Big Questions in Philosophy

What is Meaning?

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Overview for today

Why are philosophers interested in meaning?

J.S. Mill – a commonsense view

Frege’s puzzle(s)

Some modern history of philosophy

Further problems

Possible world semantics and rigid designators
Why are philosophers interested in Meaning?

- Philosophers are often interested in *knowledge that* something is case, i.e., propositional knowledge, theoretical knowledge.
- In order to investigate such propositions we need to know how their meaning is constituted.
- Philosophers are also interested in *what follows from what*; logic in the broad sense of valid and rational forms of reasoning.
- Investigating these structures of reasoning involves considering both *formal* logic and the *meaningful content* of propositions.
- In fact, in 20th century analytic philosophy, a number of important philosophical debates have hinged on the nature of meaning.
- In what follows, we will look at some of these debates regarding the nature of meaning.
- We will also look at the philosophical discipline called ‘Semantics’, which is the theory or study of meaning.
A common-sense view

• J. S. Mill put forward the view that the contribution that a name makes to a proposition is its referent.

• For example, the referent of the name ‘Aristotle’ is the man Aristotle, i.e., the object that is the bearer of the name.

• “A non-connotative term is one which signifies a subject only, or an attribute only. A connotative term is one which denotes a subject, and implies an attribute. By a subject is here meant anything which possesses attributes. Thus John, or London, or England, are names which signify a subject only. Whiteness, length, virtue, signify an attribute only. None of these names, therefore, are connotative. But white, long, virtuous, are connotative. The word white, denotes all white things, as snow, paper, the foam of the sea, &c., and implies, or in the language of the schoolmen connotes, the attribute whiteness.”

(A System of Logic, 1843, Bk.I, Ch. I, §5)
Gottlob Frege

• Frege presented some challenges for the Mill’s commonsense view, especially in his paper ‘On Sense and Reference’ (1892).

• He begins with a puzzle about what the equality sign ‘=’ is a relation between in true sentences like ‘a = a’ or ‘a = b’.

  • Two options: Either signs for objects, or the objects for which they are signs.

• This is puzzling because statements like ‘a = a’ are a priori (known independently of experience), while statements like ‘a = b’ might not be.

  • If the only meaning of the terms ‘a’ and ‘b’, is the thing that they stand for, their denotation as Mill said, then it seems like there could be no such difference between the statements ‘a = a’ and ‘a = b’.

• To see this, let’s use the sign ‘d[a]’ to indicate the denotation of the sign in the brackets; that is, ‘d[a]’ just means the object o.

• What Frege is saying is that if we read ‘a = a’ as ‘d[a] = d[a]’, and ‘a = b’ as ‘d[a] = d[b]’, then both statements merely express the equality (identity) of o with itself, i.e., they have exactly the same content and cannot be distinguished.
On Sense and Reference (1892)

1. ‘The morning star = The morning star’ : True, and *a priori*; ‘a = a’.

2. ‘The morning star = The evening star’ : True, but not necessarily *a priori*; ‘a = b’.

- ‘The Morning star’ and ‘The Evening star’ refer to the same object, i.e., the planet Venus. That is, they have the same reference, Venus.
  - On the view that meaning is reference, this implies that the two terms have the same meaning (reference).

- However, 1 and 2 would appear to have different meanings.
  - Someone could know that 1 is true without knowing that 2 is true.
  - So, there must be some other element to their meanings, which makes them distinct.

- Frege’s answer is that the terms of 2 do not have the same sense. That is, the mode of presentation of the reference is different in each case.

- ‘The Morning star’ picks out the bright star that appears in the morning. ‘The Evening star’ picks out the bright star that appears in the evening. These are two modes of presenting, or ways of finding or picking-out, the same object, Venus.
Frege’s Second Puzzle

1. “The Greeks believed that ‘the morning star = the morning star’”

2. “The Greeks believed that ‘the morning star = the evening star’”

• This makes the outcome of the previous case even clearer, but it also points to a further problem about how the meanings of sentences are composed.

• In the previous puzzle, replacing ‘the evening star’ with ‘the morning star’, didn’t change the truth value of the sentence (salva veritate); i.e., it remained true.

• However, in this case, swapping those two linguistic forms could change the truth value of the sentence.

• That is to say, it is possible for 1 to be true whilst 2 be not true.

• This is due to what is called an intensional or opaque context formed by the verb ‘believed’.

• If all there was to meaning was reference, this could not happen.

• So, it follows that there is more to meaning than merely reference.
Sense or *intension*

• “The referent of a proper name is the object itself which we designate by its means; the conception, which we thereby have, is wholly subjective; **in between lies the sense**, which is indeed no longer subjective like the conception, but is yet not the object itself. The following analogy will perhaps clarify these relationships. Somebody observes the moon through a telescope. I compare the moon itse to the referent; it is the object of the observation, mediated by **the real image projected** by the object glass in the interior of the telescope, and by the retinal image of the observer. The former I **compare to the sense**, the latter to the conception or experience.” (*On Sense and Reference*)

• This notion has often been reconstructed as an *intension*. That is, a function that takes us from a set of conditions to an *extension*, the thing(s) that satisfy those conditions.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

• The early Wittgenstein took another route: that the identity sign ‘=’ is superfluous.

• In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) he presented a *perspicuous* language in which all primitive distinct objects are represented by distinct signs, e.g., ‘a’ and ‘b’.

• So, a statement such as ‘a = a’ says nothing (it is a senseless tautology), while a statement such as ‘a = b’ is nonsense, because it says that two distinct signs have the same value, which they cannot.

• Wittgenstein’s later philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), leads to *skepticism about the very notion of meaning*.

  • Following a rule cannot be done by oneself. How would you know if you were following it correctly.

