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## Misleading Expressions:

## The Brentano-Ryle Connection

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**Abstract**. This chapter argues that Gilbert Ryle’s account of misleading expressions, which is rightly considered a milestone in the history of analytic philosophy, is continuous with Brentano’s. Not only did they identify roughly the same classes of misleading expressions, but their analyses are driven by a form of ontological parsimony which sharply contrasts with rival views in the Brentano School, like those of Meinong and Husserl. Section 1 suggests that Ryle and Brentano share a similar notion of analysis. Section 2 spells out the notion of misleading expression by means of the surface-grammar/truth-conditions distinction, which I argue is implicit in their accounts. Section 3 zooms in on a specific class of misleading expressions, namely expressions about *ficta*. Finally, Section 4 draws the consequences of what precedes for a correct understanding of the notion of meaning.

Some linguistic expressions are misleading in the sense that they look as if they are about something while they actually are about something *else*. In this chapter I argue that Gilbert Ryle’s account of misleading expressions, which is rightly considered a milestone in the history of analytic philosophy, is continuous with Brentano’s critique of language. Not only did they identify roughly the same classes of misleading expressions, but their analyses are driven by a form of ontological parsimony which sharply contrasts with rival views in the Brentano School, like those of Meinong and Husserl. It is true that Brentano’s account, unlike Ryle’s, is put in terms of underlying mental phenomena. However, this difference, I submit, is mainly terminological and does not reflect any substantial disagreement.

The chapter has four sections. Section 1 (‘Analysis’) suggests that Ryle and Brentano share a similar notion of analysis as paraphrase of misleading expressions. Section 2 (‘Two Senses of “About”’) spells out the notion of misleading expression by means of the surface-grammar/truth-conditions distinction, which I argue is implicit in their accounts. Section 3 (‘*Ficta*’) zooms in on a specific class of misleading expressions, namely expressions about *ficta*. Finally, Section 4 (‘A Moral About the Meaning of “Meaning”’) draws the consequences of what precedes for a correct understanding of the notion of meaning.

### **Analysis**

In this section I suggest that Ryle and Brentano share a similar view of analysis. On this view, the latter is best understood as a type of paraphrase which prevents professional philosophers of being *misled by language into multiplying entities without necessity*. In other words, their conception of analysis is motivated at the outset by a principle of ontological parsimony traditionally associated with Occam’s razor. Before getting there, though, let me very briefly recall some background information about Ryle’s relation to phenomenology in general and to Brentano in particular.

It is common knowledge that Ryle, who started his career with a book review of Roman Ingarden in *Mind* in 1927 and visited Husserl in Freiburg (presumably) in 1929 (Schuhmann 1977, 340), was thoroughly familiar with the Austro-German phenomenological tradition, for which he showed a continued interest throughout his life. Over the last two decades, a growing number of studies have pointed at his mediating role between phenomenology and analytic philosophy (see e.g. Brandl 2002; Bourdeau 2003; Thomasson 2002; 2007; Vrahimis 2013, 110–159; Morran 2014, 254–259; Chase and Reynolds 2017). Unsurprisingly, one of the chief things those studies reveal is that there is something of a tension in Ryle’s position. On the one hand, indeed, he had strong sympathies for the phenomenological project and went as far as acknowledging that his major book, *The Concept of Mind*,might be described as ‘a sustained essay in phenomenology’ (Ryle 2009, 196); on the other, he challenged dubious claims made by Husserl (and Heidegger) – claims he believed should be *excised from the phenomenological project* (Thomasson 2002, 137). My hypothesis is that this tension is best explained against the background of *another* tension which is internal to the Brentano School, namely the opposition between Brentano’s ontological parsimony, on the one hand, and the more liberal views held by Husserl and Meinong, on the other. On Brentano’s account, indeed, both Meinong and Husserl are typical examples of philosophers who have been misled by language into multiplying entities without necessity, in blatant violation of Occam’s razor. Very roughly, I contend that the early Ryle endorsed the same line of thought and took sides with Brentano against Meinong’s object theory and Husserl’s so-called ‘Platonism of meaning’. In the course of this chapter, I will gather some evidence to substantiate this hypothesis (although I will focus more on Meinong’s object theory than on Husserl’s Platonism).

My starting point lies in the following observation: however different their metaphilosophical views may be, Ryle and Brentano share the idea that philosophers may be misled by language not just occasionally but in some significant and systematic way. In his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* of 1874, for example, Brentano bluntly states that, when it comes to describing and classifying mental phenomena, ordinary language ‘offers no sufficient guarantee and would mislead [*in Irrthümer führen*]those who relied on it too much, just as it would facilitate the discovery of the truth for those who utilise its determinations with caution’ (Brentano 1924, 63; 1995, 45; my translation). Later in the book, in a long footnote devoted to his debate with Mill on existential propositions, he writes: ‘I hope that people will finally, once and for all, stop confusing linguistic differences with differences in thought’ (Brentano 1925, 63, note; 1995, 220, note). What Brentano is up against in those passages is what he often calls ‘linguistic fictions’ or fictions created by language – a topic which is usually associated with his so-called ‘reistic turn’ but which is far from being absent from his earlier writings.[[1]](#endnote-1) As we shall see, ‘linguistic fiction’ is just another name for what Ryle calls ‘misleading expression’ or what may be termed ‘grammatical illusion’ (see Seron, this volume). I shall give examples of such expressions momentarily.

