

CHAPTER-I
MEANINGFULNESS AND WORLD VIEW

Chapter I

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In this Chapter I like to deal with the question how some theoretical considerations like one's view of the world, logic, his belief, plays a vital role in determining the meaningfulness of a sentence or an expression. Halliday says :

Language serves for the expression of content :
It has a representational or, as I would prefer to call it, an ideational function ... the speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of his own consciousness : his reactions, cognitions, perceptions, and also his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding.¹

Let us see how each of these factors like one's view of the world, his belief about the human mind, theory of logic etc. have important bearings on meaningfulness. In dealing with this question we can take help from different examples of expressions whose meaningfulness is obviously the subject matter of controversy among philosophers and linguists.

¹ M.A.K. Halliday, "Linguistic Function and Literary Style" in Literary Style : A symposium, edited by S. Chatman, Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1971, p. 332.

"Mind and body exists" is one of such controversial expression. According to Ryle the above conjunction makes an absurd expression and can be used only in making jokes. We can construct conjunctive expressions only with the terms which belongs to the same category or type or with the same kind of expressions. Mind and body according to Ryle, are so different in nature that they can not be in the same category and therefore it is improper to say that both mind and body exists in the same sense. It is perfectly proper to say that body exists (in the literal sense of the term 'existence'). And it is also perfectly proper to say that mind exists (in the metaphorical sense of the term 'existence'). But to conjoin the two is to make a category-mistake.

But the followers of the official doctrine give an opposite opinion. According to them the proposition "Mind and body exist" is not absurd. It is alright that mind and body are different but as far as their existence is concerned they belong to the same category. The subject can have physical existence or it can have mental existence. The view of the supporters of official doctrine and of Ryle can be represented by the figure (1) and (2) respectively.

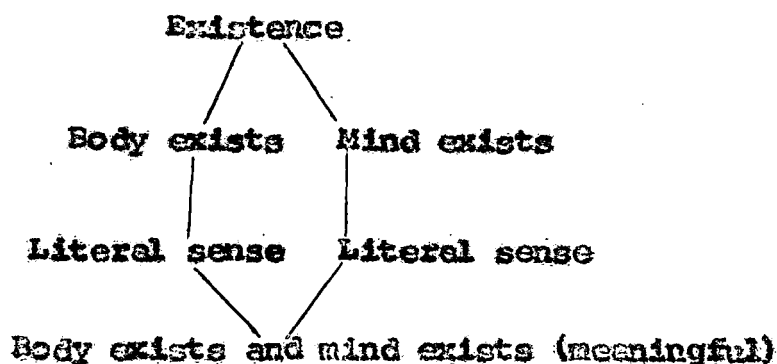


Figure : I

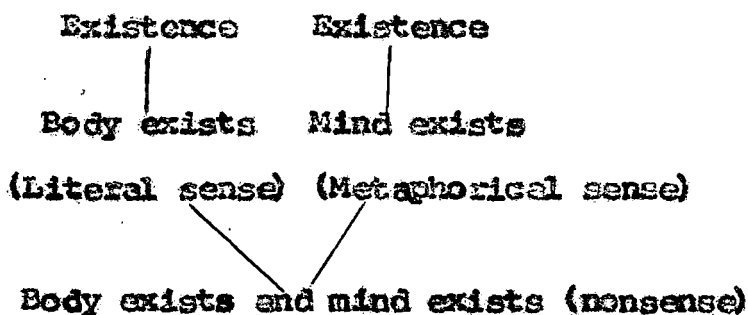


Figure : 2

Thus here we may say that different interpretations of 'existence' create strong opposition between Ryle and the followers of official doctrine in respect of the meaningfulness of the sentence "Mind and body exists".

Let us consider another controversial expression "Scott exists". According to both Frege and Russell the sentence "Scott exists" is senseless or it can be called

simply meaningless. The reason Frege gives in favour of his argument is that existence is a property of a concept. Since existence is a property of a concept it can not be significantly applied to an object, whether we affirm or deny it does not matter. Thus according to Frege general existential sentences of the form "Cow exist", "Tree exist", "Men exist" and so on are meaningful, but singular existential sentence of the form "Scott exists", "Socrates exists" is meaningless because here existence is applied to the objects.¹ He also maintains that the sentence "Scott exists" can be meaningful only in the case where "Scott exists" means there is something corresponding to the word "Scott" or the word 'Scott' is not empty.²

Russell also tries to establish by several arguments the point that sentences of the form "a exists" are meaningless where "a" is a proper name. And his argument rests solely on his theory of types, predicates and proper names. He says :

The words "a exists" are meaningless. It is only of descriptions - definite or indefinite that existence can be significantly asserted; for if "a" is a name, it must name something : what does not name anything is not a name.³

1 Frege, G., Translations from the Philosophical writings of Gottlob Frege, edited by Peter Geach and Max Black, Third Edition, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p.51.

