegans Wake* mean?" (This sense is developed in Chapter 10)
8. *Purpose*. "Violence by terrorists is meaningless."
9. *Implication*. "If it rains, that means we won't go."
10. *Significance*. "Does human life have any meaning?"

But this listing does not help us to determine whether a sentence is meaningful or meaningless. The problem is ancient. Socrates jested about whether or not triangles were virtuous; Mill about "abracadabra is a second intention"; Russell about "quadruplicity drinks procrastination"; a whimsical generation at Oxford about "Saturday is in bed." Carnap wanted to rule out as meaningless "This stone is thinking about Vienna," declaring it

no better than "New York is between." Wittgenstein posed this series to illustrate the subtlety of a decline into nonsense: "a new-born baby has no teeth; a goose has no teeth; a blade of grass has no teeth." Where in the following sequence would you say that we cross the border into meaninglessness: the priest hopes for a life after death; so does the boy; the baby; the dog; the clam; the flower; the rock; the inflationary pressures?

The decision clearly involves not logic and language alone, but also science and metaphysics. We can talk meaningfully about the world only if we take into account what the world is like. Aristotle appreciated this problem, and stipulated the following set of categories as defining the range of applicability of a term, or, in other words, as the only ways in which predicates may be meaningfully attributed to any subject:

1. *Substance*. "Socrates is a man."
2. *Quantity*. "He is six feet tall."
3. *Quality*. "He is wise."
4. *Relation*. "He is the teacher of Plato."
5. *Place*. "He is in the marketplace at Athens."
6. *Time*. "He is there in midsummer."

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7. *Action*. "He is talking."
8. *Passion*. "He is being attacked."
9. *Situation or position*. "He is surrounded by his disciples."
10. *State or condition*. "He is barefoot."

The last two categories are omitted in some versions; Aristotle must have decided they were not ultimate and could be analyzed into the others.

Names and Descriptions; Sense and Reference

The basic problem is to clarify the relation of words to things. It is only under certain circumstances that sounds or marks on paper acquire meaning, or refer. *Reference* is how language bites on to the world. It is a distinctively human activity, and, unlike thinking, it is public. The most elementary way in which to refer is to name. *Naming is the direct application of a word to a thing.*

(How many mysterious overtones there are to this linkage between a thing and its name-in mythology, folklore, literature, and our everyday habits. Think of magical spells based on names; the story of Rumpelstiltskin; the unutterable secret name of God; the Holy Name Society; the Sphinx compelling Oedipus to reveal

his name; the angel changing Jacob's name to Israel; a tribe taking the name of its totem; a religious convert assuming a new name. Orthodox Jews will not name a child after any living relative. In an Australian myth, plants and animals did not exist until they were named. We give names to some domestic animals (usually pets) but not to others (usually not chickens). A convict or army recruit is identified by a serial number, not by name. Moby Dick begins, "Call me Ishmael"-the outcast and wanderer! Kafka's *The Trial* is about a man who is being deprived of his humanity: he is called only Joseph K. An old commentary on Genesis 2: 19-20 points out that Adam's naming of the animals was his first action after being created, and it was uniquely human-the angels couldn't do it! In Plato's *Cratylus*, Socrates remarks, "Cratylus is right in saying that names belong to things by nature" and "it is not for every man to give names, but for ... the name-maker, ... of all artisans among men the rarest." Think of the term "proper name!")

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Nothing stands between a thing and its name. That linkage is logically primitive. Like pointing to a thing ("ostensive definition"; see Chapter 19), naming cannot be reduced to, or explained by, a simpler activity. But naming is not the only means by which we can refer to things; we can also use *descriptions*. A name identifies; it is a tag (Mill compared it with the chalk mark made on the door by the Arabian Nights robbers); it does not describe. However, I can refer to "the dog that woke me last night by its barking" without knowing which dog it was; and to "the heavenly body farthest from the earth" without being able to identify it otherwise. We can use different descriptive phrases to refer to the same entity. Benjamin Franklin, for example, can be referred to as "the first Postmaster General of the United States" or as "the inventor of bifocal spectacles." The planet Venus is called both "the evening star" and "the morning star."