  • This calls substantive notions of meaning into question and leads to a deflationary attitude towards philosophical questions and methods.
A test of linguistic competence

• **Column A**
  - ‘No bachelor is married’
  - ‘Blue things are coloured’
  - ‘No spinster is male’

• **Column B**
  - ‘No bachelor is tidy’
  - ‘Blue things are round’
  - ‘No spinster is worried’

• **Column C**
  - ‘Quicksilver is quick’
  - ‘Quicksilver is silver’
  - ‘Triangles have three sides’
  - ‘Triangles have 180 degrees’
  - ‘Dogs are animals that bark’
  - ‘Dogs are animals’
  - ‘If a is above b, then b is below a’
  - ‘Nothing is both blue and red all over’

• The sentences in Column A and B each have a similar linguistic property to the other sentences in their respective Column.

• For each of the sentences in Column C, does it belong in Column A or Column B?

• How is it that competent speakers of a language are able to place these sentences in the correct columns?
Analyticity (and Apriority/Necessity)

• One reason that philosophers are concerned about meaning is because meaning is taken to be relied upon by what is called **analyticity**, a kind of necessary truth.

• Leibniz (1646 – 1716)
  - **Predicate-in-Notion** principle (a ‘containment’ principle of truth)
  - **Truths of Reason** (necessary; true in every possible world) and **Truths of Fact** (contingent; true in some possible world).
  - **Characteristica universalis** and **Calculus ratiocinatur** (a universal language and rational calculus for deriving all knowledge)

• Hume (1711 – 1776)
  - ‘Hume’s fork’: **Relations of Ideas** or **Matters of Fact**
  - Neither of these provides for metaphysics; so, no causation, induction, etc.
Analyticity (and Apriority/Necessity)

- Kant (1724 – 1804)
  - *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787)
  - *a priori* (necessary) and *a posteriori* (contingent)
  - *Analytic* (containment and PNC) and *Synthetic* (ampliative)
    - Containment: Predicate in Subject
    - PNC: Principle of Non-Contradiction (the negation of an analytic truth is a contradiction)

- *Synthetic a priori* (both ampliative and necessary) – *Maths, Metaphysics*.

- Frege (1848 – 1925)
  - *Begriffsschrift* (1879; ‘Concept-notation’; Quantified Predicate Logic)
  - Considers Kant’s ‘containment’ unclear. Uses a logical characterisation of the *analytic* instead.
  - *Logicism*: attempts to reduce maths to logic.
Analyticity (and Apriority/Necessity)

- Early Wittgenstein (& Positivists) (*Tractatus*, 1921)
  - Necessary truths are known a priori and are analytic (logical tautologies)
  - Meaningful statements about the world are contingent, empirical, and synthetic.
  - The three distinctions effectively coincide, reasserting something like Hume’s fork. So, no metaphysics.

- Quine (*‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’,* 1951)
  - Rejects the positivists’ notion of Analyticity.
  - Revisability: All truths are revisable.
  - Metaphysics becomes an extension of science. Pragmatism and Naturalism.
Quine against Analyticity (and Meaning)

1. ‘No unmarried man is married’
2. ‘No bachelor is married’

• For example, sentence 2 is often taken to be an analytic sentence.
• One way to explain this is to say that it is reducible to the logical truth of 1, i.e., of the form, ‘No F is both not-G and G’.
  • The negation of this would be a contradiction.
• How is 1 reducible to 2? By putting synonyms for synonyms, e.g., by putting ‘unmarried man’ for ‘bachelor’.
• **What is synonymy?** Sameness of meaning. How can we tell when two linguistic forms have the same meaning?
  • Perhaps by definition. However, **what is definition** if not an empirical report of an antecedent synonymy, written down by a lexicographer? This couldn’t lead to analyticity.
  • Let’s try interchangeability *salva veritate*. There doesn’t seem to be a way to do this that isn’t circular.
Possible world semantics

• ‘possible world’ is a technical philosophical term. It need not mean an actual concrete world, existing somewhere over the rainbow.

• Possible worlds are, rather, possible ways the actual world could have been.

• Consider a world as being the set of sentences that are true in that world.
  • For example, P: ‘Someone is giving a lecture’, Q: ‘The audience are in their seats’, R: ‘The projector is working’, etc.
  • \( w_0 = \{P, Q, R, \ldots\} \)

• There is a possible world in which, ‘The projector isn’t working’ is true instead.
  • \( w_1 = \{P, Q, \text{not } R, \ldots\} \)

• Conversely, each proposition can be defined by the worlds that it is true in:
  • \( P = \{w_0, w_1, \ldots\} \)
  • \( R = \{w_0, \ldots\} \)

• There are further advances and complications here, which we will skip over for the moment.

• Possible world semantics gives us a way of giving a semantics of important (philosophical) terms like ‘Necessary’ and ‘Possible’.
Saul Kripke – Millianism

• Saul Kripke’s lectures, published as Naming and Necessity (1972), saw a return to a (modified) Millian theory of names.

• In Kripke’s theory a proper name is what he calls a rigid designator, which denotes the same object in all possible worlds in which it exists.

• This allows for an interesting take on Frege’s puzzle.

  1. ‘Hesperus = Hesperus’: A necessary truth known a priori.
  2. ‘Hesperus = Phosphorous’: A necessary truth known empirically.

    ❖ [Rigid designator 1] = [Rigid designator 2]

• One consequence of this is that necessity is distinguished from apriority.

• Another is that it seems that empirical investigation can reveal necessary truths. Something that was thought not to be the case by almost all previous philosophers.

• This conclusion is the standard view, but is nonetheless still debated and objected to by some philosophers.
I hope that you enjoyed the lecture and thank you for listening!