2 Frege, G., Posthumous Writings, translated by Peter Long and Roger White, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, p.60.

3 B. Russell, Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1956, pp.178-179.

And his view about the predicate is that if something is a predicate then it is possible at least to conceive of a situation where the predicate does not apply to a object. But in the case of "a exists", where "a" is a proper name, it is not possible to conceive of a situation where "a exists" is false. Because the meaning of a logically proper name is its denotatum which cannot be without its existence. "The notion of "existence" have several forms ... but the fundamental form is that which is derived immediately from the notion of "sometimes true".¹

Another argument of Russell in favour of the view that "a exists" or "Scott exists" is meaningless is as follows :

When you take any propositional function and assert of it that it is possible, that it is sometimes true, that gives you the fundamental meaning of existence ... when you say "Unicorns exist", you are not saying anything that would apply to any unicorns there might happen to be, because as a matter of fact there are not any, and therefore if what you say had any application to the actual individuals, it could not possibly be significant unless it were true ... and the same applies to when you say "Men exist". If you say that 'Men exist', and 'Socrates' is a man',

1 Ibid., p. 164.

therefore 'Socrates exists', that is exactly the same sort of fallacy as it would be if you said 'Men are numerous', 'Socrates is a man', therefore 'Socrates is numerous', because existence is a predicate of a propositional function, or derivatively of a class.¹

But in Quine's Mathematical Logic we can find an opposite view. According to him singular existential proposition such as "Scott exists" is perfectly meaningful and is true. He says :

To say that something does not exist, or that there is something which is not, is clearly a contradiction in terms; hence '(x) (x exists)' must be true.²

Not only certain theoretical consideration but also some common belief may lead to the controversy whether an expression is meaningful or meaningless. The problem of meaninglessness arises in connection with religious language - especially if religious language is claimed as cognitive. Believers of the traditional Christianity and Judaism believe the factual character of the theological statements such as "God loves mankind", "God is good", "God is infinite" and so on. According to them theological statements are not only

1 B. Russell, in Logic and Knowledge, edited by Robert Charles Marsh, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1956, pp.232-233.

2 W.V.O. Quine, Mathematical Logic, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965, p.150.

cognitive but true also. In addition to scientific realities and facts, there are religious realities and facts also.

But their thesis about religious statement has been challenged by other philosophers and philosophical schools at different times. They attempted to show that religious statements are entirely meaningless by several arguments.

According to logical positivists like Ayer a sentence can be said to have literal significance (meaning) if and only if the proposition it expresses is either analytic or empirically verifiable (verifiable in principle at least) by human experience. Experience is relevant to the truth or falsity of a statement. So in determining the truth or falsity of a statement if experience is no way relevant then that sentence must be literally meaningless. And this is what happens to theological statements, according to the positivist. In determining the meaningfulness of an expression 'experience' is a crucial factor. The problem arises about the nature of experience or more clearly what is to be counted as experience. Is religious experience an experience or is it merely a kind of feeling? When one says 'I see the world to be a gift of God' what does one experience? Or is it that he merely feels something? And when the believers of the traditional Christianity and Judaism claim that in addition to scientific

realities and facts there are religious or psychological facts, what kind of facts they refer to. Is the division of facts into different categories like psychological or religious facts and ordinary facts tenable ?

Let us see that the answer to the question whether religious language is literally meaningful or meaningless depends wholly upon the kind of answer we give to the above question.

According to some philosophers the meaning of an expression or word(s) varies in different context. The word 'experience' used in the context of religion has a meaning different from its usage in the context of science. The method of religion has an experimental character but it is different in nature from that of science. Scientific method is observational in character and observation essentially depend on sense-experience. But the experience of the Supreme Reality is non-sensible. For we can not even think of the conditions under which it can be said that we have a sensible experience of the Supreme Reality. And this non-sensible experience can be understood in the context of religious language only. The positivists contention that religious language is meaningless because they are not verifiable by experience is not tenable according to those philosophers because positivists make no distinction between different

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kinds of experience and they view as if experience means sense = experience and nothing else.

