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The Individuality of Meaning

Jasper Doomen

Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations vol. 5, no. 1 (March 2006): pp. 121-135

[Page 121]

Abstract

Descriptions have been the object of attention of many philosophers. The goal of this article is to inquire into the meaning of those descriptions which, due to the peculiar character of the objects of description, have been interpreted in different ways, and to investigate in which sense one is able to speak of the existence (or non-existence) of an object of description. The various sorts of descriptions are inquired; the question which entities exist and which do not is dealt with, and, in relation to this, how 'meaning' is to be understood.

Introduction

The question what meaning is has led to a large number of approaches. Where may meaning be found? How can it exist? In this article, these questions will be dealt with. In any enquiry it is of importance to try to find a theory that does not rest upon suppositions which cannot be justified, or at least clarified.

When meaning is the subject of enquiry, this entails that theories which defend the existence of a meaning existing independently of (users of) language are to be investigated. This is done in the first section. It has a wider scope, however, dealing with the various sorts of objects which may involve meaning. As it will turn out, it is not enough to discuss a reference and a meaning; a large number of situations cannot be explained without a third element, a secondary reference, as I shall call it.

Section 2 deals with some particular problems concerning descriptions of a difficult nature. In order to demonstrate these problems, a logical analysis is presented in section 3. An attempt to solve a number of problems which arise from the ambiguity that is characteristic for natural language is undertaken by this means as well. I have, throughout this article, tried to take a critical and cautious stance; this means that a large number of certainties isn't provided, but I prefer [Page 122] this situation to one in which the price for the desired results is a dogmatic attitude.

1. The place of meaning

1.1

When a description of something is given, an important question connected with this act is whether the thing or person described exists. Few problems present themselves when one is dealing with common descriptions like 'this man', 'the president of the U.S. in 1863' and 'the author of *L'Étranger*'. However, it is possible to distinguish statements that do not render contradictions when compared with external reality but do not refer to an external object.

Bolzano claims that there are certain conceptions to which no object corresponds.¹ He gives as examples Nothingness, a green virtue, a round quadrangle and a golden mountain. Russell's claim, that these 'objects' infringe upon the law of non-contradiction,² seems to me to be too narrow a point of view: it is the case for some things, but not for all. I think the so-called things mentioned should not be considered all at one and the same level; there are important distinctions to be made. Keeping these in mind, I shall distinguish three levels here; it is possible that there exists a greater number than this,

¹ Bolzano (1985): pp. 112, 113 (§ 67).

² Russell (1905): pp. 482, 483.

but I won't deal with that here; in fact, only the third and, to a lesser extent, the second level are of importance.

The first level at which non-existing things can be classified deals with so-called things that cannot be expressed particularly, such as Nothingness. This sort of so-called things is irrelevant for this article and will receive no further attention. The second level is that of the impossible so-called things. A distinction must be made here between things which are impossible because of their nature on the one hand and those which are so because of their essence. Obviously, a green virtue (an example at the first level) cannot exist: a virtue, an abstract value, cannot have a colour, after all;³ by attributing 'green' to a virtue, one makes a category mistake. 'A round quadrangle' (an example at the second level) is impossible for another reason. Here, an object which is essentially formed with four angles is concerned. If it ceases to have four angles, it ceases to be what it is, namely a quadrangle. A round quadrangle, one may say, contradicts external reality.⁴

The third level is concerned with non-existing things that do not contradict external reality. It may not be possible to find a golden mountain in the outside world, but it is not inconceivable that one [Page 123] exists (one may conceive a possible world in which at least one golden mountain exists).

This also applies to 'the present king of France'. Only when one knows about the form of government of France is one able to determine that the description does not correspond to external reality. Clearly, propositions concerning so-called things at the third level are not as easily dismissed as those at the second are. It is useful to examine Meinong's attitude concerning this matter. He presents a theory according to which the things whose existence is denied somehow 'exist' nonetheless: "[...] If I should, regarding an object, be able to judge that it does not exist, I seem first somehow have to grasp the object, in order to state the not-being of it, more precisely to predicate it to it, or deny it of it."⁵

According to Meinong, there must be 'Aussersein' (literally: 'outside of being'),⁶ a situation in which the thing neither exists nor does not exist – the existence of a thing is external to it⁷ – and which forms the vestibule, as it were, of judging, on the basis of which it becomes apparent whether the thing exists or does not exist (outside of Aussersein).