Ryle’s account of misleading expressions was first presented in his speech to the meeting of the Aristotelian Society in London on March 21, 1932, the same year he wrote his well-known critical essay on “Phenomenology”. Both essays have initially been published in the *Proceedings* of the Society (Ryle 1932; 1932a; reprinted in 2009, 174–185; 2009a, 41–65). Ryle’s study on misleading expressions is usually considered a significant document in the history of analytic philosophy – with good reason, since it aims at establishing the legitimacy of a philosophical research programme in which the notion of analysis plays the central role. His main concern is with what a philosophical analysis of linguistic meaning can achieve and whether such analysis is needed at all. His diagnosis has a negative and a positive side. On the negative side, Ryle insists that it cannot be a legitimate goal for philosophy to (i) clarify the meaning of linguistic expressions used in ordinary discourse, for it is already known by the speakers who use them, nor to (ii) paraphrase them in order to ensure the effectiveness or elegance of linguistic communication in real-life situations, for this is the business of *linguistic*, lexical or philological analysis (Ryle 1932a, 139–141; 2009a, 41–43).[[2]](#endnote-2) On the positive side, even once these misconceptions of philosophical analysis have been discarded, he argues, there remains ‘an important sense in which philosophers can and must discover and state what is really meant by expressions of this or that radical type’ (Ryle 1932a, 142; 2009a, 43).

How, then, should we conceive of philosophical analysis? Very roughly, Ryle’s reply is as follows. The point of philosophical analysis is to avoid *philosophers* – and, generally speaking, ‘any man who embarks on abstraction’ (Ryle 1932a, 146; 2009a, 46) – to be misled by the surface grammar of some linguistic expressions into drawing false conclusions of a logical, ontological or epistemological nature. In other words, the ensuing programme of analysis is philosophical through and through: it is to be carried out, so to speak, *by* philosophers *for* philosophers, merely for the sake of avoiding philosophical mistakes. Thus understood, philosophical analysis is not a matter of paraphrasing some expressions into more elegant, familiar or readily intelligible ones. It is a matter of paraphrasing them into *less elegant but* *less misleading* expressions for the sake of pursuing philosophical (i.e. ontological, epistemological, etc.)inquiries.

Interestingly, this understanding of philosophical analysis is in line with Brentano’s criticism of linguistic fictions. Here again, the point is not to reform ordinary language. As a matter of fact, Brentano has it that such a reform is impossible for misleading expressions are an integral part of ordinary language, to the effect that eliminating them would be tantamount to replacing ordinary language with a different language altogether. In a dictation on *ens rationis* dated January 6 1917, he writes:

Naturally, this variety of locutions [i.e. misleading expressions] arises from complications in our thinking. They make possible abbreviated discourse which is highly advantageous. The whole of ordinary language is so much under their influence that we could not possibly give them up without giving up the use of that language completely and resolving to invent an entirely new and extremely unwieldy language. (Brentano 1925, 275; 1995, 367)

As we shall see, the idea of ‘complications in our thinking’ (*Verwicklungen in unserem Denken*)has to be understood literally: on Brentano’s view, misleading expressions typically express *mental phenomena directed at other mental phenomena*, nested into each other like Russian dolls – or so I shall argue (more on that in Section 3). For now, though, suffice it to say that both Ryle and Brentano agree on the following claims: (i) misleading expressions are an integral part of ordinary language; (ii) in non-philosophical, ordinary context, they offer convenient and harmless abbreviations for complicated states-of-affairs; (iii) taken at face value, however, such expressions may mislead professional philosophers into multiplying entities without necessity. Accordingly, the point of analysing misleading expressions merely is to apply Occam’s razor (Ryle 1932a, 165; 2009a, 61) and avoid ‘infinite complications’ (Brentano 1925, 160; 1995, 292–293).[[3]](#endnote-3)

What do such misleading sentences look like? Ryle takes it that the types of misleading expressions are ‘in principle unlimited’ in number, even though ‘the number of prevalent and obsessing types is fairly small’ (Ryle 1932a, 169; 2009a, 64).[[4]](#endnote-4) He identifies three main classes thereof, to which a fourth one may be added, namely:

*Quasi-ontological statements*

(1) ‘Satan is not a reality’

(2) ‘Unicorns do not exist’

*Quasi-Platonic statements*

(3) ‘Unpunctuality is reprehensible’

(4) ‘Colour involves extension’

*Quasi-referential the-phrases*

(5) ‘Poincaré is not the King of France’

(6) ‘Jones hates the thought of going to the hospital’

[*Modifying expressions*][[5]](#endnote-5)

(7) ‘Jones is an alleged murderer’

(8) ‘Smith is a probable Lord Mayor’

As far as I know, Brentano didn’t offer any classification of its own, but his account of linguistic fictions includes at least a critical discussion of quasi-ontological statements, quasi-Platonic statements and modifying expressions. On the whole, then, I think it is fair to say that Ryle and Brentano roughly pinned down the same main classes of misleading expressions. Now, if they are right, there must be a sense in which sentences (1) – (8), however different, may all be said to be misleading in a similar way. Spelling out this sense is the business of the next section.

