

CHAPTER-VIII
REDUCIBILITY OF MEANINGLESSNESS

Chapter VIII

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From the discussions of the previous chapters it seems that the distinction between meaningful and meaningless is quite interesting and important. The distinction between 'meaningful and meaningless' is as genuine as the distinction between 'good and bad', 'truth and falsity', 'valid and invalid'. Philosophy of language may be pivoted on the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness as the logic and ethics is based on the basic distinction between 'validity and invalidity', 'good and bad' respectively. 'Meaningful' and 'meaningless' are, as if, additional words in the vocabulary of appraisal. It may not be always possible to state what is the exact meaning of an expression but it is quite possible to state whether an expression is meaningful or not. If human communication is to be something significant then with regard to any linguistic expression we have to say at least whether it is meaningful or meaningless. The purpose of using language is to communicate. And the very attempt of communication would fail if someone use the expression which is meaningless.

But the important and interesting point is that

some renowned philosophers do not give so importance to the concept of meaninglessness. According to some philosophers the concept of meaninglessness is not something new. It can be reduced into other concepts such as falsity and so on. The possibility of reducing the concept of meaninglessness to other concept(s) might render the triviality of the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Let us see whether meaninglessness can be reduced into other concept(s) or not.

Linguist Adrienne Lehrer says,

... An adequate linguistic description should be able to show explicitly what is wrong with sentences like "I saw a splendid odor", "cats can dogs", and "All spinsters are married to handsome men". Perhaps no definite line can be drawn between false and meaningless sentences. "The Rocks think profound thoughts" can be analyzed either as factually false or as linguistically absurd.¹

But his view is not satisfactory. Because (1) he did not make any distinction between sentence and statement. Sentence may not be either true or false. Statement can only be said to be either true or false. Sentences are

1 Adrienne Lehrer, "Meaning in linguistics" in Theory of Meaning edited by Adrienne and Keith Lehrer, Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970, p.9.

used to make statements. (2) A linguistically absurd sentence can not be used to make a false proposition. A false proposition can be made only by a meaningful sentence. Being meaningful, it seems, is the prerequisite condition of sentence's to be a proposition or statement.

John Hospers says,

... A false proposition asserts a possible states of affairs to be actual when it is not (for example, "It rains everyday all over the world") a meaningless sentence expresses no proposition whatever, for there is no state of affairs whose actuality is being asserted.¹

N.V. Banerjee also comes to the conclusion that the concept of meaninglessness is not a new concept. It can be understood in terms of contradiction or falsity. In proving that the concept of meaninglessness can be reduced into the concept of falsity he takes help from the English dictionary where the word "meaningless" is synonymous with the word "absurd". The word "absurd" however has its several synonymous words like "incongruous", "inconsistent" and so on. He says the following :

'incongruity' or 'inconsistency' must be either factual or logical. So meaninglessness

1 John Hospers, Introduction to Philosophical Analysis, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967, p.67.

should mean either factual or logical. So meaninglessness should mean either factual or logical inconsistency. In the former sense it is obviously indistinguishable from and in fact the same as falsity; and in the latter it is but another name for invalidity.¹

But the words 'false' and 'inconsistent' are not the same level of appraisal. Strawson nicely made this point clear. He says :

... A slightly more difficult distinction is that between the criticism we offer when we declare a man's remarks to be untrue and the criticism we offer when we declare them to be inconsistent. In the first case we criticize his remarks on the ground that they fail to square with the facts; in the second case we criticize them on the ground that they fail to square with one another. The charge of untruth refers beyond the words and sentences the man uses to that in the world about which he talks. But the charge of inconsistency does not in this way refer to anything outside the statements that the man makes.²

Moreover in uttering the phrase 'factual inconsistency' it

1 N.V. Banerjee, Language, Meaning and Persons, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1963, p.91.

2 P.F. Strawson, Introduction to Logical Theory, University Paperbacks, Methun & London, 1952, p.1.

seems, he commits a mistake. Facts are as they are. We never apply the appraisal 'consistency', 'inconsistency', 'validity', 'invalidity' to facts. We apply these appraisal only to the relation between the statements that we make.