1.2

Having established the various levels, it is now possible to inquire critically into the instances where a meaning is possible. Concerning the things at the second level, Meinong's argumentation cannot be accepted: it is not the case that one has a notion of a round quadrangle of which one subsequently denies that this represents a quadrangle existing in the outside world. What Bolzano, as a logical realist, has to say about this, that to these things corresponds a 'Vorstellung *an sich*',⁸ (a representation as such) is not tenable, in my opinion: a notion always needs a subject imagining it. Be that as it may, a more serious problem presents itself: one has to imagine a round quadrangle.

According to Bolzano, saying 'a round quadrangle', one does not claim anything, but a representation is created (in the mind) (Bolzano uses the word 'vorgestellt').⁹ This is impossible, however. As soon as one tries to imagine the quadrangle as round, it ceases to be a quadrangle. Now the question emerges how one is capable of forming the sentence: 'There are no round quadrangles.' After all, if one is not capable of forming a notion of round quadrangles, the sentence seems to have no meaning. One does not even know what one is thinking (as there is nothing to think about in this case).

³ I will forgo a discussion whether the word 'virtue' has a meaning at all here.

⁴ I readily grant that this is crudely formulated: 'contradicting external reality' is a (very) vague phrase. I have nonetheless used it here since the focus in this article is on the philosophy of language and not on epistemology; formulating a precise position would merely needlessly complicate things.

⁵ Meinong (1971): p. 491.

⁶ Meinong (1971): *ibid.*

⁷ Meinong (1971): p. 494.

⁸ Bolzano (1985): p. 112 (§ 67).

⁹ Bolzano (1985): p. 103 (§ 19).

Indeed, I do not think the sentence has a meaning. I will return to this point later. At the moment, it's useful to analyse the sentence. 'There are no round quadrangles' consists of four parts: 'there', 'are', [Page 124] 'no' and 'round quadrangles'. What is imagined when one is confronted with the first three parts? Nothing, really: they are words which serve a function within the sentence. 'No' is merely a negative element and 'there' indicates 'anywhere' (which does not excite a representation since anyone's scope is limited and does not comprise the entire universe). 'Are' is a difficult part of the sentence, but obviously no representation corresponds to this. These parts do not necessarily have to have a meaning, just as long as the sentence has one. So the sentence 'there are no paintings in this room', e.g., may have a meaning. In 'there are no round quadrangles', however, the crucial element is problematic.¹⁰

This argument would perhaps suffice, were it not that 'round quadrangles', other than the other parts of the sentence, is the composition of an adjective and a noun and a thing corresponding to it is expected here. In section 1, I indicated why 'a round quadrangle' cannot exist. The description does not excite a representation, either. In fact, 'a round quadrangle' is only a composition of two words that has no function. It can be called a 'flatus vocis': the words exist, but nothing corresponds to them. The fact that the first three words do not invoke a representation is not problematic, as long as the thing described does: the sentence 'there are no unicorns' has a meaning (provided one imagines something corresponding to 'unicorns').

Things at the third level cannot be dealt with this easily. It is important to distinguish two sublevels within the third level. An example of the first is the aforementioned 'a golden mountain'. Assuming that such a mountain cannot be found anywhere, the question arises what the status of the statement 'There is a golden mountain' is. One can imagine such a mountain. Does this mean that it exists 'ausser sein'? By no means. When one imagines a golden mountain, a mountain is imagined, examples of which have been seen, or descriptions of which have at least been heard or read, whereupon the predicate 'golden' is connected to this representation. 'Golden mountain' is a construction from these two notions, just as (I assume) 'unicorn' is a construction based on the representations of a horse and a horn.

Meinong makes an epistemological shift, supposing that the composition '(a) golden mountain' would exist primarily. Instead of thinking that a notion of a golden mountain is created on the basis of the experience of one or several mountains on the one hand and the colour golden on the other, Meinong starts on the other side and presupposes the golden mountain as a whole. [Page 125]

This objection cannot be maintained concerning the second sublevel. 'The king of France in 2010',¹¹ abbreviated hereafter as 'Kf 2010', is not the result of abstraction from two or more concepts. In order to establish whether one imagines something when saying 'Kf 2010 is bald', an enquiry into the meaning is required. According to Russell, this proposition does not refer, but it does have a meaning. I will argue that one can only speak of meaning when there is a reference; however, 'reference' must be understood in a broader way than is usually done.

