VI.—THE QUEST FOR MEANINGS

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Philosophers have sought to identify the meaning of a linguistic expression with (1) what the expression refers to (stands for, designates, denotes, connotes), or alternatively with the relation between the expression and its referent (connotation . . .); (2) with the idea(s) it expresses or evokes; (3) with the responses, or dispositions thereto, called out by its utterance, plus, perhaps, the situation in which the utterance occurs. Despite the variety in these attempts, I believe they all run foul of basically the same difficulties. In this paper, I shall be primarily concerned with explaining why they all fail and must fail. But first I want to indicate briefly the two sorts of fatal difficulties which plague all these theories.[1]

First, whatever sort of entity is identified with meaning, there will be meaningful expressions corresponding to which no such entity can be found. Not all words refer to something, nor do all have connotations. What are the referents, or the connotations of 'is', 'although', 'of'? If, under the pressure of a referential theory, we do find something which we are willing to call the referent of 'of'—*e.g.* the relation of possession—it will turn out that we are using 'referent' in a sense quite different from that in which Dwight Eisenhower is the referent of 'the president of the U.S. in 1956'. Again we cannot locate a unique idea corresponding to each meaningful unit in a phrase like 'promote the general welfare'. At least we can do so only by making 'having an idea of welfare' equivalent to 'hearing and understanding "welfare"'; and as so defined talk about ideas can provide no elucidation for talk about meaning. And not all sentences regularly elicit any actual response, or even any disposition to respond. Try a response theory on 'My great grandfather fought at Gettysburg'.

Second, even where such entities can be located they cannot be identified with the meaning of the expression. Thus 'the father of pragmatism' refers to C. S. Peirce, but we can hardly identify the meaning of the phrase with that savant. If we did we should be committed to saying, *e.g.* that the meaning of 'the father of pragmatism' was married twice and often wrote reviews for the *Nation*. Again, we cannot say that the meaning of 'look out'

[1] These difficulties have been more elaborately set out elsewhere. See, *e.g.* Gilbert Ryle, "The Theory of Meaning", in C.A. Mace (ed.), *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century*, New York, 1957.

is identical with such activities as ducking, fending, or falling prone. I sometimes engage in such activities as these, but what would it mean to say that I sometimes engage in the meaning of 'look out'?

The monotony of the fate accorded these diverse theories may well lead us to suspect the whole enterprise of identifying meanings. But what could be wrong with trying to discover what sort of thing a meaning is?

Note that when philosophers attempt to say what a meaning is, they generally do so in the course of trying to make explicit what it is we say about a word when we specify its meaning, *i.e.* in the course of trying to analyse meaning-statements (statements of the form 'Procrastinate' means—'put things off', or 'The meaning of "procrastinate" is—put things off'). The legitimacy of this larger enterprise can hardly be doubted. It is undeniable that we often say what a word means, and that on those occasions we are speaking intelligibly. And if so, it is surely proper to ask for a general account of such statements. Hence the trouble must arise from the fact that philosophers go at this job by seeking to identify meanings. If we can uncover the source of the fascination of this approach, we may be able to discover why the fascination is fatal.

Consider the following statements:

(1) The capital of France is Paris.
(2) The conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra is Eugene Ormanday.
(3) The wife of Henry Luce is Clare Booth.

In all these cases one can profitably proceed in just the way we have found so frustrating with respect to meaning. One can make explicit what we are saying about a country when we give its capital by saying what sort of thing a capital is. This will involve specifying (1) the general category to which it belongs (city), and (2) the sort of relation a member of this category must have to a country if it is to be the capital of that country (contain the main centre of government). Similarly we spell out what we are saying about a man in a statement like (3) when we make explicit that the wife of a man is a (1) woman, who, (2) has entered into a thus far unrevoked marriage contract with that man. It is natural to approach the apparently kindred statement 'The meaning of "procrastinate" is—put things off' in the same way. To spell out what we are saying about the word 'procrastinate' here it would seem that we must specify (1) to what category a meaning belongs and (2) how something of that category must be

related to a word in order to be the meaning of that word.[1] And all the standard theories of meaning aim at doing just this. If we are to understand why such theories invariably collapse we must get beneath the apparent similarities of meaning-statements to statements about capitals and conductors.