Some philosopher made a famous trichotomy of 'either true or false or meaningless', as applied to statements or propositions. Passmore also do the same in his Philosophical Reasoning. He says :

Philosophical arguments ... frequently issue in the conclusion that a disputed proposition is neither true nor false; rather, in what turns out to be somewhat special sense of the word it is meaningless.¹

N.V. Banerjee also implicitly accepted this trichotomy of 'either true or false or meaningless' by reducing the concept of meaninglessness into the concept of falsity. Because one concept is reducible into other (S) implies that they are the same level concepts. But this trichotomy is a bogus one and vanishes the distinction between sentence and statement. The sentence "All cricketers are very strong" is not meaningless. It is a perfectly significant sentence. But it does not make sense to ask of this sentence, whether it is true or false. It is about statements only

1 John Passmore, Philosophical Reasoning, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, 1961, p.81.

that the question of truth or falsity can arise. Words like 'meaningful', 'meaningless', 'grammatical', 'ungrammatical' belong to the first order vocabulary, while 'true', 'false' belong to the second order vocabulary. A meaningful sentence can only make a true or false statement. A meaningless sentence donot make any statement at all.

Those who says that the concept of meaninglessness is not a new concept and is reducible into the concept of falsity, it seems, are also influenced by the apparent similarity between the meaningless sentence and the self-contradictory statement. In both cases the general purpose of using language that is the intention to communicate something has been failed. Contradictions are, however, meaningful which I have discussed in Chapter III. Contradiction means cancellation. In contradiction predicate expression cancels or denies what is affirmed by the subject expression. The man who makes a contradictory statement makes a false statement, only a logically false or a priori false statement in distinction from ordinary false statement.

Another attempt of characterizing meaningless sentences as false (a priori false) has been made by Theodore Drange. The following sentences such as :

- (1) The theory of relativity is blue.
- (2) The number 5 weighs more than the number 6.

- (3) Socrates is a prime number.
- (4) Quadruplicity drinks procastination.
- (5) Smells are loud.
- (6) I have eaten a loud clap.
- (7) Moral perfection is a prime number.
- (8) Chemistry is a greater ordinal than the
concept of truth.

are all meaningless, according to Theodore Drange, because they involve a crossing of types or type boundaries. They are meaningless or unintelligible when they are taken literally. He also says that sentences such as (1) - (8) need to be given some special interpretation in order to be understood. Some interpretation can be given to them which would render them not only meaningful but true also. For example, the sentence (2) could be uttered in a printing shop by a type setter. Sentences (3) could have reference to a numbered list of philosophers' name. But they are all meaningless if they are interpreted in an ordinary and straightforward way. In replying to the question what makes an expression type crossing, Theodore Drange gives two views. In Type Crossing he says in one place that the sentences (1) - (8) involve crossing of types and therefore meaningless in so far as their usual interpretations are concerned. They seem to be saying one type of thing something that has application only to another type of thing.

He also says in another place in the same book :

What makes a sentence a type crossing is the interpretation given to it, which is not necessarily its prima facie meaning. For example, consider the sentence :

(9) That mechanism has two springs in it.

Sentence (9) would normally be taken to be a perfectly meaningful sentence of English. But suppose the word 'spring' which appears in it, were understood to mean 'The first season of the year'. Then (9) would be a type crossing, being equivalent to "that mechanism has two first seasons in it".¹

That is some unusual interpretation of a given sentence may make the sentence in question as type crossing. Thus there are two ways of sentences being type crossing and therefore meaningless, according to Theodore Drange, (1) an usual way of interpretation would make some sentences type crossing and (2) an unusual interpretation of some sentences would make them type crossing. But he clearly states "... let the term 'type crossing' be understood ... as referring to sentences which are like (1) - (8) in the specified way".¹ The unusual interpretation of sentences would make most of the meaningful sentences that we use in our daily life as type crossing and hence meaningless. There is no reason to take seriously his second interpretation of type crossings.