When the sentences 'The president of the U.S. in 2010 is bald' and 'Kf 2010 is bald' are verified, the first sentence turns out to be false. What about the second one? According to Russell's approach, it is false as there was no king of France in 2010.¹² Strawson refutes this thought: "[...] The question of whether [someone's] statement [that the king of France is bald, or, as in Strawson's example, wise (which one of these properties is attributed is not important for the example)] was true or false simply *didn't arise*, because there was no such person as the king of France."¹³

What Strawson says here is important, but not radical enough. He maintains Russell's statement¹⁴ that the statement has a meaning.¹⁵ What does this comprise, however? Suppose an

¹⁰ For the sake of clarity, I contrast this example with another one. The sentence 'there are no chiliagons' does have a meaning. In this case, no representation exists (I, at least, fail to excite one), yet the sentence can be used by substituting a polygon one *is* able to imagine for the chiliagon. Similarly, Descartes distinguishes between imagining and understanding a chiliagon, being able to do the latter while being unable to do the former (R. Descartes, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, pp. 72, 73 (Meditatio 6)).

¹¹ I prefer to use this description to the one used in section 1 ('The present king of France'), since the latter is bound by context.

¹² (nor in, for example, 1950, when Russell was still alive).

¹³ Strawson (1950): p. 330.

¹⁴ Russell (1993): p. 179; Russell (1905): pp. 483, 484.

unmarried man is invited to a gathering and is mistakenly asked: 'Will your wife be there as well?' According to Russell's and Strawson's analyses, this sentence has a meaning, despite the fact that it does not refer. However, the bachelor, on hearing 'your wife', has no representation of his wife (as there is none) and neither does the inquirer: he simply states a question, the form of which is the same as it would be if it had been asked to someone else whose marital status is unknown to him. The question would, by contrast, have had a meaning if it had been directed at a married man, in such a way that the inquirer not only knew that he was married, but also knew his wife or had at least heard or read a description of her (and had a representation of her when he asked the question). Here, however, the words are, one could say, empty. Nothing is represented and the sentence accordingly has no meaning.

In order to illustrate his statement that 'Kf 2010' has a meaning, Strawson gives an interesting example:¹⁶ One may tell a story about the king of France and ascribe all sorts of predicates to him. In this case, one has a representation (of the king of France). It is important to distinguish the representation of the speaker from the one the hearer has. It is either the case that the speaker has a certain representation and gives information of this to the hearer, who, on this basis, creates a representation of his own until this is sufficient, or that the speaker states something [Page 126] about a thing which has no existence in external reality, the situation being one in which the speaker has no representation, and the hearer creates a representation which ceases to be at the moment information which is not conformable to external reality is provided.

An example of the first situation is the representation the speaker has of Lincoln. He has a lot of information about this person at his disposal and has a representation of Lincoln on the basis of this. If he presents this information to the hearer and the latter understands it, a representation will arise with him as well (which will, however, probably not be the same as the one the speaker has). On the basis of statements like 'He was the 16th president of the U.S.', 'He was president during the Civil War' and 'He was assassinated in 1865', one forms a representation of the historical person. Even if a great number of historical data would turn out not to be correct, the representation would remain.

Strawson's king is an example of the second situation. If only a mythical, legendary or otherwise fictive king (fictive in the sense that he has no existence in history) is concerned, no problem concerning the forming of a representation need arise: one can imagine a man living in a palace, being wise, being bald or not and having other properties than these. However, if this king is supposed to be the king of France in 2010, something peculiar happens.

The speaker may inform the hearer about such a king and produce a representation of a king. If he then states: 'This king of whom I spoke is, by the way, the king of France in 2010', this representation cannot be maintained by the hearer. If he knows about France's form of government, he will separate the representation from one about the king of France, so the representation is not about the king of France. If he does not know about it, the representation won't be affected, but it won't be adequate as it is not about the king of France. Consequently, 'Kf 2010 is bald' does not, in contrast to what Strawson and Russell state, have a meaning.

