

THE CONCEPT OF MEANING

Meaning can be studied by scientists as well as by philosophers. Different sciences such as linguistics, comparative philology, cultural anthropology and psychology can contribute to the study of meaning as philosophy does. But a philosophical study of meaning is different from a scientific one. When a comparative philologist or a linguist studies meaning he asks such questions : how do words acquire meaning; how do words shed their old meanings and acquire new ones ? If he is concerned with preparing an unilingual dictionary he mentions the current use of words and if he is concerned either with a bilingual or with a multilingual dictionary he supplies the cognate words of the language in question. Though this sort of activity of dictionary making is merely the activity of translating one word into another or explaining one word by a different word of the same language, yet we do say that dictionaries give us the meaning of words. The psychologists can study such aspects of meaning as, how do human beings learn or forget the meaning of expressions and what is the psychophysical process involved in learning the same. The cultural anthropologists seek to find out the relationship between the cultural tradition and the meaning of linguistic expressions. To a cultural anthropologist the meaning of the sanskrit word Chhātra (student) as one who hides the faults of one's own teacher bespeaks the intimate relationship between a student and a teacher in ancient India. A philosopher does neither of the afore-mentioned things in his study of meaning. But this is not to say that a philosophical study of meaning underestimates the scientific study of it.

The philosopher, in this connection can be compared with an economist who does not tell us what is the price of different commodities as a shop keeper tells us but simply tells us what is meant by saying that commodities sell at different price.

The philosopher asks such questions as what is it for an expression to be meaningful. This mode of speech may give rise to the feeling that the philosopher asks the same sort of question as a grammarian asks with regard to the meaning of expressions. To a grammarian, an expression is meaningful if it conforms to the formal rules of grammar. But this way of saying is very often vague and misleading because the sentence, 'Saturday is in bed' though conforms to the formal rules of grammar yet is not meaningful. If we stick to the grammarian's definition of meaning we may be misled into postulating phantastic entities like "Saturday". In fact, the criterion of meaningfulness employed by the grammarians is not only vague but also inadequate to account for the multifarious functions of language. The philosopher, when he studies the concept of meaning does not reject the grammarian's criterion of meaning as useless and unnecessary but seeks to explore whether this criterion of meaning is adequate, self-complete and sound and if pushed to its logical end can be shown to be free from absurdities and contradictions. Moreover, under the concept of meaning the philosopher can explore and analyse the various "meanings" of the notion of meaning. In fact, a philosopher can exhibit the logical *modus operandi* of "meaning". Hence we say, the philosopher is concerned with the second order talk of "meaning" and not with its first order. To give a first order talk of meaning is to make, as we have said earlier, a scientific study of meaning and to give a second-order talk about meaning is to analyse and explicate the concept of meaning.

In the history of philosophy various attempts have been made in order to explicate the concept of meaning. These attempts have taken either the shape of the referential theory, or of the verificational theory, or of the dispositional theory, or of the use theory. I will not present an expository account of these theories. In what follows, I will raise some of the basic issues and logical difficulties connected with these theories.

The referential theory of meaning either in its extreme form or in its moderate form leads to the absurd fact that meaning could be sour, sweet or bitter. Moreover, if it is taken for granted that meaning of an expression is what it refers to then we have to eliminate a great number of expressions as meaningless for which we cannot find referents. Again, sentences of the type "Lal Bahadur Sastri is dead" will not be meaningful, because in order to be meaningful the sentence "Lal Bahadur Sastri is dead" must have a referent. But of the sentence, "Lal Bahadur Sastri is dead" there is no referent for the simple reason that Sastri is no more. In fact the moment we accept that the meaning of an expression is what it refers to we cannot state the death of animals and loss, destruction, and disappearance of objects.

Again the view that the meaning of an expression is the image it evokes, can be shown not to be free from inconsistency. First, there is no logical guarantee that the sentence, "The horse is brown" will evoke the same image say "M" in me whenever I utter this statement. It is quite possible that there could be imageless thinking and even if there is image-thinking the images may vary from place to place, from person to person and from time to time, depending upon the social and the psychological background of the individual. The theory that it is the mental act or "intending" that makes a sentence meaningful also suffers from the following difficulties. If it is the intending or the mental occurrence that makes sentences meaningful then it will lead to ambiguity of meaning. An expression, say "P" in order to have the same meaning for two persons say A and B, must have been preceded by the same sort of mental act both by A and B. But there is no guarantee that both A and B will have the same sort of mental occurrence by a linguistic expression. In fact, both A and B may have different sorts of mental occurrence even when the same sentence is uttered. Moreover, there is no guarantee that "A" will have the same sort of mental occurrence when the same sentence is uttered at two differen

times or at two different places. Again it can be asked, when does the mental occurrence or intending take place? Does it precede, succeed, or is simultaneous with the utterance of the sentence? Any one of the alternatives lead to absurdity. If it is argued that the mental occurrence precedes the utterance of the sentence the sentence does not carry the same meaning as intended by the speaker, for the act of intending is over before the utterance is made. Again, if it is argued that the mental occurrence or, intending succeeded the utterance of the sentence the sentence could not have the meaning as would be intended by the speaker because the act of intending begins after the utterance of the sentence and it would be ludicrous to say that the sentence does not mean anything when the speaker utters it.