For one thing the statements in the above list are all identity statements. In each case we identify the A of B by providing after the ' is ' a name of the entity previously referred to by the definite description; *i.e.* we provide a name of the entity so related to B as to be its A. Superficially it appears that in the same way a meaning-statement provides a name, or other designation, for the entity which is so related to the word in question as to be its meaning. But a closer scrutiny will reveal the impossibility of this construction, and for two reasons which nicely mirror the two sorts of difficulties we saw to be inherent in all meaning theories.

First, it is not true in general that what follows ' is ' in a meaning-statement designates anything at all. Consider the following cases:

The meaning of ' promulgate ' is make known by open declaration.

The meaning of ' auspicious ' is—favourable.

The meaning of ' gradually ' is—bit by bit.

The meaning of ' if ' is—provided that.

What entities are designated by the expressions which follow ' is ' in these sentences? Where do we locate *make known by open declaration* and *bit by bit*? What sorts of things are *favourable* and *provided that*? These questions cannot be answered because they have no sense; and they have no sense because ' make known by open declaration ', ' provided that ', etc., do not have the function of designating anything; they refuse to perform when we try to put them in a referring role. In these cases at least, a meaning-statement does not consist of the identification of some entity which is related to the word as its meaning.

Second, even where what follows ' is ' is a referring expression we cannot construe the meaning-statement as an assertion that the entity referred to is identical with the meaning of the expression in question. Consider: ' The meaning of " courage " is—steadfastness in the face of danger.' ' Steadfastness in the face of danger ' certainly does refer to something, to a certain trait of character, the same trait to which ' courage ' refers. Does it also refer to what ' the meaning of " courage " '

[1] I shall henceforth term this mode of analysis ' hypostatic '.

refers to ? Consider some of the predicates which can be attached to steadfastness in the face of danger : ' the crown of virtue ', ' all too rare in these times ', ' more common among men than women ' (or *vice versa*). None of these predicates can be meaningfully attached to the meaning of ' courage '. Only nonsense results from saying: ' The meaning of " courage " is all too rare in these days.' Conversely none of the predicates which can be attached to the meaning of ' courage '—' easy to grasp ', ' rather vague ', ' been forgotten for many years '—can be sensibly coupled with ' steadfastness in the face of danger '. The trait and the meaning can hardly be identical. And yet it cannot be doubted that the meaning of ' courage ' *is*—steadfastness in the face of danger.

These considerations, though important, fall short of demonstrating the impossibility of a hypostatic analysis of ' meaning '. For, it will be said, even if a meaning-statement does not consist in the *identification* of the entity which is related to an expression as its meaning, still it does consist in saying *something* about that entity. Perhaps it should be analogized to ' The capital of France is gay ' rather than to ' The capital of France is Paris '. The former sentence cannot be as completely analysed as the latter by explaining what a capital is ; for there is another predicate, ' gay ', to be considered. Still, explaining what a capital is will constitute an essential part of the job ; this is necessary for analysing the definite description which has the role of subject. Analogously, even if ' The meaning of " procrastinate " is—put things off ' does not identify the meaning of ' procrastinate ', still if we are to explain what it is this statement is about, we must, it would seem, explain what a meaning is. To meet this challenge we must dig deeper.

There is a class of common nouns, to which ' capital ', ' conductor ', and ' wife ' belong, along with ' dog ', ' tree ', ' phonograph ', ' party ', ' symphony ', ' monarchy ', and many others, to which I propose to apply the term ' entitative '. The defining feature of this class can best be brought out by considering the requirements for understanding such terms. In order to understand an entitative term, ' P ', one must be able to : (1) identify P's, *i.e.* know how to go about determining, with respect to any presented entity, whether or not it is a P ; (2) identify a particular P, *i.e.* know how to go about determining, with respect to a given P, what P it is—whether, *e.g.* it is the same P which was identified on a previous occasion. If anyone lacks these abilities with respect to ' wife ', *e.g.* if he has no idea how to tell whether a presented item is or is not a wife or if, having identified it as a wife, he has no idea how to tell whether or not it is the same wife

that lives next door, then he is not to be trusted with ' wife ' (or wives). We can express this double requirement by saying that to understand an entitative term one must have appropriate criteria of (1) classification and (2) individuation.