It may be useful to maintain another way of referring than the one which is usually utilised. Frege distinguishes between meaning ('Sinn') and reference ('Bedeutung'). This distinction is valuable, but, in my opinion, not sufficient. If one wants to determine the meaning of a sentence, one is dependent on a reference of some parts of the sentence. I will henceforth call this 'secondary reference'; 'reference' will mean the same as it does with Frege. [Page 127]

In Frege's example, 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep,'¹⁷ although 'Odysseus' has no reference, the sentence has a meaning. So, in order for a sentence to have a meaning, a reference is not necessary. Still, upon hearing the sentence, one must have a representation of Odysseus; this representation is the secondary reference.

This is the difference between 'Odysseus' and 'Kf 2010'. In the first case, something is represented; if this is not the case, the sentence has no meaning. When someone hears about Odysseus for the first time, a sentence in which the word 'Odysseus' occurs may receive a meaning: 'Odysseus sees that the Cyclops is coming' gives him enough information to conclude that Odysseus is some

¹⁵ Strawson (1950): p. 331.

¹⁶ Strawson (1950): *ibid.*

¹⁷ Frege (1892): p. 32.

being. One may create a representation and conclude that Odysseus is a man, woman, or even an animal, but at least one has a representation. The sentence 'Odysseus was seen by Hector' leaves open a greater number of options. Odysseus may as well be a person or animal as an inanimate object. If one connects a representation to the name, the sentence does receive a meaning.

In the case of 'Kf 2010', this option is not present. Here, the notion itself is problematic. 'Kf 2010' cannot simply have as its secondary reference a representation of a man, woman, animal or object, since the representation is one that can never have an equivalent in external reality: if it is properly understood, one sees and acknowledges that it cannot be maintained. (At least in reality as I know it. In a possible world in which France was a monarchy in 2010, 'Kf 2010 is bald' may of course have a meaning.)

Again, 'Lincoln' has a reference, 'Odysseus' has a secondary reference (whether he has a reference or not, one has a representation of him) and 'Kf 2010' has neither. 'Lincoln' has, besides a reference, a secondary reference for those who know him, having arranged the information into a representation. Only sentences containing something which may have a secondary reference have a meaning. This meaning is attributed to them by someone hearing or reading them. Meaning cannot, at least not by me, be said to be something that exists irrespective of human efforts of understanding and dealing with language. Meaning does not play a role when someone tries to determine what a sentence means; it may be possible that meanings in the sense of independently existing entities exist, but whether they do or not seems to be irrelevant. The basis for meaning lies in the existence of secondary references, which makes it possible for the same sentence to have a meaning for one person and fail to have one for another. [Page 128]

There are, however, situations in which no secondary reference and hence no meaning can be rendered. 'Kf 2010' is an example. This phenomenon is also found in the structure of natural languages. In many languages a so-called overt subject is used in simple sentences as 'it rains' (or: 'it is raining') ('es regnet', 'il pleut'). Italian, however, lacks such a subject. To express that it is raining, the statement 'piove' suffices (the ending makes clear that the third person singular is concerned). This means that the overt subject ('it', 'es', 'il') really has no meaning. Speakers of English, German or French have no notion of some thing that rains. It consequently has no secondary reference and therefore no meaning. The only secondary reference here lies in the 'raining' itself: here, something is imagined. 'It rains' is, as it were, a petrified expression: one simply uses it, without wondering what the meaning of 'it' is. In this situation, of course, no problems arise: such expressions merely serve as a means to convey information and there are fewer demands imposed on natural languages than on formal ones.

Sentences only have a meaning when the thing described has a secondary reference. Of course, a sentence can be well formed without having a meaning, so this is not a sufficient condition. 'Kf 2010 met the president of the United States of 2010' is well formed, but has no meaning. Hence, the distinction between language and external reality has to be acknowledged. When language describes external reality adequately, a representation of things in external reality and hence a meaning is produced.¹⁸ So, a secondary reference, be it based on a reference (e.g. 'Lincoln') or not (e.g. 'Odysseus') is a prerequisite for a meaning.