### **Two Senses of ‘About’**

In this section I explain what it means for sentences like (1) – (8) to be misleading in the sense here discussed. Drawing on (Ryle 1933; 2009a, 86–88), the proposed explanation hinges on the distinction between two senses of ‘about’. As stated at the outset, the notion of misleading expression applies to cases where a linguistic expression – typically, a sentence – looks as if it is about something while in fact it is about something else. But how are we to understand the difference between what a sentence seems to be about and what it actually is about? More pointedly, what clue do we have as to what a sentence actually is about? I argue that, whereas what a sentence seems to be about is determined by its *surface grammar* (starting with its grammatical subject), what it actually is about is determined by its *truth conditions*. Accordingly, successfully analysing a misleading expression amounts to paraphrasing it into a non-misleading expression with the same truth conditions. This, I submit, is at bottom the view held by Ryle and Brentano, as I interpret them.

Consider (1) ‘Satan is not a reality’. It has the same surface grammar than ‘Capone is not a philosopher’, and yet, whereas the latter denies a certain property (namely, that of ‘being a philosopher’) to the individual called ‘Capone’, it would be an error to say that the former denies a certain property (that of ‘being a reality’) to an individual called ‘Satan’. Despite the grammatical appearances, the sentence ‘Satan is not a reality’ is not about Satan in the way in which ‘Capone is not a philosopher’ is about Capone (Ryle 1932a, 148–149; 2009a, 48). (1) refers, if at all, to something *else*, namely the fact that *there is no individual* which is called ‘Satan’ and exhibits the related features (is devilish, etc.). A similar observation, Ryle suggests, applies to (2) – (8): (2) looks as if it is denying existence to unicorns in the way in which ‘Cows are not carnivorous’ (say) denies the property of being carnivorous to cows; (3) looks as if it ascribes the property of being reprehensible to unpunctuality in the way in which ‘Paul is eligible (to become governor)’ ascribes the property of being eligible to Paul; (4) looks as if it is ascribing to colour the property of involving extension in the way in which ‘The final list involves Paul’s name’ ascribes to the final list the property of involving Paul’s name; (5) looks as if it is about the King of France in the way in which ‘This is the picture which is on my desk’ is about the picture which is on my desk, etc. Sentences (1) – (8)are misleading in the sense that they look as if they refer to something while that actually refer to *something else, which is not explicitly named in them*.

Here is yet another example:

(9) ‘Centaurs are fictional creatures’.

Now take the following, *non*-misleading sentence:

(10) ‘Whales are marine mammals’.

Plainly, the grammatical structure of (9) is identical to that of (10): they have exactly the same surface grammar. However, whereas (10) ascribes the property of being marine mammals to whales, (9) does not ascribe the property of being mythical creatures to centaurs. ‘Though the grammatical appearances are to the contrary’, as Ryle puts it (1932a, 144; 2009a, 45), (9) is not about centaurs in the way in which (10) is about whales, for the word ‘centaurs’ does not signify a ‘subject of attributes’. Rather, (9) is a shorthand for what would be less conveniently, albeit less misleadingly, expressed by means of *another* sentence like, perhaps:

(9\*) ‘There is no creature in the non-fictional world which is half-man and half-horse’ (or whatever properties are taken to be definitional of centaurs).

It is important to note that systematically misleading sentences are not *per se* syntactically ill-formed (e.g. ‘green is where’), nonsensical (‘the number three is screaming loudly’) or false (‘Descartes is born in the 1400s’). On the contrary, they do not violate any rule of grammar or semantics. What is more, they are not to be conflated with equivocal expressions (‘this curry is hot’), which admittedly are *occasionally* misleading – even though, most of the time, the context of utterance usually contributes to remove any doubt as to their actual meaning. Again, the ‘plain man’ is in no way misled or puzzled by them. They are a source of trouble for philosophers only.

Surely, at this point, it would be good to have a definition of the notion of misleading expression. Ryle himself does not offer any formal definition but describes the situation as follows: (9) and (10), despite having the same surface grammar, actually refer to ‘different types’ of states-of-affairs or to facts with a ‘different logical structure’. Now when two sentences with the same grammatical structure refer to different types of states-of-affairs, taking the linguistic expressions ‘at face value’ can result in one’s becoming oblivious to the differences between the types of facts referred to. Hence, Ryle suggests that the following holds true of all systematically misleading expressions: they ‘are couched in a syntactical form improper to the facts recorded and proper to facts of quite another logical form than the facts recorded’ (Ryle 1932a, 143; 2009a, 44).

Admittedly, this is hardly a definition. Besides, this description is utterly silent on what clue one might have as to what fact is actually ‘recorded’. In his three-page article for the first issue of the journal *Analysis*, though, Ryle introduces an interesting distinction between various senses of ‘about’ which, as it happens, makes it possible to spell out the notion of misleading sentence in a somewhat more precise fashion. He distinguishes between what a sentence is about in a *linguistic* sense and what it is about in a *referential* sense (Ryle 1933; 2009a, 86–88). Thus, (1) ‘Satan is not a reality’ is about Satan in a merely linguistic (and nominal) sense. Yet, it does not refer to Satan, since there is no such a thing as an individual called Satan. The distinction can be captured by means of the following notation: sentence (1) is ‘about (l)’ Satan (in the linguistic sense of ‘about’) while it is not ‘about (r)’ Satan (in the referential sense of ‘about’). Note that, contrary to what this example suggests, what a sentence is about (l) is not exhausted by its grammatical subject. On Ryle’s account, the sentence (5) ‘Poincaré is not the King of France’ is ‘nominatively’ (i.e. in virtue of its grammatical subject) ‘about (l)’ Poincaré, but it is also ‘about (l)’ the King of France, just like the sentence (8) ‘Smith is a probable Lord Mayor’ is both ‘about (l)’ Smith and ‘about (l)’ a probable Lord Mayor. The important thing, however, is that they are *not* ‘about (r)’ the King of France or a probable Lord Mayor. Again, they refer, if at all, to something else.

