

Theories of Meaning

- Certain kinds of scratches and noises have *meaning*, and we humans can interpret and create them with little effort. How is this possible, and how does it work?
- Such questions may seem pedantic, but they are crucial to all of philosophy, because philosophy is conducted with these very scratches and noises.

- For example, consider the term ‘morally good.’ The moral philosopher might want to know whether or not capitalism is morally good. And so he might construct a theory about how things are morally good if they lead to the greatest happiness for the most people, and then he might argue that capitalism *is*, in fact, morally good, because capitalism leads to the greatest happiness for the most people.

- But now, another philosopher says, “But I don’t accept your definition of ‘morally good.’ I think ‘morally good’ refers to that which is approved of by God. That is roughly what *most* people mean when they said the phrase ‘morally good,’ after all.”

- Who is right, here? How can we decide? And how is it that the sentence ‘Capitalism is morally good’ has meaning, anyway? Does it have meaning because each word refers to something in the world? But to what thing does the term ‘Capitalism’ refer? What about ‘good’? What about ‘morally’? What about ‘is’?

- In this way, all philosophical questions eventually fall back upon questions about language, for all philosophy is conducted in language. Studying language will help us to clarify our meaning and arguments in *all* fields of philosophy: including the two major subjects of *this* blog, ethics and philosophy of religion.

- (1) Few people know that before he came to the United States and became a movie star, Charlie Chaplin performed in a comedy troupe with his parents in Shanghai, who raised him in the British Settlement in the Huangpu district of China's largest city.

- (1) There is a reason few people know this. None of it is true. But remarkably, as you read through that opening sentence – let's call it sentence (1) – you *understood* it perfectly, and quite easily, and not by having seen it before, and not by having ever read any sentences very similar to it. How is this possible?
- Let's look at some more

- (2) w gfjsdkhj jiobfglglf ud
- (3) It's dangerous to splash patrol around your living room.
- (4) Good of off primly the a the the why.

- Certain sequences of noises or marks, then, have a feature that is both scarce in nature and urgently in need of explanation: that of *meaning something*. And each of those strings has the more specific property of meaning something in particular. For example, (3) means that it is dangerous to splash patrol around your living room.

- So our philosophical study of language begins with the following data.
 - Some strings of marks or noises are *meaningful sentences*.
 - Each meaningful sentence has parts that are themselves meaningful.
 - Each meaningful sentence means something in particular.
 - Competent speakers of a language are able to understand many of that language's sentences, without effort and almost instantaneously; they also produce sentences, in the same way.

- How is it that a sequence of marks or noises is meaningful?

The Referential Theory of Meaning

- One common sense theory is that expressions have meanings because they ***stand for things***: **they mean what they stand for**. Words are like labels. “Charlie Chaplin” denotes the person Charlie Chaplin. The word “cat” stands for a member of *Felis catus*. And the sentence “Charlie Chaplin kicked a cat” stands for Charlie Chaplin having kicked a cat, presumably *because* “Charlie Chaplin” denotes the person Charlie Chaplin, “kicked” stands for the act of kicking in the past, and “a cat” refers to a member of *Felis catus*.

- On this view, words are like labels; they are symbols that represent, designate, name, denote or refer to items in the world: the name “Adolf Hitler” denotes (the person) Hitler; the noun “dog” refers to dogs, as do the French “*chien*” and the German “*Hund*.”
- The sentence “The cat sat on the mat” represents some cat’s sitting on some mat, presumably in virtue of “The cat” designating that cat, “the mat” designating the mat in question, and “sat on” denoting (if you like) the relation of sitting on.
- **Sentences thus mirror the states of affairs they describe, and that is how they get to mean those things.**

- This Referential Theory of Linguistic Meaning would explain the significance of all expressions in terms of their having been conventionally associated with things or states of affairs in the world, and it would explain a human being's understanding a sentence in terms of that person's knowing what the sentence's component words refer to. It is a natural and appealing view.
- Yet, when examined, the Referential Theory very soon runs into serious objections.

Problem 1

- Not every word refers to an actual thing.
 - First, some words don't refer to anything that exists. "Pegasus" does not denote anything real, because there is no winged horse after all. Also, consider the sentence "I saw nobody." But to what does "nobody" refer?
 - Second, consider:
 - (2) Ralph is fat.
 - What does "fat" denote? Perhaps it denotes something abstract, like the property of being fat. Or as Plato would have called it, The Fat Itself. So perhaps when we express (2) we mean that Ralph *exemplifies* the property of being fat. On this view, "is fat" means something like "has fatness."
 - So maybe what we're doing is joining together the name of a person (Ralph) with the name of a property (fat) by using "is." But then what does "is" stand for? Perhaps it stands for the relation of "having." So (2) really means something like "Ralph bears the having relation to fatness."