2. Implications and problems

2.1

In section 1, secondary reference, which deals with representations, has received attention. It has to do with the manner in which an individual meaning is produced: for the speaker, the sentence he utters has a meaning if it has a secondary reference.¹⁹ It is now to be examined what happens when

¹⁸ I have not explored the difficulties which accompany this position or considered its alternative, that (external) reality is (partly) determined by language, since it would deviate too far from the matters discussed here. That does not mean that it is not an important issue, but it may very well be undeterminable.

¹⁹ This is a *necessary* condition, not a *sufficient* one. To illustrate this by means of the example I mentioned at the end of the previous section, the sentence 'Kf 2010 met the president of the United States of 2010' contains a

communication takes place. When two people talk to each other about something which gives them both a secondary reference, will there be a single meaning (for both)?

Russell rightly points out that descriptions vary for different people.²⁰ His elaboration for descriptions of historical people is consistent and may be maintained. However, this elaboration holds only [Page 129] for cases in which objects with a reference are dealt with. According to Russell, no object corresponds to a word like 'Odysseus'. Since he indicates that the only thing constant in different circumstances is the object, his theory becomes problematic for all sentences with a meaning and without a reference. I have tried to solve this problem by introducing a secondary reference.

When people communicate, there has to be some element which is constant (something they can share), otherwise communication would be impossible. What is this element? In my opinion, it is that which is communicated. When two people are talking about 'Odysseus', they may have different representations while talking and nevertheless be able to have a conversation about him. As long as the things discussed do not concern the representations, no problem in communication need arise. Person A may have a representation of 'Odysseus' according to which he is malevolent, while person B may have one according to which he is not. Only when some property is dealt with, for example his cunningness, need they agree.²¹ They can both cling to their own representations about other properties, such as his alleged malevolence.

By connecting meaning to a representation, the objection that experts decide on issues with which other people are unfamiliar, such as distinguishing certain species of trees,²² is resolved. This way of looking at things puts fewer constraints on the contents of communication than most theories do. I think it is plausible to deal with communication like this: in what may be called an occamian approach, one may state that all that is required for communication is present; there is no need to posit any further assumptions. Only if higher demands are made regarding the content than necessary need problems arise.²³

The alternative view that use is the crucial element²⁴ may be said to be unproblematic for some situations, namely those in which one does not reflect on one's words before actually communicating them (and the utterance is a spontaneous one) and in cases where the meaning is not an issue (in cases where phrases are used metaphorically, for instance).

2.2

I will now devote some attention to problems which may arise when things are understood differently by different persons (e.g. when person A has a secondary reference and person B does not). Ambiguity may play a role in sentences of a natural language. 'Smith's murderer is insane' can be interpreted in two ways: either the person talked about is Smith's murderer and happens to be insane as well, or Smith's mur- [Page 130] derer, who-ever he is, is insane (as he murdered Smith). This distinction was made by Donnellan, as the referential and the attributive use of definite descriptions, respectively,²⁵ but in my opinion there is no real problem here. The ambiguity is caused by the fact that natural language admits such differences. When the sentence is analysed with the aid of logic, as will be done in the third section, this ambiguity is solved.

There is, however, another problem. This is about entities which lack a simple status in existence. 'God' is an example. Does 'God is not malevolent' have a meaning or not? A number of interpretations are possible. One comprises that the speaker thinks that God does not exist (and therefore is not malevolent). In this case, the sentence has no meaning: there is no entity which is

secondary reference ('the president of the United States of 2010' has a secondary reference) but lacks a meaning (because the other crucial part of the sentence, 'Kf 2010', lacks a secondary reference).

²⁰ Russell (1982): pp. 29, 30.

²¹ They don't have to agree with regard to the issue whether he is cunning or not, of course; the point is that the conditions to be able to bring up this issue in the first place have to be present.

²² Putnam (1995): pp. 18, 19.

²³ Cf., e.g., Putnam (1989): p. 25.

²⁴ Wittgenstein (1997)(2): p. 262 (§ 43).

²⁵ Donnellan (1966): p. 285. The distinction can, incidentally, be traced back to the Scholastic classification of 'de re' and 'de dicto'.

supposed to be malevolent, nor is the representation of ‘God’ present for the speaker. ‘God’ is simply a word and there is no meaning involved since a secondary reference is absent. Another interpretation is the following: God exists and is not malevolent. Now, because of the first part of this conjunction (‘God exists’), the sentence has a meaning if the speaker believes that God exists and lacks one if he does not.