My suggestion is that this distinction between the linguistic and the referential use of ‘about’ may be employed to define the notion of systematically misleading sentence. The definition I have in mind is as follows:

*Systematically Misleading Sentence*

For any sentence *S*, *S* is systematically misleading if, and only if, (i) *S* is ‘about (l)’ *x* and (ii) *S* is ‘about (r)’ *y* and (iii) *x* ≠ *y*.

On the face of it, this sounds quite promising. But we are still faced with the same difficulty: how are we supposed to find out what a given expression is ‘about (r)’? Ryle is not very explicit on that score, to say the least, but I suspect that the notion of *truth conditions* offers the needed leverage here. Recall that systematically misleading sentences like (1) ‘Satan is not a reality’ or (9) ‘Centaurs are fictional creatures’ are not false. In most cases they are true, and they are so in the perfectly common sense that some fact or state-of-affairs makes them true. Yet, even when they are not true, they have *truth conditions* and this, I submit, is of paramount importance whenever it comes to paraphrasing them into less misleading expressions. Note well: Ryle himself does not talk of truth conditions; yet, if I’m not mistaken, this notion captures what he and Brentano are after in their analyses. Take (6) ‘Jones hates the thought of going to the hospital’. It looks as if it is about an entity referred to as ‘the thought of going to the hospital’, but this grammatical appearance is deceptive, Ryle says. How can we tell? Reply: by considering its truth conditions. ‘*For it to be true*’, he writes, ‘the world must contain a Jones who is sometimes thinking and sometimes, say, sleeping; but it need no more contain both Jones and “the thought or idea of so and so” than it need contain both someone called “Jones” and something called “Sleep”’ (Ryle 1932a, 161; 2009a, 58; my emphasis). Compare Brentano: ‘The proposition, “A centaur is a poetic fiction,” does not imply […] that a centaur exists, rather it implies the opposite. But *if it is true,* it does imply that something else exists’ (Brentano 1925, 61; 1995, 219; my emphasis). As I interpret them, those passages speak in favour of reframing Ryle and Brentano’s conception of analysis in terms of truth conditions. In order to find out what a sentence really is about (r), all you have to do is inquire what should be the case for the sentence to be true.

Let me take stock. Saying that linguistic expressions may be misleading in a systematic or non-occasional way amounts to saying that there is sometimes a gap between what an expression *seems* to be about and what it *actually* is about. On the proposed interpretation, this difference is best understood when applied to sentences – that is, truth-assessible expressions. What a sentence seems to be about is determined by its surface grammar, including its grammatical subject. (9) looks as if it is about centaurs in virtue of having the word ‘centaurs’ as grammatical subject, just like (5) looks as if it is about the King of France as having ‘the King of France’ as grammatical predicate. By contrast, what a sentence *actually* is about is determined by its *truth conditions*. For (9) to be true, it is not necessary that there exist centaurs which have the property of being fictional creatures, etc. As a result, I suggest understanding systematically misleading expressions as those which generate systematically misleading sentences and defining the latter as follows, with ‘aboutSG *x*’ meaning ‘about *x* in virtue of its surface grammar’ and ‘aboutTC *y*’ meaning ‘about *y* in virtue of its truth conditions’:

*Systematically Misleading Sentence\**

For any sentence *S*, *S* is systematically misleading if, and only if, (i) *S* is aboutSG *x* and (ii) *S* is aboutTC *y* and (iii) *x* ≠ *y*.

To my opinion, this understanding of misleading expressions is implicit in both Ryle and Brentano. It captures the sense in which sentences (1) – (8) may be said to be misleading. In virtue of their surface grammar, indeed, (1) – (8) are aboutSG Satan, unicorns, unpunctuality, colour, the King of France, the thought of going to the hospital, a murderer and a Lord Mayor. Yet, they are not aboutTC Satan, unicorns, unpunctuality, etc. In other words, they are all misleading for the same reason: what they are aboutSG is not identical to what they are aboutTC.

In Section 1 I have suggested that both Brentano and Ryle share a certain notion of philosophical analysis. Philosophically analysing misleading expressions like (1) – (8) amounts to successfully paraphrasing them into non-misleading (or, at any rate, less-misleading) ones. We are now in a position to get a better grip on the relevant notion of analysis. All is needed is to define in turn the notions of non-misleading sentence and successful paraphrase. Given what precedes, the following definitions suggest themselves:

*Non-Misleading Sentence*

For any sentence *S*, *S* is a non-misleading sentence if, and only if, (i) *S* is aboutSG *x* and (ii) *S* is aboutTC *y* and (iii) *x* = *y*.

*Successful Paraphrase*

For any pair of sentences *S1* and *S2*, *S2* is a successful paraphrase of *S1* if, and only if, (i) *S1*’s surface grammar ≠ *S2*’s surface grammar and (ii) *S1*’s truth conditions = *S2*’s truth conditions and (iii) *S2*is a non-misleading sentence.