Many philosophers regard religious experience as a proof of the existence of God. They maintain that it is possible for men to be immediately acquainted with God as in the case of sense-content. In opposing to their view positivists maintain that they do not deny that religious assertion may be true. Religious assertions may be true only if the man who asserts that he is seeing God is merely asserting that he is experiencing a peculiar kind of sense-content, he is experiencing a religious emotion or feeling. The autonomists¹ also take the view like that of the positivists. They maintain that " 'God exists' means 'God is love'" and also maintain that " 'God exists' is reducible to what is love without loss of meaning".² But the thesis of the reductionism is not at all accepted by the religious believers because it reduces ontological category into a psychological one. Ordinarily the man who says that he is experiencing God or seeing God is not saying that he is experiencing a religious emotion or feeling, but also that there exists a

1 Autonomists maintain that One's believe that God exists and an ordinary object exists is not of the same kind. In the case of God exists 'the belief that means belief in'.

2 Sengupta, — Logic of Religious Language, Prajna, Calcutta, 1978, p.44.

transcendental God who is the object of his emotion or feeling. For example, one who loves God also claims that love experience must have a perfect and infinite loved object. If there is no such object then love experience would not be possible. If 'God exists' means 'one feels in a certain way' then this ontic character of the religious believe will vanish.

From the above discussion does it follow that in addition to scientific objective realities religious objective realities need be attributed to religious assertions? The problem it seems, actually lies in the use of the term 'objective reality'. Those who believe that religious experiences must have some 'objective reality' have extended the meaning of the word 'objective' in such a way that ultimately they fail to give it any meaning at all. And that is why the statements about religious experience, or more simply, the religious statements seems to many people to be meaningless or nonsense.

Let us consider another controversial issue of whether the assertion made by the philosopher like "No empirical statements are certain", "There are no material things" are absurd or meaningless. According to Moore and Malcolm these statements are absurd or senseless. They have

used the paradigm case argument to prove their absurdity. Paradigm case argument goes from the actual use of words in our ordinary language to answer to the philosophical problems. It refuses to conduct philosophical discussion in a different way, with different rules from those of ordinary discussions. Argument from paradigm case states that words mean what a given language, its rules, customs and conventions say they mean. Philosophical theses which often go against the paradigm cases are surely absurd or senseless. The defender of the paradigm case argument try to prove the absurdity of the philosophical theses like "No empirical statements are certain", "There are no material things", in this way, "No empirical statements are certain" is absurd according to Moore, because we at least know for certain that there are several chairs in this room, and it would be absurd to suggest that we do not know it, but only believe it. Philosophical thesis that "There are no material things" is also absurd because the existence of two hands at least prove that there are at least two material things that exist. The essence of Moore's technique of refutation lies in the fact that these statements go against the ordinary use of language. In reply to these Moore's argument it may be said that when philosophers say that we never know for certain any material thing statements he is not stating any empirical fact. What

they deny is that the form of the speech such as "I know for certain that P" is proper where p is a material thing statement. This is an improper form of speech because this is not the type of statement which can fulfil the criterion of certainty. The criterion of certainty states that it is wrong to say that anything is certain if there is the slightest possibility that it will not happen. A priori statement can only fulfil this criterion of certainty. The phrase "know for certain", according to Ayer is properly applied only to a priori statements and not to empirical statements. Similarly, when a philosopher says that "There are no material things" he does not deny that 'material thing' plays no part in ordinary language. Denying material things he is not denying anything which the ordinary man believes. What they want to say is that man does not really see a material thing like cat, what he sees only some sense-data of a cat.

So it seems that the problem of absurdity or meaninglessness sometimes arise from the controversial issue of what should be the nature of philosophical language - the language philosophers used for their discussion. Philosophical theses seem absurd to those who believe that ordinary language should be the philosophers medium of discussion, while it seems perfectly meaningful to those who believe that

philosophers' statements are not to be interpreted in the same way as it is done by ordinary men.

Thus after discussing the various examples of expressions whose meaningfulness is obviously a matter of controversy among philosophers it seems that the concept of meaningfulness and meaninglessness cannot be used uniformly or univocally. Sometimes we cannot say instantly whether an expression is meaningless or meaningful. The concept of meaningfulness and meaninglessness are chequered concepts and are related to a plethora of items. Meaningfulness and meaninglessness may be determined against the background of linguistic and non-linguistic facts.

In this chapter I have randomly used the term "absurd" as synonymous for "meaningless". One may object that the term "absurd" cannot be used as a synonymous term for "meaningless" for some kind of arbitrariness is involved with the term "meaningless". While with the term "absurd" this type of arbitrariness is not involved. I am also agree that "absurd" cannot be always used as a synonymous term for "meaningless". But they may be used interchangeably in those cases where the meaningless expressions are not constructed through arbitrary or random combination of words.

but out of linguistic and non-linguistic illusion. The instances of meaningless expressions (although controversial) that I have taken for consideration in this Chapter are not at all arbitrary. So, I think, there is nothing wrong in using the word "absurd" and "meaningless" interchangeably.