The description receives a status which depends on the opinion of the person describing: if he believes in God, the description has a meaning and is ‘true’ respectively ‘false’, depending on the belief of the person describing, according to whom He is malevolent or not.²⁶ If he does not believe in Him, it has no meaning and is neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’.

The sentence has a meaning if one thinks that God exists and (therefore) has a representation of God (be it limited). Can God be described, however? Of course, some properties of God can be named, but this does not suffice. He has a particular nature and simply naming some properties is not enough to provoke a representation. In the case of ‘Odysseus’, it is enough to state that he is a cunning man, who has travelled widely, met a number of strange creatures and did battle with many men. On the basis of these facts, a representation can be produced. Where information is lacking, an abstraction from actual persons one knows may fill in the gaps (at least in order to create a representation).

In the case of God, this option is not present: there are no beings like Him (at least none with whom one has, I assume, any acquaintance), so all of His properties have to be known in order to create an adequate representation. A description of God can, accordingly, not be given. Sentences containing ‘God’ have a particular status: one [Page 131] cannot simply state that they have a meaning (since a complete description and with it a complete representation is missing), nor that they lack one (since some people form a representation of God, even if this is limited and does not do justice to the object represented in the case it exists). In the last section, this will be analysed with the aid of logic.

3. The limits of meaning

An elementary analysis, which will now be presented, is created for four sorts of descriptions: those which have a meaning, those which lack one, those which may receive a meaning depending on the point of view of the hearer and those of which it cannot be determined whether they have a meaning or not.

Ambiguities in natural languages are solved when this analysis is applied. ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’, from the previous section, is ambiguous until the sentence is properly analysed. In the elementary analysis, one has to opt for either ‘the person who killed Smith is insane’ or ‘that person, who (by the way) killed Smith, is insane.’

In the analysis, the following result is found:

1. The person who killed Smith is insane: $(\exists x) ((Mx) \wedge (Mx \rightarrow Rx) \wedge (\forall y) (My \rightarrow y=x))$, where ‘M’ stands for ‘murderer of Smith’s’ and ‘R’ for insane’;
2. That person, who killed Smith, is insane: $(\exists x) (((Mx) \wedge (\forall y) (My \rightarrow y=x) \wedge Rx))$

Real problems do not emerge until the presence or absence of meaning is doubtful. When dealing with a secondary reference one may, after having applied the elementary analysis, add a symbol to the description in order to state that it has a meaning. I will use the Greek letter μ for this. Of course, this is not a symbol in predicate logic. Logic does not deal with meaning; it merely gives adequate descriptions. (This point was already made by Wittgenstein: logic does not say anything;²⁷ it is simply a condition to be able to say something.)

²⁶ A problem here is that this way of thinking leads to a situation in which the person describing determines reality; in order to avoid this, I have not treated ‘truth’ as an absolute concept.

²⁷ Wittgenstein (1997)(1): p. 54 (§ 5.43).

The elementary analysis of ‘the 16th president of the U.S. had a beard’ will be: $(\exists x) ((Px \wedge (\forall y) (Py \rightarrow y=x) \wedge Bx) \wedge \mu)$, where ‘P’ stands for ‘the 16th president of the U.S.’ and ‘B’ for ‘has (or had) a beard’.²⁸ [Page 132]

The absence of meaning is represented by ‘ $\neg \mu$ ’. So, ‘the king of France in 2010 is bald’ is represented thus: $(\exists x) ((Kx \wedge (\forall y) (Ky \rightarrow y=x) \wedge Qx) \wedge \neg \mu)$, where ‘K’ stands for ‘the king of France in 2010’ and ‘Q’ for ‘bald’. It may appear that ‘there is a king of France in 2010, and he is bald’ is incompatible with the fact that this description has no meaning. However, ‘there is’ is not to be understood ontologically, but semantically: it does not imply an existence, but merely conveys that the sentence is at this time a candidate for receiving a meaning. ‘There is’ does not mean anything by itself here, but may be used meaningfully in some contexts (e.g. by saying: ‘there is a chair in this room’ when there is one (cf. the example of ‘there are no paintings in this room’ from section 1.2); there are, in fact, many words which merely serve as a means and have no meaning themselves). If, however, something which lacks a secondary reference appears after ‘there is’, this possibility vanishes.