Thus, there are two distinct aspects of meaning: the sense of the words (called Sinn by Frege) and the reference, which is what the words point to, or designate (which he called Bedeutung). A name (e.g., "Bert") has no sense, only reference; whereas a description (e.g., "the heavenly body farthest from the earth") may have no known reference, but only sense. Terms such as I, this, now, here have a fixed sense and a constantly changing reference. Such terms are called "indexical" or "egocentric particulars" by Russell, and "token-reflexives" by Reichenbach.

"The rule is, jam tomorrow, and jam yesterday-but never

jam today."

"It must come sometimes to 'jam today,'" Alice objected.

"No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every other day: today isn't any other day, you know."

These two aspects of meaning, *sense* and *reference*, are roughly parallel to the *connotation* and *denotation* of a term (in logical, not literary, usage) and to the *intension* and *extension* of a class. The connotation of "bachelor," for example, is "adult unmarried man"; it is what anything would have to be in order to be a bachelor. The denotation of "bachelor" is all the actual persons you can so designate. Thus, "ghost" has connotation, but no denotation. The connotation of "cordates" is "all creatures with a heart"; the connotation of "renates" is "all creatures with a kidney"; but in fact all creatures with a heart have a kidney, and

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vice versa, so that both terms have the same denotation. Similarly, the intension of the class of bachelors is the definition, or "what you have in mind" by the term; whereas the extension is all the actual bachelors in the world.

Those philosophers who are suspicious of unobservable psychic processes, or unverifiable mental events, or hypostatized meanings subsisting apart from words, question whether there are such things as intensions; that is, whether the phrase "what you have in mind" denotes anything at all. (Intensions are called "guardian angels" by Richard Martin.) Some of these rigorous philosophers are also reluctant to speak of propositions (which are mental entities); they prefer sentences (which are physical—they can be seen and heard). I agree that it makes no sense to speak of propositions that are not embodied in sentences. However, I think we require the term "proposition" to denote what is presupposed by, or common to, different utterances of the same sentence, and different sentences having the same meaning (e.g., "the king is dead," "dead is the king," "*le roi est mort*"). The proposition would, then, be loosely the sense of a sentence. I am not asserting that "meanings" are entities subsisting apart from words (which is what Platonism may assert), nor that meanings may be designated in any way other than by words (or other symbols). But though meanings require words, they are not identical to words (Chapter 19). Therefore, the perennial argument as to whether words refer to things (as Mill claimed) or to our thoughts about things (Locke's position) may be dissolved thus: *words refer to both thoughts and things, because words have both sense and reference.*

Problems of Naming and Meaning

Of course there are problems in this account of naming and meaning. Some problems are relatively trivial. Not everything actually has a unique name, and not every name in fact denotes a unique thing. There are two different writers both named Samuel Butler, and there is one writer named both Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain. What happens when one uses a name in fiction (Mr. Pickwick) or in mythology (Pegasus) or in folklore (Santa Claus)? Do these names refer to beings having some kind of putative

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existence, or hazy reality? No; it is a mistake to think that if a word purports to be a name, then something must exist which it names; these are names in only a Pickwickian or metaphorical sense. Naming and describing may overlap when one uses a name as a description (calling a ruthless conniver "another Stalin") or a description as a name ("El Greco" or "Holy Roman Empire"). Many names did in fact originate as descriptions, and creative writers often coin names in this way ("Oedipus," "Shallow," "Adam Verver"), Sometimes a name and a description practically coalesce, for example, in the case of the painter known to us only as "the Master of the 'Adoration' at Avignon." We know almost nothing about the person named Homer except that he is the author of the Homeric poems. Such issues present no profound problems for logical analysis. The circularity of names and descriptions is not vicious. It is, like the constant process by which dictionary definitions derive from actual usage and in turn influence actual usage, one of the ongoing procedures of using linguistic symbols to organize experience.