Now the interesting point is that ' meaning ' does not belong to this class. One does not learn to talk about the meanings of words by learning how to determine whether a given item is a meaning and if so what meaning. Nor is the possession of such an ability a prerequisite for understanding ' meaning '. One can wield the term correctly—can, *e.g.* accurately specify the meanings of various words and follow such specifications when made by others—and yet be completely at a loss when asked how he tells whether something is a meaning and if so, what meaning. Nor would matters be improved by a shift from theory to practice, *i.e.* by presenting various items—physical objects of various kinds, numbers, qualities, segments of behaviour—and asking of each whether it is a meaning and if so which. Our subject would remain quite baffled.

Then what is involved in understanding ' meaning ' ? As in many such cases we can best tackle this question by ferreting out the conditions under which one would be said not to understand ' meaning '. What would justify our saying this in a particular case? For one thing, if he denied that ' procrastinate ' means put things off, while at the same time using ' procrastinate ' and ' put things off ' in the same way ; or conversely, asserting that ' infant ' means foot soldier, while at the same time refusing to use ' infant ' and ' foot soldier ' in the same way. Again, lack of understanding could justifiably be charged if he assented to my statement that ' procrastinate ' means put things off, but refused to use them in the same way, or denied my statement while going ahead to use them in the same way. This strongly suggests that what learning to talk about meanings of words involves is learning what it is for two words to be used in the same way ; and understanding ' meaning ' is a matter of knowing (in practice) the conditions under which two words have the same use. The elucidation of ' use ', as used here, is a task which lies beyond the limits of this paper. Roughly, when I say that two words have the same use I mean they are inter-substitutable in most sentential contexts without changing the job which is being done by the whole sentence. Thus to say that ' procrastinate ' and ' put things off ' have the same use is to say that, *e.g.* the statement which is normally made by uttering ' You are always procrastinating ' would also normally be made by uttering ' You are always putting things off ', the plea which is normally made by ' Please

don't procrastinate so often' would also normally be made by uttering 'Please don't put things off so often', etc.

It should now be apparent why the hypostatic approach which is so well suited to 'capital' and 'wife', is basically unsuited to the elucidation of 'meaning'. Since 'meaning', unlike 'capital', and 'wife', can be understood and used correctly without knowing how to apply it to given items, its meaning cannot be elucidated by specifying criteria of such applications. If the above suggestion as to what is involved in understanding 'meaning' is correct, then the elucidation will have to proceed by way of specifying the conditions under which two expressions can be said to be used in the same way. I take this to be the beginning of a justification of Wittgenstein's famous slogan, "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use".

Thus far I have been arguing that it is impossible to elucidate 'meaning' by specifying the conditions under which something is the meaning of a given expression. But this would seem to leave open the possibility of making synthetic statements as to what sort of things meanings are and how they are related to the expressions of which they are meanings, however little value such statements might have for the exhibition of the meaning of 'meaning'. But in fact the situation of the hypostatic meaning theorist is much more desperate. What the above considerations really show is that phrases of the form 'the meaning of E' do not have the function of referring to anything at all, or, to put the point in a perhaps misleading way, that there are, in point of logic, no such things as meanings. This conclusion needs both explanation and justification.

A phrase of the form 'the P which ———', *e.g.* 'the book which I am reading', can be used to refer to something only if 'P' is an entitative term, in the sense of 'entitative' set forth above. If such a phrase is to be usable for designating something, the meaning of 'P' cannot leave completely open the conditions under which something can be called a P. If such conditions are not laid down in the meaning of 'P', one could understand 'P', and still be unable to tell whether a given item was a P or not. But that would mean that he was unable to determine what a phrase of the form 'the P which ———' designates. He would be unable to take the first step toward locating the designatum; unless we can tell whether something is a P, we can hardly determine whether it is the particular P designated by a certain phrase.

Here is another way of making essentially the same point. Supposing 'the meaning of E' does refer to something, it seems

