

CHAPTER-III
CRITERIA OF MEANINGFULNESS & MEANINGLESSNESS

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Present day thinkers are far too ready to dismiss a philosophical statement as meaningless. But they are unable to come to a single point about what criterion do we follow for distinguishing meaningful sentences from the meaningless ones. Philosophers from different conceptual background has given different conditions under which a sentence may be said to be meaningful or meaningless, philosophers of the empiricist tradition give empiricist criteria of meaningfulness. According to empiricism all non-analytic knowledge is based on experience. Empiricist criteria of meaningfulness is mainly formulated for opposing metaphysicism or for discarding metaphysical expressions as meaningless. Hume, an extreme traditional empiricist, claims that 'substance', 'essence', 'causal power' all are insignificant [meaningless, not 'senseless'] because we do not experience what they ostensibly signify, we do not know 'from what impressions these ideas are derived'. Let us move from Hume's thesis to the theses of logical positivists. There are many versions of logical positivists criteria of meaningfulness. All these versions deal only with 'cognitive' meaning of a sentence as opposed to 'poetic' or 'emotive' meaning. When logical positivists claim that metaphysical statements are meaningless what they mean is that they are cognitively

meaningless although they can have poetic or emotive meaning.

One of the earliest formulation of the empiricist criterion of meaningfulness is complete verifiability (possibility of verification). Hempel formulated this criterion in the following manner :

A sentence has empirical meaning if and only if it is not analytic and follows logically from some finite and logically consistent class of observation sentences.¹

This complete verifiability criterion has a serious defect. If the formulation of complete verifiability is taken as a criterion of meaningfulness then all sentences of the universal form including the scientific discoveries would turn out to be as meaningless, because they are not verifiable even in principle by finite set of observational data. This criterion is so strong that it rules out certain sentences as meaningless which are in fact generally accepted as meaningful.

For this reason logical positivists employ the

1. Karl G. Hempel, "The Empiricist criterion of Meaning", in Logical Positivism, edited by A.J. Ayer, The Free Press, New York, 1959, p.111.

criterion of complete falsifiability instead of complete verifiability. The new criterion is like this :

A sentence has empirical meaning if and only if its denial is not analytic and follows logically from some finite logically consistent class of observation sentences.¹

The main defect of this criterion is that it rules out purely existential sentences like "There exists at least one unicorn". Further there are sentences containing mixed quantifiers which could not be falsified conclusively.

For these above reasons the requirement of complete verifiability and complete falsifiability were abandoned. Positivists soon come to modify the criterion so that it requires merely that all meaningful empirical sentence would be capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed to certain degree instead of complete verifiability or falsifiability. This can be called "confirmability criterion of meaningfulness". Then new problem arises regarding when a sentence is confirmable or disconfirmable. Ayer devised a criterion of confirmability which states that a statement is confirmable and hence meaningful if it is possible to derive from the statement in question and its subsidiary hypotheses an observation statement not derivable from the subsidiary hypotheses alone.

1 Ibid., p.113.

This criterion of confirmability is so liberal that it rules out no sentence as meaningless. It allows empirical import to any sentence whatsoever. Thus if S is the sentence "The God is good" it can choose as a subsidiary hypothesis the sentence "If the God is good then this leaf is green" to deduce the observation sentence. "This leaf is green" - a deduction which does not follow from the first sentence alone. To meet this objection Ayer has proposed a modified version of the confirmability criterion. Under this new formulation the subsidiary hypotheses were required to be either analytic or independently testable.

This new criterion, however, allows empirical significance to any conjunction, S.N where S is a sentence which is either analytic or independently testable and N is a sentence like "The absolute is perfect" or "The God is good" and so on.