Meaning cannot be acknowledged or denied as easily as in the situations displayed above in every case. The sentence ‘God is not malevolent’, from the previous section, is an example. I have already indicated where the difficulty lies. To elaborate on this point, at least three interpretations of the sentence can be discerned.

The first one is fairly simple: it is not the case that God exists; therefore, he is not malevolent. This sentence has no meaning, since one has no representation when saying or hearing ‘God’ (no secondary reference is involved): $\neg (\exists x) ((Gx \wedge Sx) \wedge \neg \mu)$, where ‘G’ stands for ‘God’ and ‘S’ for malevolent. This interpretation is not very likely to occur.

The second interpretation is more complex: God exists and is not malevolent. The sentence does not simply have a meaning, based on a secondary reference: whether it has one or not depends on the conviction of the person dealing with it. Here, a conditional meaning is the case: conditional because the speaker’s or hearer’s point of view determines the presence or absence of meaning and no absolute statement is the case here: $(\exists x) ((Gx \wedge \neg Sx) \wedge (\mu \vee \neg \mu))$.

The last and most difficult interpretation is the following: It is not the case that there is a God who is malevolent. This interpretation cannot, as will become clear, be properly understood. In order to form the sentence, no representation has to be created. This requirement is present, however, in order to determine whether the sentence has a meaning. It cannot be done here, since ‘God’ is, as it were, conditional: only a negative statement is made, in which ‘God’ is en- [Page 133] closed. So, determining whether the sentence has a meaning is impossible: $\neg ((\exists x) (Gx \wedge (\forall y) (Gy \rightarrow y=x) \wedge Sx) \wedge \mu?)$.

In this sentence, a meaning can neither be acknowledged nor denied. The sentence cannot even be understood, as an analysis is required which one does not seem to be able to perform. This analysis is not simply one of all malevolent things, where it is investigated whether God is one of them or not. The problem here is not that one is not capable of investigating all malevolent things; it is rather that being God involves the absence of malevolence.

‘God is not malevolent’ does not have the same status as ‘I see a round quadrangle’. ‘I see a round quadrangle’ is a demonstrably absurd sentence whereas ‘God is not malevolent’ is not per se; furthermore, ‘God is not malevolent’ is within the scope of the negation ‘ \neg ’, which means that nothing is said – nothing positive, at least: because of this, it is impossible to determine whether the sentence has a meaning. In the second interpretation, although the sentence was within the same scope, this problem did not occur because the sentence was understood differently: in that case, the individual person determined whether the sentence had a meaning.

It turns out that sentences cannot be dealt with by an elementary analysis if it is unclear whether they have a meaning or not. The analysis can solve many ambiguities in natural languages, but its limitations must be acknowledged: its domain is limited to sentences which have or lack a meaning.

²⁸ Lincoln did not have a beard in his younger years, but that does not matter for the example.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show where meaning is to be found and to indicate some of the limitations of describing. The first point, that of meaningfulness or the lack of it with descriptions in singular cases, which was treated in section 1, indicates that a description at a singular level does not necessarily render a meaning. This is explained more easily when one assumes that meanings are formed in individual situations than when meanings are assumed to exist as separate entities.

In section 2, communicative situations turned out to render problems in many situations as some descriptions are ambiguous and some depend on the convictions the describing parties may have – [Page 134] convictions they do not actually hold (one of the parties describing may believe in God, for example, while another may not).

In the third section, an analysis was presented on the basis of which it was shown that some problems in natural languages may easily be solved while others may not; certain ambiguities disappear when one applies this analysis, but statements which do not simply have or lack a meaning are still problematic. This is caused by the fact that logic has its limitations, since it is not concerned with the content of sentences but merely with the form, whereas establishing whether a sentence has a meaning or not involves an investigation of its content.

The analysis given in this article leaves a number of details to be worked out and the number of questions it raises may surpass that of the answers it provides. It is, furthermore, of course limited to my personal stance; another one, from another point of view, can be maintained as well. That does not mean, however, that anything else has the same value; one has to scrutinise one's claims in order to be able to say whether they are tenable, which some theories do not seem to allow.

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