impossible to refer to that something otherwise than as a meaning, *i.e.* it seems impossible to find any true identity statements, one term of which is ' the meaning of E ', and the other term a definite description containing some other non-synonymous common noun like ' concept ', ' referent ', or ' response '. We can get another designation for ' the meaning of " procrastinate " ' only if we either replace ' procrastinate ' with a synonym and get ' the meaning of " put things off " ', or replace ' meaning ' with a synonym (if we stipulate one) and get something like, ' the signification of " procrastinate " '. In either case we are still picking out the referent as a meaning. A meaning is parasitic on the expression (s) of which it is the meaning in a way in which a conductor is not parasitic on the orchestra(s) he conducts. The conductor can survive the expiration of his tenure and fail to find another orchestra, and still be located and identified as the self-same individual who once conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra. But there is no way of pursuing a meaning after it has been abandoned by all linguistic expressions, and identifying it by reference to its other activities and entanglements. This impossibility of alternative designations implies that to the question ' To what does " the meaning of procrastinate " refer ? ' we can only answer by saying " to the meaning of ' procrastinate' " or by using some other phrase which involves only synonym substitutions. That is, we are unable to say what it is to which such a phrase refers, except by (essentially) repeating ourselves ; and this hardly counts as specifying a referent. If it did, we could specify a referent for any expression and the notion of referent would lose its point. (To what does ' although ' refer ? To albeit : Or to what is referred to by ' albeit '.) No doubt, what ' the meaning of " procrastinate " ' refers to is ' the meaning of " put things off " ' could be used (eccentrically) to tell someone what ' procrastinate ' means, but that does not mean that it directs us to any referent for the phrase ' the meaning of " procrastinate " ', and still less does it give any insight into the general question what such phrases refer to (what a meaning is). Can we distinguish between (1) not being able, in point of logic, to say what it is to which a phrase refers, and (2) that phrase not referring to anything ? [1]

[1] The reader may be reminded of Frege's difficulties over referring to concepts. (See " On Concept and Object " in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, P. Geach and M. Black, B. Blackwell, Oxford, 1952.) Having distinguished objects of reference from concepts, Frege found himself apparently referring to concepts in the course of saying such things as 'The concept " horse " is a concept easily attained '. In order to avoid admitting that a concept, since referred to, is also an

At this point the hypostatizer will make his last stand. Of course, he will say, the conditions for understanding 'meaning' are radically different from the conditions for understanding 'capital'. After all, meanings are very different from capitals; it is not surprising that the logic of the terms is correspondingly different. A meaning cannot be referred to except as a meaning. But that does not mean it can't be referred to at all, or that there is no such thing. A meaning is a very special sort of entity, so special that it can only be talked about in its own terms. And this fact constitutes no reason for denying its existence.

Is a meaning an entity of a very special sort? Well, as Wisdom says, is a zebra without stripes a zebra? Yes, if you like. Only do not forget that it is *that* sort of zebra. By the same token, if, after all the foregoing, one is still impelled to say that 'the meaning of E' refers to an entity of a very special kind, then well and good; only do not forget in just what way it is special. If we remember that its speciality consists in the fact that there can be no other mode of reference thereto, we shall not be tempted to ask questions like 'What sort of thing is a meaning?' and 'How must something be related to a word to be the meaning of that word?', questions which are answerable only if a meaning can be otherwise designated. Once the nature of its speciality is fully grasped, the force of the admission is dissipated. The whole apparatus of referring expressions, as contrasted with adjectives and common nouns—and their ontological correlates, things or entities, as contrasted with the qualities of things and the kinds to which they belong—is intimately tied up with the possibility of referring to the same entity in alternative ways. The point of using an expression like 'my dog' instead of 'dog', 'this intelligent student' instead of 'intelligent', is that the former member of each pair can be used to pick out something which can also be picked out in other ways, *e.g.* as my pet, or the girl on the front row. It is this overplus, this multiplicity of points of attachment, that gives my dog and this intelligent student their status as entities, and correlatively it is the possibility of functioning in the corresponding identity statements that gives 'my dog' and 'this intelligent student' the character of referring expressions. To say that an expression

object, Frege felt constrained to hold that in a statement like the above one is not talking about a concept, but about an object which "represents" a concept. This implies, among other things, that "the concept 'horse' is not a concept" (p. 46). Of course this "solution" raised more ghosts than it laid. I believe that Frege could have resolved his problems more successfully if he had used something like the treatment of ostensibly referring meaning-phrases presented here.

refers to something, and then to deny that this something can be referred to in any other way, is to take away with the right hand what had been offered by the left. The admission then simply amounts to admitting that 'the meaning of E' is used as a grammatical subject. It is like Henry Ford's famous epigram: "I give my customers a choice of a color—black." To refer to an entity in this way is indistinguishable, except for the grammatical point, from not referring at all. To be sure, everything is what it is and not another thing, but anything which is only what it is, is next to nothing.

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