From the above discussion it can be said that all attempts to state an adequate empiricist criterion of meaningfulness have failed, some of them are too liberal while some others are too restrictive. Verification argument only states, as Ayer says,

That metaphysical statements do not fall into the same category as the laws of logic, or as

scientific hypothesis, or as historical narratives, or judgement of perception or any other commonsense descriptions of the "natural" world. Surely it does not follow that they are neither true nor false, still less that they are nonsensical.¹

Metaphysicians too never claim that metaphysical statements belong to the same category as scientific statements or logical laws. Metaphysicians are conscious about the status of the metaphysical expressions - which category they belong. So by stating that metaphysical expressions belong to different category from that of scientific statements it says nothing new.

Another criterion which is closely related with verification criterion of distinguishing meaningful sentences from the meaningless ones is the truth-condition criterion. And its close relation with verification criterion can be manifested from the remark of M. Schlick.

... it is simply impossible to give the meaning of any statement except by describing the fact which must exist if the statement is to be true... The statement of the conditions under which a proposition is true is the same as the statement

1 A.J. Ayer, Editor's Introduction to Logical Positivism, Free Press, New York, 1959, pp.15-16.

of its meaning ... And these 'conditions' ... must finally be discovered in the given ... verifiable certainly means nothing but "capable of being exhibited in the given. The meaning of every proposition is finally to be determined by the given, and by nothing else.¹

Here the main problem is whether meaningfulness can be determined by truth-conditions only or whether the possibility of giving truth-conditions of an expression affirms about its meaningfulness. This problem arises because meaning and truth go together so often that to some philosophers the fundamental questions about meaning seem to be the same as the fundamental questions about truth.

In dealing with the above problem I presupposed the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions and deals only with the truth-conditions of synthetic statement. A statement is analytic when it is true by virtue of its meanings or by syntax independently of a fact. I think that to give truth-conditions of a sentence is to indicate the fact and for this the concept of truth-conditions is not relevant in determining the meaningfulness of analytic statements. Analytical statement is often termed as tautology or vacuous.

1 M. Schlick, "Positivism and Realism" in Logical Positivism, ed. by A. J. Ayer, The Free Press, New York, 1959, pp. 36-37.

The identification of sentence meaning with truth-condition is not a latter-day aberration. It could be traced to Wittgenstein's Tractatus. In Tractatus logical constants are defined by the method of truth-table. And to give truth-table of a sentence containing logical constant is to give the conditions under which those sentences are true or false. In the case of molecular propositions there is an explicit identification of sense with its truth-conditions.

It is the central task of semantics to give the semantic interpretation i.e. the meaning of every sentence in the language. It is very easy to decide whether a sentence is grammatically or syntactically meaningful or not. The main job of syntax is to characterise sentencehood and we are very much confident about this characterisation because there are explicit grammatical or syntactical rules for fulfilling this task. This is true not only of an analytical sentence but also of synthetic sentence. But there is no such explicit semantical rules for determining whether a sentence is semantically meaningful or not. To determine whether a sentence is semantically meaningful or not is not such an easy task. We have to say what particular meaning it has. According to Donald Davidson "... to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence".¹

1 Donald Davidson "Truth and Meaning" in The Philosophy of Language, edited by A.P.Martinich, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1985, p.76.

A theory of meaning for a natural language is claimed to be a theory of truth. Davidson says,

... a semantic theory of a natural language cannot be considered adequate unless it provides an account of the concept of truth for that language along the general lines proposed by Tarski for formalized languages... By a theory of truth I mean a set of axioms that entail, for every sentence in the language, a statement of the conditions under which it is true.¹

And this condition is conventionally expressed in this way "Grass is green" is true if and only if grass is green. By giving truth-conditions in this manner the meaning of all sentences will be automatically determined.

Critique of the truth conditional semantics may claim that many sentences of natural language vary in truth value depending on the time of utterance of the sentence and identification of the speaker. And this crucial fact is absent in the case of truth conditional theory. But the defender of the truth conditional theory tries to accommodate this phenomenon in their theory. They said that truth value

1. Donald Davidson, "Semantics for Natural Languages" in On Noam Chomsky: Critical Essays, edited by Gilbert Harman, Anchor Books, Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1974, pp. 242-243.

is either the property of a particular utterance or the speech act or truth is a relation between a sentence, a speaker, and a time.