- Third, there seem to be nouns that do not name individual things or kinds of things or even abstract things like the property of being fat. Think of words like “sake” and “behalf.” I might do something on another’s behalf, but this “behalf” doesn’t seem to be a thing or even an abstract object. These nouns are meaningful, but they do not seem to get their meaning by *referring* to anything at all.
- Fourth, if we consider words *other* than nouns, they *often* fail to refer to anything at all: “very,” “of,” “a,” “yes,” and “alas.” These words don’t refer to anything, and yet they are meaningful. If it’s correct that many words do not refer to things, this is a problem for the Referential Theory of Meaning.

Problem 2

- Referential Theory treats a sentence as a list of names for things to which the words refer. But a list of names says nothing:
(3) Bob Jill Washington Phyllis
- So how could we get meaning from a list of words that refer to things? There must be something else going on, too.

Problem 3

- There is more to meaning than reference. Some words can refer to the same thing but *not* share the same meaning, for example “Joseph Ratzinger” and “the Pope.”

- If not Referential Theory, then what?
- There are other theories of meaning that surpass the Referential Theory, though they have their own problems
- Note, even if reference cannot account for how we use language by itself, it is still an important *part* of how language works.

Summary

- Some strings of marks or noises are *meaningful sentences*.
- It is an amazing fact that any normal person can instantly grasp the meaning of even a very long and novel sentence.
- Each meaningful sentence has parts that are themselves meaningful.
- Though initially attractive, the Referential Theory of Meaning faces several compelling objections.

- Even if the Referential Theory of Meaning does not hold for all words, one might think it would apply at least to **singular terms**

- Singular terms supposedly denote individual things like
 - “Charlie Chaplin,”
 - “Saudi Arabia,”
 - “3:20 pm,”
 - “the cat on the mat,”
 - “she,”
 - “this,” and
 - “that.”
- General terms can apply to more than one thing, like
 - “dog” or
 - “brown” or
 - “intoxicated.”

singular term

- There is no really adequate definition of *singular term*. Here are some definitions proposed by different writers:
 - A term that tells us which individual is being talked about. (John Stuart Mill, Arthur Prior, P. F. Strawson)
 - A term that is grammatically singular, i.e. a proper name (*proprium nomen*), a demonstrative pronoun (*pronomem demonstrativum*) or a demonstrative pronoun with a common name (*cum termino communi*). (William of Ockham)
 - A term that is inherently *about* the object to which it applies or refers. (Gottlob Frege)
 - A term that is true "in the same sense" of only one object. (Peter of Spain)
 - Source Wikipedia

Singular Terms

In predicate logic translation the first thing you need to do is diagnose the difference between:

Singular and General
terms or statements.



Singular Terms

In predicate logic translation the first thing you need to do is diagnose the difference between:

Singular and General
 terms.

This is not the same as:

Singular vs. Plural.



Singular Terms

In predicate logic translation the first thing you need to do is diagnose the difference between:

Individual

~~Singular~~ and General
terms.

This is not the same as:

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In predicate logic translation the first thing you need to do is diagnose the difference between:

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A singular (individual) term
picks out a unique individual.



Translating Singular Terms

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Translating Singular Terms

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Identifying Singular Terms

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Socrates



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Socrates

Jim's cat



Identifying Singular Terms

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Socrates

Jim's cat

he, she, it, this, that



Identifying Singular Terms

A singular (individual) term
picks out a unique individual.

Socrates

Jim's cat

he, she, it, this, that

the first man on the moon



Identifying Singular Terms

A singular (individual) term
picks out a unique individual.

Socrates

Jim's cat

he, she, it, this, that

some cat

a cat

WRONG!

'some' and 'a'
are always general



The Which Test

The which test is designed to distinguish singular from general terms.



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Imagine a conversation:

A: Socrates is a man.

B: Which person did you have in mind?

A: No particular person.

ASK: Could this be coherent?



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SO: The term 'Socrates' is **singular**.



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Imagine a conversation:

A: A cat ruined the couch.

B: Which cat did you have in mind?

A: No particular cat.