With those definitions in hand, I now turn to the analysis of some misleading sentences. For reasons of limited space, I will zoom in on Ryle’s first class of misleading expressions, namely ‘quasi-ontological statements’ or statements about *ficta*, and compare Brentano’s analysis thereof with Ryle’s.

### ***Ficta***

Recall Ryle’s examples of quasi-ontological statements:

(1) ‘Satan is not a reality’.

(2) ‘Unicorns do not exist’.

Although those sentences are aboutSG Satan and unicorns (respectively), they are not aboutTC Satan and unicorns. For (1) to be true, indeed, it is not required that there is an individual which is called ‘Satan’ and which is devilish and of which it is true that it is not a reality. Similarly, for (2) to be true it is not required that there are horses having a horn and of which it is true that they do not exist. What is required, then? What exactly are the *truth conditions* of (1) and (2)? In this section I review three options I call the *Lockean*, the *Meinongian* and the *Brentanian* option. According to the Lockean option, quasi-ontological statements are aboutTC *ideas*; according to the Meinongian option, they are aboutTC *non-existent objects*; and according to the Brentanian option, they are aboutTC *mental phenomena*. I argue that Brentano and Ryle both reject options 1 and 2 and endorse option 3.

*The Lockean option: quasi-ontological statements are aboutTC ideas*. – Although it is associated with Locke’s notion of ‘ideas in the head’, the claim that a name does not mean the thing itself but our idea of the thing is usually traced to Hobbes. On this account, (1) is true in virtue of there being an idea of Satan in my mind. John Stuart Mill famously objected that this view is incompatible with a correct analysis of the underlying mental phenomena. When we use the word ‘sun’, Mill argues, we do not name our idea of the sun, but the sun itself. His argument rests on the view that we do not only use words in order to communicate some presentations of a thing, but also in order to indicate that we judge a thing to be so-and-so. Now such judgements are not about our idea of the thing, but about the thing itself. For example, when I say that ‘the sun shines’, surely I do not mean that my idea of the sun shines or that my idea of the sun involves the idea of shining. Rather, this sentence expresses an act of judging which is aboutTC the sun itself: my judgement is true if the sun actually shines (of course, it is also aboutSG the sun; ‘the sun shines’ is a non-misleading sentence). Mill writes:

Names are not intended only to make the hearer conceive what we conceive, but also to inform him what we believe. Now, when I use a name for the purpose of expressing a belief, it is a belief concerning the thing itself, not concerning my idea of it. When I say, ‘the sun is the cause of the day’, I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of day; or in other words, that thinking of the sun makes me think of day. I mean, that a certain physical fact, which is called the sun’s presence […] causes another physical fact, which is called day. (Mill 1974, 25)

Of course, Mill’s example is not about a *fictum*, so the question arises whether it is any different with names of *ficta* like ‘Satan’ and ‘unicorns’. Shouldn’t we retain Hobbes’ suggestion when it comes to sentences such as (1) and (2)? Both Ryle and Brentano answer this question negatively: *no*, *pace* Hobbes, (1) and (2) are not aboutTC ideas (Ryle 1932a, 144; 2009a, 45).[[6]](#endnote-6) Plainly, (1) cannot possibly be paraphrased by saying something like ‘my idea of Satan is not a reality’ or ‘my idea of Satan does not involve the idea of a reality’ or ‘my idea of Satan does not involve the feature “real”’ (whatever that would mean). Likewise, (2) does not mean something like ‘my idea of unicorns does not exist’ or ‘my idea of unicorns does not involve the idea of existence’. The moral seems to be that, when uttering (1) and (2), we are not talking aboutTC ideas in the mind. So much for option 1. What about option 2?

*The Meinongian option: quasi-ontological statements are aboutTC non-existent objects. –* This is the option favoured by Meinong and the supporters of object theory. In fact, on Meinong’s view, (1) and (2) are not misleading sentences. What they are aboutSG is identical to what they are aboutTC, namely fictional objects or *ficta*, objects of which it is true to say that they don’t exist. Therefore, there is no need to paraphrase (1) and (2). This view, however, raises well-known difficulties. Like option 1, option 2 is based on the thought that something may *be* without *existing*. Now this thought is highly problematic. Brentano rejects it outright: ‘I confess that I am unable to make any sense of this distinction between being and existence’ (Brentano 1925, 137; 1995, 274). Brentano’s main reason for rejecting the distinction between being and existing is that it generates contradictions. For example, if we follow Meinong, we are led to attribute a being to things which we correctly deny, i.e. which are not, and thus we are led to speak of ‘existing unicorns’, say, as being and non-being at the same time, which contravenes the principle of non-contradiction. Russell makes a similar point against Meinong in his well-known essay, “On Denoting” (Russell 1905; 1973, 117–118). Ryle shares Brentano and Russell’s opinion:

Some argued that the statement [(1)] was about something described as ‘the idea of Satan’, others that it was about a subsistent but non-actual entity called ‘Satan’. Both theories in effect try to show that something may be (whether as being ‘merely mental’ or as being in ‘the realm of subsistents’), but not be in existence. But as we can say ‘round squares do not exist’, and ‘real nonentities do no exist’, this sort of interpretation of negative existentials is bound to fill either the realm of subsistents or the realm of ideas with walking self-contradictions. (Ryle 1932a, 144; 2009a, 45)

Furthermore, the Meinongian option violates the principle of ontological parsimony, for it would imply that, besides an apple (say), there would be ‘the existence of an apple’, ‘the subsistence of the existence of an apple’, and so on – which is hardly acceptable in light of Occam’s razor (Brentano 1925, 160; 1995, 292–293). Thus, we are left with the third, Brentanian option.