But one obvious difficulty about this theory of meaning is that of the existence of the counterfactual statements. Let us take a well known example of Dummett : "A city will never be built here". Truth condition theorist of course may give the truth condition of the above statement in the following manner:

"A city will never be built here" is true if
and only if, a city will never be built here.

But the truth-conditions given by the truth-theorist is such that it could not even in principle be recognized as obtaining by any speaker of any time. Though it is impossible even in principle to recognize that the truth-conditions of the sentence "A city will never be built here" is obtaining, the competent English speakers do indeed understand the sentence, know the meaning of the sentence. So giving truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of sentences is not an adequate account.

Secondly, truth-conditional theory says nothing new about the condition under which an individual sentence can

be said to be true and therefore have a meaning. It merely repeats the sentence type.

Moreover, there are sentences that do not seem to have any truth values at all, for example, imperatives, interrogatives, exclamatory sentences and so on. But they are the proper sentences of natural language. A theory of meaning for a natural language must successfully cope with the meaning of these sentences.

Some philosophers claim that expressions like "The child was naked but wore a red dress", "He saw a colourless green dream last night", "The square is a four sided figure but not four sided" are meaningless because they are self-contradictory. Some, but not all, philosophers have held that self-contradictory expressions are meaningless. Whether self-contradictory expressions are meaningless or not is a matter of controversy. There are so many dissenting views about whether contradictions are meaningless. Langford holds that self-contradictory sentences are meaningless. The reason he gives in support of his view is that we cannot find any unitary meaning of self-contradictory expressions or sentences, though we get the meaning of the separate words or sentences. He also states that a sentence is meaningful by virtue of the 'accompaniment of the sentence' i.e., something

which a sentence stands for. But in the case of self-contradictory expression no accompaniment can be found.¹

In defending the view that self-contradictory sentences are meaningless Edward Erwin has given the following argument :

... "Some bachelors are married" and "virtue is square" both kinds of statements are unintelligible in that we cannot understand what it would be like for them to be true. I conclude, then, that it is not objectionable that contradictions turn out to be meaningless, if we interpret "meaningless" as meaning "a priori false".²

It follows from the cited argument that if the interpretation of "meaningless" as meaning "a priori false" can be proved incorrect or if some other interpretation can be given to the term "meaningless" such as "meaningless" means "neither true nor false" then contradiction cannot be regarded as meaningless. Because contradiction is a priori false. Thus whether contradiction is meaningless or not would wholly depend on the interpretation of "meaningless" if we accept Erwin's view. It seems that he

1 C.I. Lewis and C.H. Langford, Symbolic Logic, Dover Publications, New York, 1932, pp.475-77.

2 Edward Erwin, The Concept of Meaninglessness, John Hopkins, C1970, pp.138-39.

is bound to give the view that contradiction is meaningless because he defines "meaningless" as meaning "a priori false" and contradictions are a priori false as the negation of contradiction is a priori true.

C. I. Lewis, however, gives an opposite view. He states that self-contradictory sentences have meanings which are inconceivable.¹ It does not draw a blank. There is some reaction to such a sentence. Even he states that self-contradictory expressions have connotation, it definitely implies some properties. The expression "round square" implies the property of roundness and squareness. And it is for the existence of the two mutually exclusive properties at the same time and space the meaning of a self-contradictory sentence can not think consistently. It is inconceivable. Inconceivability here means 'logical inconceivability'.