A more serious problem is *referential opacity*. There are certain linguistic contexts in which you cannot substitute one name for another name, or one description for another description, even though they refer to the same particular thing. This constraint would seem to play havoc with accepted logical rules. Three of these "opaque" or "oblique" contexts may be illustrated:

- I. In the following pair of propositions the first is true, the second false:
 1. Samuel Clemens adopted the pen name "Mark Twain" to conceal his identity.
 2. Mark Twain adopted the pen name "Mark Twain" to conceal his identity.
- II. Propositions involving "modal" contexts (e.g., possibility,

impossibility, necessity) are opaque, and cause confusion. Thus, propositions 3 and 4 are true, but 5 is false:

3. The number of states in the United States is fifty.
4. Fifty is necessarily less than fifty-one.
5. The number of states in the United States IS necessarily less than fifty-one .

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III. Propositions involving such "intentional" or "psychological" attitudes as believing, hoping, doubting, etc., are referentially opaque. Thus, propositions 6 and 7 are true, but 8 is false:

6. Bert thinks the capital of Oregon is Sacramento.
7. Sacramento is in California.
8. Bert thinks the capital of Oregon is in California.

Or, to take another example, propositions 9 and 10 are true, but 11 is false:

9. Oedipus wanted to marry Jocasta.
10. Jocasta was Oedipus' mother.
11. Oedipus wanted to marry his mother.

In the preceding three referentially opaque contexts, error or confusion results from substitution of one term for another even though both have the same reference.

Also puzzling is the question of reference if you deny that a certain thing exists; for example, if you say that there is no Loch Ness monster, or that there is no such thing as a perpetual-motion machine. Since you must refer to it or think of it in order to deny it, does it not then in some way become a "subsistent entity"? Meinong argued that if we say there is no such thing as a golden mountain, then there is something to which we do refer. One can even make true or false statements regarding this thing; for example, it would be true to say that "it" is golden and false that "it" is silver. But how untidy it would be to clutter up the universe with such dubious reifications! We have noted how metaphysics must avoid this trap (Chapter 1). We are misled here by grammar, just as we would be if we were to take an "imaginary uncle" to be, like a "rich uncle," a kind of uncle. (Other examples of how language may mislead us are presented in Chapter 19.)

Russell's *Theory of Descriptions* dissolved problems arising from this kind of ambiguity, by distinguishing between descriptive phrases and names. "The golden mountain" is a descriptive phrase which has no denotation. "The present Queen of England" and "the present Queen of France" are formally identical phrases; nevertheless, the first has a denotation and the second has not. In

a famous example, Russell analyzed the proposition "Scott is the

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author of *Waverley*" as the conjoint assertion of these three propositions:

1. At least one person wrote *Waverley* (i.e., there is such a book).
2. At most one person wrote *Waverley* (i.e., we may indicate someone as being *the* author).
3. There is nobody who both wrote *Waverley* and is not identical with Scott (i.e., Scott is the only one who wrote *Waverley*).

Thus, the original proposition is not about a person named Scott (as it would be in "Scott is tall"), but rather about the property (having written *Waverley*) which in fact Scott happens to have (he is the one who wrote that book).

I have said that naming and describing are two ways in which language bites on to the world. Note that this distinction corresponds generally to *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description*. You must have direct acquaintance with something in order to pin a name on it, or the name would fail of its purpose. If God had said, after Adam named the cats, dogs, and cows, "There is another animal over at the far end of the garden-what name would you give it?" Adam would no doubt have replied petulantly, "How can I give it a name when I can't even see it?" If you would now like to have a great-grandchild named "Bert," you may indeed reserve that word, but it does not name anything until the child is born. "Neptune" did not become the name of the planet that was presumed to cause the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus until it was actually spotted; "Vulcan," in a supposedly analogous situation, never did become the name of a planet.