*The Brentanian option: quasi-ontological statements are aboutTC mental phenomena*. – The key idea here is that of a complication of mental phenomena: (1) and (2) are aboutTC mental phenomena inasmuch as they express mental phenomena *directed at other mental phenomena*. To fully understand this idea, though, it is necessary to make a brief detour via Brentano’s logic course (Brentano Ms. EL 80).

On Brentano’s view, it is the primary function of language to express (or arouse) mental phenomena. He calls *categorematic* any linguistic expression which by itself expresses (or arouses) a mental phenomenon, where ‘by itself’ means ‘without being supplemented by any further word or group of words’. He then calls *name* any categorematic expression that expresses (or arouses) an act of presentation, and contrasts names with *speech* (*Rede*), which is any categorematic expression that expresses another type of mental phenomena, namely an act of judgement or an act of interest.[[7]](#endnote-7) Now central to Brentano’s analysis of names is the distinction between what a name *means* (*bedeutet*)and what it refers to or *names* (*nennt*). What a name *means* depends on the ‘content’ of the corresponding presentation, whereas what it *names* depends on what thing in the world, if any, is picked out by means of this content. In other words, it depends on the object of the presentation.[[8]](#endnote-8) For the sake of illustration, consider the phrase ‘my cat’. Unlike ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘is’ and the likes, ‘my cat’ is a *categorematic* expression for it expresses by itself a mental phenomenon occurring in the mind of the speaker or aroused in the mind of the addressee. Unlike ‘my cat is sleeping on the mat’, which expresses an act of judging, ‘my cat’ is a *name* for it expresses an act of presentation. It *means* whatever is the content of the related presentation and *names* the animal which was chasing birds in the garden earlier in the morning and is presently sleeping on the mat in my living-room. On Brentano’s view, a similar distinction applies to pieces of discourse: the assertion ‘my cat is sleeping on the mat’ *means* whatever is the content of the related judging act and *indicates* (*anzeigt*)that which is accepted or rejected by this judging act, what is judged *about*. Those distinctions are captured in *Fig. 5.1* and *Fig. 5.2*.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *names*  the object of | |  | | Name | |  | | *means*  the content of | |
|  | |  | |
|  | |  |  |  | |
|  |  |  |  | *expresses/arouses*  the related act of presentation | |  |  |  |  |
|  | |  | |  | |  | |

*Fig. 5.1 Brentano’s analysis of a name*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *indicates*  the object of | |  | | Speech | |  | | *means*  the content of | |
|  | |  | |
|  | |  |  |  | |
|  |  |  |  | *expresses/arouses*  the related act of judgement/interest | |  |  |  |  |
|  | |  | |  | |  | |

*Fig. 5.2 Brentano’s analysis of a speech*

Brentano has it that many errors in philosophical theories about language derive from a confusion between those three fundamental functions, namely *expressing* (respectively, arousing), *naming* (respectively, indicating) and *meaning*.[[9]](#endnote-9) It is plain, for example, that ‘my cat’ does not name or mean the related act of presentation but *expresses* it, and does not express or mean the animal which is sleeping on the mat but *names* it.

As it happens, this idea of a confusion between the aforementioned functions places Brentano’s rejection of the Lockean and Meinongian options under a new light. One way of interpreting Brentano’s criticism indeed is to say that the Lockean option rests on a confusion between what is named and what is expressed, while the Meinongian option rests on a confusion between what is named and what is meant. Plainly, the presentation of Satan is what is expressed by the name ‘Satan’, not what it refers to or what it *names*. Likewise, the non-existence of Satan is what is *meant* in (1) – it is the *content* of the related act of judgement –, but it is not what is *indicated* or judged about. This explains why, on Brentano’s account, (1) is not aboutTC the non-existence of Satan, any more than it is aboutTC Satan or the non-existent object called ‘Satan’. When I utter (1) in a communicational context, I’m not communicating to my addressee, *pace* Meinong, that I’m performing a judging act to the effect that the non-existence of Satan obtains or that there is an individual called Satan of which it is true to say that it does not exist. Again, such analyses would violate Occam’s principle according to which entities should not be multiplied without necessity:

If a content, e.g. the being or the non-being of Napoleon, could become an object, then it would also have to hold true of it that it either is or is not, and we would have to be able to say in the strict sense not only of Napoleon but of the being of Napoleon as well, that it has being at one time and at another time it does not. (Brentano 1925, 161; 1995, 293)

Let me return to our opening question: what are (1) and (2) aboutTC? Brentano has it that, to answer this question, it is necessary to ‘peep beneath’ their surface grammar in order to identify the actual objects of the underlying acts of judgement, i.e. *what must be the case for (1) and (2) to be true*. Take Mill’s well-known example: ‘A centaur is a poetic fiction’. Plainly, there is no centaur in the world. Still, as we have seen, there must exist *something else*, which makes the sentence true. I quote Brentano again:

The proposition, ‘A centaur is a poetic fiction’, does not imply […] that a centaur exists, rather it implies the opposite. But if it is true, it does imply that something else exists, namely a poetic fiction which combines part of a horse with part of a human body in a particular way. If there were no poetic fictions and if there were no centaurs imaginatively created by poets, the proposition would be false. (Brentano 1925, 61; 1995, 219)

Accordingly, ‘A centaur is a poetic fiction’ might be less conveniently but less misleadingly paraphrased by ‘There is a poetic fiction which conceives the upper parts of the human body joined to the body and legs of a horse’ or ‘Some people have imagined a creature which is half-man and half-horse’. Note that, since mental acts are not just ‘floating in the air’, they always presuppose *someone*, some individual or group of individuals, who is performing them – hence the second paraphrase. Therefore, ‘A centaur is a poetic fiction’ may be said to be aboutTC an act of imagining or, more pointedly, aboutTC the one who performs this act, namely an undetermined ‘imaginer’. If this analysis is correct, one should say that (1) ‘Satan is not a reality’ expresses a judgement which is not aboutTC a thing called ‘Satan’ but *aboutTC another judgement*, for example ‘The act of acknowledging an individual called “Satan” and being so and so, is incorrect’, or:

(1\*) ‘Those who acknowledge an individual called ‘Satan’ and being so and so, are in error’.

Likewise, (2) ‘Unicorns do not exist’ might be paraphrased by saying that ‘The act of acknowledging creatures which resemble horses and have a horn, is incorrect’, or again:

(2\*) ‘Those who acknowledge creatures which resemble horses and have a horn, are in error’.

Let me briefly comment on that. First, since what (1\*) and (2\*) are aboutSG is identical to what they are aboutTC, they are non-misleading sentences in the above-defined sense. Furthermore, if Brentano’s analysis is correct, their truth conditions are identical to those of (1) and (2), respectively, to the effect that they are successful paraphrases of (1) and (2). Next, we see how the whole process of analysing misleading expressions is driven by the thought of ontological parsimony underlying Occam’s razor. Clearly, (1\*) and (2\*) are assertions: they are pieces of discourse which express some judging acts. The key to Brentano’s account is that those judging acts are not intentionally directed at Satan or centaurs but *at* *other mental acts*: (1\*) makes it manifest that (1) really is aboutTC the act of acknowledging an individual called ‘Satan’, etc., just like (2\*) makes it manifest that (2) really is aboutTC the act of acknowledging creatures which resemble horses and have a horn. If one nonetheless wants to say that they are ‘about’ Satan and unicorns, one should say that they are about them only *in modo obliquo*, which is Brentano’s way of capturing the thought of mental phenomena nestled into other mental phenomena (see Dewalque 2014).Admittedly, this account implies that expressions about *ficta* rest upon a complication of mental phenomena. Yet, this complication is quite acceptable in Brentano’s eyes, for unlike the Lockean and the Meinongian options, it does not imply the existence of anything above and beyond mental phenomena or mentally active subjects. Ontologically speaking, mental acts or mentally active subjects are regular entities. They have nothing in common with weird entities like ‘ideas in the head’ or ‘non-existent objects’.

So far I have briefly reconstructed (what I take to be) Brentano’s analysis of (1) and (2). What about Ryle? Regarding (1), he maintains that ‘the fact recorded would have been properly or less improperly recorded in the statement “‘Satan’ is not a proper name” or ‘No one is called ‘Satan’” or “No one is both called ‘Satan’ and is infinitely malevolent, etc.” *or perhaps “Some people believe that someone is both called ‘Satan’ and infinitely malevolent, but their belief is false*”’ (Ryle 1932a, 149; my emphasis). The last paraphrase is very close to (1\*). To be sure, it is not explicitly couched in terms of a complication of mental phenomena and I’m not sure Ryle would be happy with such a terminology. But I see no reason why his own analysis in 1932 should be constructed as incompatible with that of Brentano. After all, Brentano’s theory of mental phenomena has nothing to do with the ‘Lockean demonology’ Ryle rejects (Ryle 1932a, 161). On the contrary, as Ryle himself points out, mental phenomena in Brentano’s sense are nothing but ‘directly discernible manifestations of mental functioning’, the variety of which is in no way reducible to ideas in the head (Ryle 2009, 175). Similarly, Ryle paraphrases (2) by saying that ‘Nothing has the property of resembling a horse and having a horn’, which on Brentano’s account should in turn be paraphrased in terms of (2\*), for ‘nothing’ is not a categorematic expression and does not refer to anything, as Ryle himself recognises.

Brentano’s analysis, therefore, does not seem to me to be incompatible with Ryle’s. If anything, it goes a step further by investigating the structure of the underlying mental phenomena, while Ryle rather sticks to case-by-case paraphrases and refrains from embarking on psychological descriptions (the question of which option is better is a question that I will not address here). Admittedly, this difference is not negligible. It probably reflects the fact that they have different views of philosophy – not to mention the fact that Ryle’s anti-Cartesianism, which will come to the fore in *The Concept of Mind*, will still increase the gap between them. Still, Ryle’s 1932 account of misleading expressions is, if not identical to, at least *continuous with* that of Brentano.