A. C. Ewing offers an argument in favour of the view that contradictions are meaningful. He says,

...the statement : Quadratic equations attend race meetings, is self contradictory... even self-contradictory sentences are not meaningless, I think that : Quadratic equations attend race meetings, is a statement which

1 C. I. Lewis and C. H. Langford, Symbolic Logic, Dover Publications, New York, 1932, p. 68.

we understand perfectly well and that it is only because we can understand it so well that we see it to be obviously false.¹

Ewing says that "Quadratic equations attend race meetings" is self-contradictory because according to him type-crossings are self-contradictory. He does not make any distinction between the sentence "Quadratic equations attend race meetings" and the sentence "An equilateral triangle is not equilateral". "If any self-contradictory statements are meaningful I do not see where to draw the line",² says Ewing. But whether the sentence "Quadratic equations attend race meetings" would be regarded as self-contradictory is a controversial issue. Let us consider this issue a little.

We can divide a priori truths into those (1) which are true by virtue of their logical form, for example, "A bachelor is a bachelor" and (2) those which are reducible by substitution of synonyms to statements of the first kind, for example, "A bachelor is an unmarried male". If we restrict the term "contradiction" only to the negation of statements of the above two kinds then type crossing in general and the sentence "Quadratic equations attend race

1 A.C.Ewing, Non-Linguistic Philosophy, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1968, pp.31-32.

2 Ibid., p.32.

meetings" in particular would not be regarded as self-contradictory. Only "A bachelor is not a bachelor" and "A bachelor is not an unmarried man" would be contradictions.

P.F.Strawson has denied that type crossings are self-contradictory. He argues,

Some have been tempted to assimilate violations of type restrictions to self-contradictions. But this seems a mistake. The reason why 'loud smells' makes no sense is not that smells, like murmurs, are necessarily soft. Referring to something as a smell prescribes as senseless the question whether it is loud or not loud.¹

Now if we restrict the usage of the term "contradiction" only to the above two kinds then many sentences such as "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously", "Round square is a geometrical figure", "The table is round and square", "He is dead and alive" which seems contradictory would no way be regarded as contradictory. It can be said that though they look like contradictory sentences, actually they are 'indeterminable' sentences. I propose to use the term 'indeterminable' following Katz though in a slightly

1 P.F. Strawson, Introduction to Logical Theory, Methuen, London, 1952, p.227.

different way. He says that those sentences are indeterminate which involve incompatible subjects but not incompatible predicates. Sentences which involve incompatible predicates are contradictory because incompatible predications made of the same unproblematic subject.¹ I like to use the term 'indeterminable' to cover the cases which involve both incompatible subjects and predicates. They are not contradictory because contradiction is the case where incompatibility lies between the subject and the predicate or between the two sentences (in the case of conjunction) but not between the subject and the predicate themselves. Moreover, by negating the contradictory sentences we get the analytic sentences but by negating the indeterminables we cannot get the analytic sentences. So indeterminables are not self-contradictory.

Let us return to our original problem - whether self-contradictory sentences are meaningless. It seems to me that self-contradictory sentences are meaningful. Contradiction is a logical relation between two given expressions. A contradiction simply means what the subject expression designates or asserts while predicate

1 J.J. Katz, The Philosophy of Language, Harper & Row, New York, 1966, pp.215-217.

expression denies that or what an expression asserts another expression of the same conjunction denies that. The thing designated by the contradictory expression belongs to a set which cannot have a member or that it belongs to a null set. Besides this, analyticity and contradiction are inversely related to each other with respect to negation. Negation of a analytic sentence can never be a meaningless sentence. Analytic sentences perfectly meaningful so are the negation of analytic sentence.

Many philosophers find some obvious relation between the metaphor and the concept of meaningfulness. One of the views of metaphor is that metaphorical expressions are meaningless. The violation of category restrictions is the distinctive feature of categorical expressions. In other words metaphorical expressions necessarily commits a category mistake. And committing the category mistake is the sign of a sentence's being meaningless or nonsensical. Another reason for supporting the view that metaphorical expressions are meaningless may be the acceptance of the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness. According to the verificationist a sentence cannot be meaningful unless it is verifiable. The metaphorical sentence 'The spring as it comes bursts up in bonfires green' (D.H.Lawrence) is not the kind of sentence that is verifiable as it does not report

facts or describe things in a conventional or in a straight jacket. So this metaphorical sentence, according to verificationist, is meaningless. I have already discussed about the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness and shown that it is not the adequate criterion of determining the meaningfulness of a sentence.