ASK: Could this be coherent?

ANSWER: YES IT COULD!

SO: The term 'a cat' is NOT singular.



The Which Test

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Imagine a conversation:

A: The cat ruined the couch.

B: Which cat did you have in mind?

A: No particular cat.

ASK: Could this be coherent?

ANSWER: **NO IT COULD NOT!**

SO: The term 'the cat' is **singular**.



The Which Test

Although 'he', 'she', 'it' and 'the X' are usually singular, they can be general.

Imagine a conversation:

A: He who defiles an Egyptian tomb must die.

B: Which person did you have in mind?

A: No particular person.

ASK: Could this be coherent?

ANSWER: YES IT COULD!

SO: The term 'he' is NOT singular in this case.



The Which Test

Although 'he', 'she', 'it' and 'the X' are usually singular, they can be general.

Imagine a conversation:

A: The whale is a mammal.

B: Which whale did you have in mind?

A: No particular whale.

ASK: Could this be coherent?

ANSWER: YES IT COULD!

SO: The term 'the whale' is NOT **singular** in this case.

[For more click here](#)

Source:

https://www.google.com.pk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=0CCwQFjAD&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.class.uh.edu%2Fclasses%2FPHIL1321%2FContents%2FPowerPoints%2FI2.1bSingular.ppt&ei=3VYBVcTEBsmqUf-0g_AI&usq=AFQjCNG_HJbClbSoLj6xovNX4QUmPrGxUw&sig2=q8t46nqlyOK9UtpTWFd0YQ&bvm=bv.87920726,d.d24&cad=rja



- Back to Referential Theory of Meaning and Singular Terms

- But there are four problems that seem to prohibit us from saying that the Referential Theory of Meaning holds *even for singular terms*.

The Problem of Apparent Reference to Nonexistents

(1) The present king of France is bald.

But now, consider the following set of statements, all of which seem to be true:

J1: Sentence (1) is meaningful.

J2: Sentence (1) is a subject-predicate sentence.

J3: A meaningful subject-predicate sentence is meaningful only in virtue of its picking out some individual thing and ascribing some property to that thing.

J4: Sentence (1)'s subject term fails to pick out or denote anything that exists.

J5: If (1) is meaningful only in virtue of picking out a thing and ascribing a property to that thing [J1, J2, J3], and if (1)'s subject term fails to pick out anything that exists [J4], then either (1) is not meaningful after all [contrary to J1] or (1) picks out a thing that does not exist. *But:*

J6: There is no such thing as a “nonexistent thing.”

- The problem is that it's logically impossible that J1-J6 is each true, and yet they all seem to be true.

The Problem of Negative Existentials

Consider:

(2) The present king of France does not exist.

Sentence (2) seems to be true about the present king of France.

But wait a minute. If (2) is true, it can't be true about the present king of France, for there exists no such entity for (2) to be true about. But if (2) *is* about the present king of France, then (2) is false, for the present king of France would have to then exist.

Some have said that the present king of France has *being* of a sort other than existence, but he lacks the property of existing. The present king of France likes donuts but he fails to exist. It happens.

But it is hard to see what it means to say that something has being without existing.

Frege's Puzzle About Identity

An identifying statement like

(3) The present Pope is Joseph Ratzinger.

has two singular terms (“the present Pope” and “Joseph Ratzinger”), both of which denote the same person or thing (assuming the sentence is *true*). But then the meaning of (3) is that *this person* is identical with *this person*, which is trivial; (3) basically says “the present Pope is the present Pope.” And yet (3) does not seem to be trivial: it is *contingent* because it might have been otherwise, and it is *informative* because it might tell you something you didn't already know.

So it seems like one of the terms in (3) must contribute some meaning beyond that to which it refers.

The Problem of Substitutivity

- If singular terms get their meaning solely from referring to things, then we would expect that we could take two singular terms that refer to the exact same thing and use them interchangeably within sentences without changing those sentences' meaning, or at least their truth value. But consider:
- (4) Albert believes the author of *Euclid and His Modern Rivals* was a noble thinker.
- and suppose that (4) is true. But Alfred is unaware that the author of *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*, Charles Dodgson, is the same Lewis Carroll (author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) whom Alfred knows was probably a criminal, and not somebody Alfred believes to be a "noble thinker." But then we cannot substitute "the author of *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*" with "Lewis Carroll" without making (4) *false*, even though "the author of *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*" and "Lewis Carroll" refer to the same man!