1 Theodore Drange, Type Crossings : An Interpretation of Meaningless Sentences. The Hague, Mouton, 1966, p.13.

2 Ibid., p.13.

Let us discuss whether type crossings, exemplified in sentences (1) - (8), can be characterized as false (a priori false) as it is demanded by Theodore Drange. He claims that type crossings can be characterized as false. And this follows, he says, from the principle that negations of type crossings are true (a priori true) and therefore meaningful. He has given some proofs in favour of his view. One example of such proofs is the following :

- (1) The theory of relativity is a theory.
- (2) Theories are abstract entities.
- (3) No abstract entities are concrete entities.
- (4) Only concrete entities are colored.
- (5) Only colored entities are blue.
- (6) Therefore, the theory of relativity is not blue.

He says that the conclusion is a priori true and hence meaningful as it is logically follows from the premises each of which is a true statement. And therefore the type crossings themselves can be legitimately characterized as a priori false.

But the theory that negation of type crossings are a priori true and therefore type crossings themselves may be legitimately characterized as a priori false seems unacceptable because the theory of relativity is such a kind of thing about which no empirical predicate like blue, green, red,

heavy, light and so on can be applied or denied to be applied. "The theory of relativity is not blue" also is a meaningless sentence, it cannot be a meaningful sentence because a significant sentence only can be significantly contradicted or negated. Arthur Pap also says that the negation of a meaningless sentence is meaningless. And if a sentence is meaningless then the question whether the statements made by these sentences are true or false do not arise. Pap opposed the view that the negation of type crossings are true (a priori) in this following way :

In ordinary parlance, a rejection of a statement of the form "X is blue" as false is equivalent to the assertion that X has some colour other than blue; similarly, were one to reject "X weighs more than Y" as false, one would implicitly assert that either X and Y have the same weight or Y weighs more than X, and so on.¹

So there is no question of describing or characterizing type crossings as (a priori) true. They are simply meaningless as the type crossings themselves are. Only contradictory statements are said to be false a priori. As contradictions

1 Arthur Pap, "Types and Meaninglessness", Mind Vol.69, 1960, p.41.

are the negation of analytic statements which are true a priori. Moreover, Theodore Drange attempts to prove that the negations of type crossings are meaningful by way of their being true. But the sentences being meaningful is the prerequisite condition of its being true but not vice versa.

The concept of meaninglessness is not reducible into the concept of falsity is also evident from the poetic uses of language. In poetry there occurs many expressions which are semantically incorrect and therefore meaningless. In poetry we find many instances of such semantic violations forming strange but interesting aesthetic images. Take Dylan Thomas's phrase "a grief ago" as an example. "Ago" is a word ordinarily used with words specified by some temporal feature: "a week ago", "an hour ago", "a month ago", "a century ago" but not "a table ago", "a dream ago" or "a mother ago". When Thomas used the word "grief" with "ago" he was adding probably a durational time feature to the word for poetic effect. But poetry can never be said to be false. Though it can be meaningless or nonsense. So the concept of falsity and the meaninglessness is not the same concept.

There are other sentences which sound like English sentences but make no sense at all because they include some words which have no meaning, they are "uninterpretable". One can only interpret them if one impose some meaning for each

meaningless or nonsense word. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is probably the most famous poem in which most of the content words have no meaning - they do not exist in any of the English lexicon of the world. Yet all the sentences sound as if they are the perfect English sentences .

He took his vorpal sword in hand,
Long time the manxome foe he sought.
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood a while in thought.

Or take some lines from Sukumar Roy's The Blighty Cow.

A very strange bird is the Blighty cow
You can see him at Haru's office now.
He has dreamy eyes in a very long face,
His sleek black curls are neatly in place.

We do not know what the word 'vorpal' and 'the Blighty cow' means. We can say that the sentence in which the words like 'vorpal' and 'the Blighty cow' occurs are meaningless but never say that they are false.

From the above discussions it may be said that the concept of meaninglessness and the concept of falsity are two different concepts. So there may not arise any question of reducing meaninglessness into falsity or characterizing meaningless as false. Attempt of characterizing meaningless as false may not be successful.