Let us examine the first reason given by some philosophers in favour of the view that metaphorical expressions are meaningless as they violate type or category restrictions. The view that metaphorical expressions violate category restrictions and hence are meaningless is primarily based on the view that metaphors should be read literally. But it is not without controversy. One of the contrasting view in this regard is that metaphors should not be read literally. Paraphrasing of metaphor is always inadequate, it cannot express the exact sense of the metaphorical expression or the subtle feelings expressed by it. Something is lost in paraphrasing. That the metaphorical expressions does not mean exactly what the paraphrase means. If in speaking metaphorically, it seems as if, he is speaking literally the very use of metaphor will be redundant. Moreover, to some philosophers in the case of metaphorical expressions there is a break between speaker's meaning and the sentence meaning (conventional meaning). What the sentence literally

means is not here identical with what the speaker means by the sentence though it is dependent on the sentence meaning in some way. Here speaker's intention plays a vital part. Even a speaker can give the literally nonsensical sentences like 'A rose-red song with sky-blue tune, a little scent of laughter' (Sukumar Roy) a metaphorical use. We can mention the remark of Edward Erwin in this respect.

In general, what a speaker means is what he intends to say; but what his words mean may not be what he means, and hence, may not mean what we intend to say. We sometimes fail to say what we mean - we intend to say one thing but actually say another. It is what we actually say, however, and not (necessarily) what we intend to say, that is either meaningless or meaningful.¹

Now if the above view of Erwin is correct then the question of whether metaphorical expressions are meaningless or not is completely irrelevant. Because metaphor is related with the speaker's intention and not with the sentence itself.

But the question arises : how we can understand

1 Edward Erwin, The Concept of Meaninglessness, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore and London, C 1970, p.123.

the speaker's intention if it is not expressed by the sentence itself? Or in other words what the principles that would enable speaker to formulate and hearer to understand metaphorical utterances? In replying to this above question Searle states,

Because in metaphorical utterances what the speaker means differs from what he says (in one sense of "say"), in general we shall need two sentences for our examples of metaphor - first the sentence uttered metaphorically, and second, a sentence that expresses literally what the speaker means when he utters the first sentence and means it metaphorically¹

i.e., the relevant paraphrases will indicate or at least hint what the speaker intends to say by his metaphorical sentences. Let us take one of the famous metaphor and see what problems arise about its meaning. The poet Burns wrote :

My love is like a red red rose
That's newly sprung in June.

Apparently it seems meaningless because 'My love' which refers either to a young woman or the poet's own emotion

1 J.R. Searle, "Metaphor" in The Philosophy of Language edited by A.P. Martinich, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford 1985, p.419.

is not the kind of thing that can be 'red rose'. Pure literal interpretation of this sentence obviously makes it a meaningless sentence. But by using the part of the expression like 'a red red rose' the author suggests something of the vitality, the freshness, the vividness of colour and beauty of his love and using the expression "That's newly sprung in June" he suggests the intensity and vigour of his love. In metaphorical expression the suggestive meaning plays a vital role. And it is generally expressed (though not by an adequate way) by translating or paraphrasing the metaphorical sentence itself in a systematic way, finding some kind of similarity between the metaphorical usage of the expression and its literal usage.

But the original question, the question of meaningfulness, arises regarding the expression which is a translation of a metaphorical expression. Surely it must be translatable into something that we already know to be meaningful. So a criterion of meaningfulness is already presupposed.

