

Public and Private Meaning in Hume: Comments on Ted Morris' "Meaningfulness without Metaphysics: Another Look at Hume's Meaning-Empiricism"

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Abstract This paper raises questions concerning Ted Morris' interpretation of Hume's notion of meaning and investigates the private and public aspects of Hume's notion of meaning.

Keywords Hume · Private language · Public nature of meaning · Modern empiricism · Meaning

Morris addresses three criticisms of Hume made in the "heyday of analytic philosophy". Hume's critics argue that his meaning empiricism and its attendant "theory of ideas"

- (a) Commits him to a private world of ideas
- (b) Leads him to defend a genetic rather than analytic account of meaning
- (c) Leads him to confuse impressions with perceptions of an objective realm.

Morris' defense of Hume proceeds from various angles. Here are three of its elements: First, Morris emphasizes that Hume's project is different from that the aims of which Hume's critics seem to hold him accountable to. He emphasizes that Hume is engaged in a reform of philosophy aiming at the elimination of metaphysics and its replacement with an empirical, descriptive "science of human nature". Second, Morris argues that in his attempt to enact this reform Hume puts forward a theory of meaningfulness against which traditional metaphysical notions are tested. He does not give a theory of meaning nor does he need to, Morris seems to argue. Third, Morris urges that if we look carefully at Hume's theory of meaningfulness we will see that Hume does not confine us to a realm of private ideas but instead emphasizes the public nature of language.

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I will simply pose a few questions concerning these elements of Morris' interpretation of Hume in hopes of eliciting a fuller explanation from Morris of how they hang together.

When Morris mentions the heyday of analytic philosophy one thinks of the logical empiricists. Like Hume, they were concerned to reform philosophy by banishing empty metaphysical notions and disputes. Like Hume, an important part of their project was the definition of a criterion of meaningfulness. Even in mature empiricist theories, such as Carnap's, where strict verificationist criteria of meaning have been abandoned, we find a reductive translation of abstract terms and an insistence on not asking questions about the *ultimate* nature of reality. The question "What is there?" can only be asked from within a particular system of beliefs. But here the similarities end and, one can imagine, the criticisms of Hume begin. For Hume, the cognitive content of terms ultimately *is* given in terms of an individual's impressions. These are private and thus not suitable as the empirical content of a scientific theory. Though Hume and the logical empiricists agree that when we debate the truth of claims about the world we are not disputing the nature of reality in some "ultimate" sense we are, nonetheless, engaged in a dispute. Thus, it seems necessary that we should be able to identify the intersubjectively available content of that dispute. On this point, Morris defends Hume by first pointing out that when Hume appeals to the private impressions annexed to terms, he is providing a criterion of meaningfulness and not an analysis of their meaning. But, if we look back at the passages Morris draws upon, we do find Hume giving an account of the cognitive content of the terms. This cognitive content is not intersubjectively available. While we may excuse Hume from giving an account of how our thought connects us with an independent reality, we cannot excuse him providing an account of disagreement and the nature of the object of that disagreement.

Morris attempts to mitigate the private nature of Hume's account of the cognitive content of our ideas by emphasizing the role of language in thought and further, its public character. Here Morris emphasizes, in response to Hume's Wittgensteinian critics like Bennett, the Wittgensteinian flavor of Hume's own remarks. For example, Morris explains that general concepts are to be understood not just in terms of the particular impressions that come to mind when one considers the general concept and which were present at one's acquisition of the concept, but also in terms of the general term itself. This general term belongs to a public language and though each man entertains his own particular impression in using or hearing the term, the term itself stands as a bastion against solipsism: As Morris writes, Hume "emphasizes that language presupposes a shared world where people check their speech and regulate their thoughts by reference to shared criteria."¹ He quotes the following passage from Hume:

Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed 'twere impossible we cou'd ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation. (T 482)

¹ Morris, present volume, p. 444.

Morris writes that “this emphasis on the public character of language and its importance for human life doesn’t mean that Hume is abandoning ‘the theory of ideas,’ but it does show that his commitment to it doesn’t commit him to an incoherent view about the *privacy* of those ideas... For Hume, ‘experience and observation’ is experience and observation of a world of persons with whom we interact, from whom we learned language, which in turn makes possible the thoughts we have when we describe what we observe. Instead of the Lockean picture of introspecting one’s ideas, Hume’s scientist of human nature observes people seeing, hearing, and saying things.”² Again, Morris quotes Hume:

We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men’s behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures.”
(T xix)

Morris points to an interesting aspect of Hume’s view but I fear that Hume’s Wittgensteinian critics would be unconvinced by Hume’s latent Wittgensteinian tendencies. The Wittgensteinian critics of Hume were not simply seeking an acknowledgement of the public nature of discourse, or of the claim that we *learn* our language and refine our use of language only in the company of fellow language users and in response to public norms. They thought there was something *incoherent* about introspectable private meanings of cognitive contents. For them the appeal to associated impressions or ideas goes *no* way toward explaining an individual’s understanding of a term. The Wittgensteinian emphasizes the public nature of language because he finds use constitutive of meaning. Hume’s appeal to the public nature of language, on the other hand, serves merely to encourage us that we can become more confident that our private meanings are similar enough to the private meanings of others for us to engage in fruitful discourse. Thus, in conclusion, I am not convinced that Morris’ appeal to Hume’s discussion of the public nature of language learning and refinement of use will satisfy Hume’s Wittgensteinian critics or, recalling my previous comments, Hume’s otherwise sympathetic logical empiricist critics.

² Morris, present volume, p. 444.