If the mental occurrence is simultaneous in origination with the utterance of the sentence it has to be co-continuous with the utterance of the sentence. If the act of intending ends in the middle point of the utterance of the sentence then the rest of the sentence would cease to have any meaning; but this is absurd. Again the mental occurrence or the act of intending can be explained in terms of meaning rather than vice versa. When an unemployed engineer understands the meaning of the sentences in a piece of advertisement for an administrative job in a firm, he intends accordingly. Here understanding the meaning of the sentence is the causative factor of the act of intending, rather than intending being the causative factor of understanding the meaning. Hence it can be said that the act of intending, if any, is explained and explicable in terms of meaning than meaning being explained in terms of intending.

When the verificationists hold that a proposition is meaningful, if it is verifiable they confuse between the criterion of meaning and the criterion of truth. Verification can be a method of determining the truth-value of a proposition but cannot be a method of determining whether or not a proposition is meaningful. If a

proposition is meaningful only when it is verifiable then one who knows that a particular proposition is meaningful could also know whether or not it is verifiable. But it is quite conceivable that one could know the meaning of a proposition without knowing whether it is verifiable. Moreover, verification is, to some extent dependent upon meaning rather than meaning being dependent upon verification. As for instance, anyone who knows the meaning of the proposition "Ram has stolen the watch", to some extent knows, what can be its method of verification. Here the meaning of the proposition serves as a guideline to verification.

The Stevensonian thesis that meaning is the disposition of linguistic expressions to arouse cognitive or emotive reaction is not also free from defects. On this criterion even meaningless jumble of words can sometimes turn out meaningful. As for instance, the expression Abracadabra can, on certain occasion, be used as a teaser and thus may arouse emotive reaction in the listener. But on this ground it is wrong to say that the expression Abracadabra is meaningful. Moreover, every expression whether meaningful or meaningless is capable of arousing some reaction. Therefore, on this criterion it will be extremely difficult to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless expressions.

With regard to use theory we can say that it has not been precisely stated because the statement, "The meaning of an expression is its use" is very often misleading. The term "use" means very many things. In, "what is the use of taking meat instead of eggs when the former is very costly", the word use means 'utility' and 'necessity'. Again, in "Explosive was first used in India in the battle of Panipat" the word 'use' means 'to employ' or 'to utilize'. Similarly a host of instances could be adduced to show that the term 'use' does not mean one thing. It is not univocal. And its being multivocal sometimes works as a source of confusion. When the use theorists hold that the meaning of an expression is its use they are not saying that the

meaning of an expression is its utility. To say this, would be again falling back upon some form of referential theory of meaning. Wittgenstein perhaps could realize the difficulties involved in the question, "what is the meaning of linguistic expressions"? Hence he held, "...The meaning of a word is its use in the language", because it is sensible to ask the meaning of a particular linguistic expression but it is insensible to ask for the meaning of expressions in general. Historically speaking, various attempts have been made to give reply to the question "what is the meaning of linguistic expression?" and all the replies say, the referential, the verificational and the mental-occurrence theories of meaning have landed in difficulties and have been the fertile source of various types of absurdities. Hence the best method of avoiding the difficulties and absurdities is not to raise the question "what is the meaning of expressions" and to be aware of the fictitious nature of it. Moreover, if Wittgenstein's 'use' be understood in the sense of function and 'role' more things about language could be known than they could have been known had we asked "what is the meaning of linguistic expressions?". For a linguist, every word has some sort of significance or meaning. He takes meaning or significance for granted. But to say that every word has some meaning or significance is, in a way, to say nothing. It is definitionally true that something say 'W' cannot be a word unless it is significant and thereby has got some meaning. A particular language say, 'L' cannot be a language unless it consists of words that are significant and meaningful in some way or the other. In other words, significance and meaningfulness constitute the necessary and the essential conditions of a word. To be a word means to be significant and meaningful. Therefore to say that every word has some meaning is to say nothing. It is to utter an analytical truth i.e. a word is a word.

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NOTE

1. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Tr. G. E. M. Anscombe The Macmillan company, 1968, P. 43.