I shall now discuss another argument, "type" or "category" mistake argument which many philosophers think can be employed for distinguishing meaningless expressions from the meaningful ones. The word "category" was first

used as a technical term by Aristotle. According to Aristotle every 'uncombined expression' must fall one of the ten categories or classes : substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, posture, time, state, action and passion. Two expressions belong to two different categories means that they have literally nothing in common. In recent philosophy the notions of 'category' and 'category mistake' has been introduced mainly by Gilbert Ryle. At the beginning of The Concept of Mind he gives various examples in explaining what he means by "category mistake". Since the concept of category-mistake is famous by Ryle, let us consider whether Ryle's concept of category-mistake is adequate for distinguishing meaningless sentences from the meaningful ones.

Ryle says :

When a sentence is (not true or false but) nonsensical or absurd although its vocabulary is conventional and its grammatical construction is regular, we say that it is absurd because at least one ingredient expression in it is not of the right type to be coupled with or to be coupled in that way with the other ingredient expression or expressions in it. Such sentences, we may say commit type-trespasses or break type-rules.¹

1 Gilbert Ryle, Collected Papers, Vol. II, Hutchinson, London, 1971, p.174.

That is, it commits a category-mistake. But how do we determine that two terms or expressions belong to or does not belong to different categories? In reply to this question Ryle says the following :

Two proposition factors are of different categories or types if there are sentence frames such that when the expressions for these factors are imported as alternative complements to the same gap sign the resultant sentences are significant in one case and absurd in the other.¹

With the help of some examples this point can be made clear
" _____ won the world-cup trophy of 1992" is a sentence frame, the dash is the gap sign. If we put in the blank an expression like "India", "Pakistan", "England" and the words of this categories the result will be a significant sentence though the sentence may be false. But if we put in the blank an expression like "virtue" the resulting sequence will be absurd or nonsensical. From this it follows that "virtue" belongs to different category from "Pakistan", "India", "England" and so on.

The category-mistake argument is used primarily to

1 Gilbert Ryle, "Categories" in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol. XXXVIII, 1937-38, p.203.

state that a sentence is meaningless and it is also used to prove that a term is ambiguous. To discuss about the category-mistake argument philosophers usually begin by stating that if the two terms X and Y belong to two different logical categories then a third term, Z, can not be predicated of both X and Y. If we do so two conclusions will follow (1) that predicating some third term, say Z, to both X and Y would make the sentence meaningless or nonsense and (2) that the term Z is ambiguous. These two conclusions follow from the presupposition that terms of different types or categories cannot share the common predicates in the same sense.

One objection against category-mistake argument is that it does not state separately that if "x is z" is a significant sentence then "y is z" is nonsense, or that z is an ambiguous predicate. It only states that either "y is z" is nonsense or z is ambiguous. So we have to supply an additional criterion to get the conclusion that a sentence is nonsense from the disjunction that either "y is z" is nonsense or z is ambiguous. So the category-mistake argument is not self-sufficient for determining whether a sentence is meaningless or not.

Moreover, if category-mistake results in meaninglessness that does not mean that it is the only cause of

meaninglessness. "Pirots canalize elatically" is meaningless, but no category-mistake is apparently involved here or no category-mistake can be detected in this sentence.

From the above discussion about the general principle or criteria of distinguishing meaningless expressions from the meaningful ones it may be said that our aim of discovering one general criterion of meaninglessness have failed. But that does not mean that we should abandon all these criteria of meaninglessness. Expressions may be meaningless for different reasons and in determining their meaninglessness different criteria may be used. The concept of meaninglessness can be compared with the concept of 'game' as it is used by Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations. Wittgenstein says that there are different kinds of game, card-games, board-games, ball-games, Olympic games and so on. There is nothing common to all of them but only similarities.¹ Similarly there is no one single element that is common to all instances of meaningless expressions although there may be some similarities. So our hankering after a general criterion of meaningless is not reasonable.

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, Sect. 66.