### A Moral About the Meaning of ‘Meaning’

I have argued that Brentano and the early Ryle share a strikingly similar conception of philosophical analysis and misleading expressions. The backbone of this conception is the principle of ontological parsimony associated with Occam’s razor. I have illustrated this claim by comparing their analyses of statements about *ficta*. I suspect (although I cannot show it here) that a similar observation can be made for their analyses of quasi-Platonic statements (statements about universals) and modifying expressions.

To conclude, I would like to draw a consequence of what precedes for a correct understanding of the notion of meaning. On Brentano’s view, as we have seen, what is called ‘the meaning of a name’ just is the content of the underlying act of presentation. Likewise, ‘the meaning of an assertion’ just is the content of the related act of judgement. Because Brentano has it that the content-object distinction must be preserved, the contents of those mental phenomena cannot become the true *objects* of further assertions. Although it sometimes looks as if we are referring to the meaning of an expression, we do not actually judge aboutTC it. In other words, *meanings are not objects* *we can talk aboutTC*. Whenever we talk aboutSG the meaning of a linguistic expression, what we really are talking aboutTC is the underlying mental phenomenon with such and such content. For example, saying that ‘the meaning of *x* is vague’ is a convenient, albeit misleading, way of saying that ‘there is an underlying mental phenomenon whose content is not sharply determined’. One of the main consequences of this view is that all questions of philosophy of language which presuppose that meanings are objects are wrongheaded. Worse, they are *senseless*. Treating meanings as if they were objects distinct from, and on a par with, physical things and mental episodes, is just another way of allowing oneself to be misled by language into multiplying entities without necessity.

Ryle, among all people, had perfectly grasped this fundamental lesson from Brentano.[[10]](#endnote-10) The sentence ‘I have just grasped the meaning of *x*’, he writes, is systematically misleading in that it grammatically resembles sentences such as ‘I have just met the village policeman’, whereas in fact there is no object corresponding to ‘the meaning of *x*’ (no more than there is an object corresponding to ‘Satan’ or ‘the present King of France’). Hence, enquiring into the status of the object allegedly referred to by ‘the meaning of *x*’ is absurd, since there simply is no such object. As Ryle puts it: “It is as pointless to discuss whether word-meanings (i.e. ‘concepts’ or ‘universals’) are subjective or objective, or whether sentence-meanings (i.e. ‘judgements” or “objectives’) are subjective or objective, as it would be to discuss whether the equator or the sky is subjective or objective. For the questions themselves are not about anything’ (Ryle 1932a, 163; 2009a, 65). On this approach, anti-Platonism about meaning does not imply that meaning is psychological or subjective. Rather, it implies that the question whether meaning is subjective or objective is *senseless*. Here, I suspect, Ryle is more ‘Brentanian’ than many philosophers of the Brentano School.

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1. My own feeling is that Brentano’s position is much more continuous than suggested by the talk of a reist ‘turn’, but I will bracket this issue here. For a recent account of Brentano’s reism and related developments in the Prague School, see (Sauer 2017; Janousek and Rollinger 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Interestingly, Ryle is not the only analytic philosopher to defend that view. G.E. Moore makes approximately the same points in 1933–1934 (see Moore 2004, 165–171). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ryle himself retrospectively talks of the ‘Occamizing zeal’ deployed in his early writings (Ryle 2009a, xx). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Compare (Brentano 1925, 305; 1995, 367): ‘If one wished to make a *complete* survey of *entia rationis*, one would have to go into the great variety of locutions which make *words* the subject and predicate of propositions *which do not refer to real things in and of themselves*’. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ryle does not give any name to this fourth class, to which he devotes only a couple of lines (see Ryle 1932a, 165; 2009a, 61). For the sake of convenience, I use here the Brentanian label. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See e.g. (Brentano Ms. EL 80, 13.001[3]–13.002[7]): ‘Regarding names, the question arises as to *what they* *mean*. They mean: 1. not themselves; 2. not the act of presentation or the presentation; 3. not what is presented as presented; 4. and yet they do not seem to denote the things a) for many names are not names of things, they are fictions, e.g. Jupiter, [and] b) *hoc animal* and *hic homo* would not have a different meaning. They denote something presented, though not as presented but as that as what it is presented [*als das, als was es vorgestellt wird*]. This accommodates a) and b), for we are presented here with a thing, albeit through the mediation of various presentations’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. I won’t comment here on Brentano’s classification of mental phenomena. For a reconstruction, see (Dewalque 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See (Brentano Ms. EL 80, 13.018[1]–13.018[5]): ‘The name designates [*bezeichnet*] in some way the *content* of a presentation as such, the immanent object. In some way, [it designates] *what is presented by means of the content of a presentation*. The *former* is the meaning of the name. The latter is what the name names [*nennt*]. We say about it that it has the name [*es komme der Name ihm zu*]. When it exists, it is an external object of presentation. One names through the mediation of meaning’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Another source of errors lies in the fact of regarding syncategorematic expressions as categorematic ones, like when one takes at face value expressions such as ‘the truth of *p*’ of ‘the impossibility of *A*’ (see e.g. Brentano 1995, 322). I won’t address this kind of confusion here. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Thomasson rightly noted that the anti-Platonistic approach to meaning is a major commonality between Ryle and Brentano: ‘Ryle – like Brentano – takes it to be a systematic mistake to conceive of the procedure of conceptual analysis as involving a description of relations among Platonized meanings or concepts’ (Thomasson 2002, 129). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)