Names and descriptions are of course both words, and *a word is a device by which one thing can signify something else. Words are conventional symbols used for the purpose of reference.* They are not, of course, the only conventional symbols. There are also the gestures used and understood by auctioneers, football referees, and dancers; handshakes and other customary greetings; Churchill's "V"; traffic lights; elevator buzzers; such artifacts as the flag, the Crown, and the Cross; the lion as a symbol of courage; Moby Dick as a symbol of evil. Art may be loosely regarded as a symbolic language (Chapter 21) .

There are, in addition to words and other conventional sym-

bols, certain signs that are not purely conventional, but stimulate habits of response in other ways. Peirce includes in his general theory of signs what he calls the *icon* and the *index*. The icon refers to something by looking a little like it. Thus, a photograph, a waxwork, and a road map are icons. The index is causally connected with what it refers to. Thus, smoke is a sign of fire; clouds are a sign of rain; a boulder on a hill is a sign of a glacier; a scar is a sign of an injury; footprints are the sign of an animal.

Contemporary Theories of Meaning

A major impetus in twentieth-century philosophy has been linguistic: to clarify thought by clarifying language. How many hopeless tangles result from the careless or wanton use of words! What can F. H. Bradley possibly have meant by "the Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress"? or Hegel by "Being and nothing are one and the same"? or Heidegger by "the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation ... the Nothing itself nothings"?

Philosophers, however, are not the only offenders. Scientists speak of the *elan vital*, of *absolute space*, of the *libido*, of the *racial unconscious*, and of the *group mind*. These concepts purport to explain various phenomena; but the terms have no clear denotation or extension; no way appears whereby to correlate them unambiguously with what can be observed. Ernst Mach was suspicious of even such terms in physics as *atom*, *ether*, and *magnetic field*.

There has been a widespread disinclination to regard a term as meaningful unless one could specify exactly what facts it entailed, or what actions would verify its use. In Dewey's phrase, "the application of symbols to things is the cashing of promissory notes." Peirce, in a famous definition, prescribed a long list of operations that

tells you what the word "lithium" denotes by prescribing what you are to do in order to gain a perceptual acquaintance with the object of the word ... what a thing means is simply what habits it involves ... there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference in practice.

P. W. Bridgman, startled by Relativity Theory to discover that

the phrase "two simultaneous events" is literally without meaning, argued for operationalism; that is, that the meaning of a term is a set of operations. F. C. S. Schiller held that the meaning of a term is not a mental entity, but rather the ways in which it is used. Schlick set the program for the logical empiricists and positivists:

Whenever we ask about a sentence, "what does it mean?", what we expect is instruction as to the circumstances in which the sentence is to be used ... the conditions under which the sentence will form a true proposition, and of those which will make it false The meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification.

But, alas, the attempts by operationalists, empiricists, positivists, and pragmatists to connect meanings securely with actions cannot be deemed successful. Just as meanings are not the same things as words, so meanings are not the same things as operations or methods or uses. Schlick's identification of meaning with verification also goes too far. There is no way to verify certain kinds of propositions, such as those concerning the remote past ("It snowed in Manhattan on January 6, 1092"-there are no records), or the remote future ("Stars will continue to shine after all life is extinct"-who will do the verifying?), or types ("The lion is fierce"-you may study any number of individual lions, but not "the lion") , or some kinds of feelings ("She secretly loves him" -if the loving is secret, it cannot be verified), or things that do not yet exist ("Inventions nobody has thought of might solve the energy crisis") . But do these propositions then have no meaning?

Nevertheless, the philosophical legacy, or residue, of these twentieth-century empiricist movements, despite their partial failure, is a caution which must never be disregarded. We reach out to cope with the world in many and complex ways: in names and descriptions, in sense and reference, in signs, symbols, words, and gestures, in thinking and in acting. All of these modes bear on the concept of "meaning." And no future philosopher will ever be free to ignore such demands as, What exactly do you mean? How, precisely, do you know? What conceivable turn of events would verify what you say or be incompatible with it?