

A THEORY OF MEANING

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Individuals utter or write words and groupings of words; often if not usually, they mean something by them. For instance, I mean something now when I am typing these words.

What an individual means by a word sometimes, if not always, is dependent on the individual, on what he believes, and on his memories; and so on what kind of life he has lived and what kind of experiences he has had, the manner in which he learned the word, and so forth. For instance, someone who lives in a hot climate will surely mean the word 'cold' in a different way than someone who comes from a cold one. Indeed the same individual sometimes, if not usually or always, means the same word in different ways. After all, his memory and experiences will change, even if a little, between uses. For instance, a person who lives in a hot climate and then moves to a cold climate, will surely mean the word 'cold' in a different way, because he has learned something and has had new experiences. Still, it would be incorrect to identify the meaning of the word with any of these parameters, because even two people, with exactly the same lives and experiences, could, or indeed would, mean different things by the same word, just because they are different individuals to begin with, and so have been influenced by their experiences in different ways.

If one needs an image or metaphor of meaning, then I would suggest the roots of a tree, which are intricate and run deep into the ground, drawing from the soil in which they lay.

What I mean cannot be understood exclusively in terms of causing beliefs in an audience. Two people uttering the same sentence to a third person would presumably cause the same belief in that person, yet again it would seem that they could or do mean differently. Moreover, sometimes I talk to myself. It would seem I mean approximately what I mean when I speak to another person, yet this is more *caused* by a sort of belief, than *causing* it.

Individuals participate in a community of language speakers - learning, teaching, correcting, and just speaking or writing. A single individual may participate in several communities - e.g. the same individual may belong to the community of American English speakers as well as the community of biochemists or the community of Bostonian English speakers. A community is not limited to individuals who currently speak the language. It also consists of writings and other preserved instances of the language - for example, dictionaries and books and movies.

There is a tendency to a certain core commonality in the way people of a community mean certain words, so that people can understand what other people mean when they speak. 'Cold' is usually used in roughly the same way and for the same situations, for people who are part of the same community.

Note that there are many words whose meanings are known or used only by a small section of the over-all community. For instance, some words are only understood by scientists of a certain discipline. Or more simply, there are uncommonly used words which are known only by people with large vocabularies.

Let's call the way an individual means a word a *personal* meaning, and the way the community means a word a *community* meaning. The two depend on one another. Community meanings are in part a function of the personal meanings of the individuals making up the community. The personal meanings develop in large part because of an individual's interaction with the community and his assimilation of the community meaning.

Because in general different people will mean the same word differently, one cannot and should not identify a personal meaning with a community meaning. That is, the personal and community meaning may well, if not will, be different, and it is an error to assume that they are the same (e.g. introspecting how one means a particular word and concluding or assuming that is how the community means it).

Individuals are able to reflect on their past meanings to a certain extent, because I am able to remember the context of the use of a word and reason how the word must have been meant in order to make sense in that context. I recall when I meant 'milk' this morning, that my meaning had something to do with a white, liquid substance. But the context does not and cannot decide more subtle points, so I am not, however, able to recall whether I meant it this morning such that the liquid comes from a cow.

Individuals are sometimes able to reply to questions about how they mean the word and whether it applies in a certain context or not. For clear-cut situations, one would expect the community to be nearly unanimous in their answers. (Is this a *cat*?) In these instances the community meaning can be identified with the nearly unanimous view; for one thing, with such cases, when a member answers differently, the rest of the community simply maintains that he is just not in correct command of the language and so is considered outside of the community. But for difficult situations - and after all, philosophers tend to be interested in difficult situations (Is this *just*?) - the community is not apt to be unanimous but will be split, with a certain percentage saying that the word applies and the rest not. It makes little sense to say that the community meaning of the word is decided by the majority's view; rather, the community meaning incorporates the split. Perhaps the community acknowledges the existence of sub-communities which *do* agree. Or perhaps the community meaning depends on every individual's meaning (as well as dictionary definitions, uses in books and movies, and so on), in which case the community meaning would be *different* if the majority's size changes; that is, it is different if 55% think a certain situation is just than if 70% think it is. And it would also be different even if the answers of everyone remains the same, but the intensity of feeling changes.

One would expect the community to be able to agree more easily for terms which are concrete and which are related to parts of the world which can be seen or touched or

otherwise experienced, and for which one can easily get corrective feedback from the community. Again, philosophical terms tend not to be like this. So one would expect less commonality, among the entire community or even just between two individuals, for the meanings of philosophical terms.

There is clearly a different context in using a word spontaneously and reflecting afterwards on its meaning or being confronted with an example and having someone tap their fingers and asking, *Well which is it?* So, if one accepts that how one means a word can depend on its context or environment, then clearly the personal meaning of the word may not be the same in its spontaneous as in its reflective use. This sets a limit to how well we can know what our personal meaning is or was, and the same caution carries over to community meanings.

It is an assumption even that meanings are coherent. It is possible, for certain meanings, that our memories and experiences pull in different ways; for instance, we can be unrealistic, and we can want too much. Or, even if coherent in any or every particular instance, because only one set of memories or experiences is being called upon, different, even succeeding, instances may be contradictory. So when I reflect upon the meaning of a word in some kind of over-all way, as I might do when I think philosophically (e.g. trying to think about the question *What is just?*), and try to conjure up *all* sets, I may have intuitions which are conflicting.

So for example I (and I think others) would say on the one hand that a society without inequality is more just than one with, while on the other that it is just that a person, who works harder than another, earns more. By concentrating on either one of these intuitions, that is, on either of these two sides of the meaning of 'just,' one will evidently draw very different conclusions about what is just. One can try to resolve the contradiction by placing restrictions on the framework of either intuition; but in doing so, one is no longer dealing with the idea of justice itself but rather something else, with certain similar features.

Meanings are not like a mineral which one can view from all angles and whose interior one can penetrate and analyze. They are essentially inchoate and nebulous. Philosophical problems which turn on what the meaning of a word is exactly, can thus be irresolvable, in the sense they cannot be definitively or completely answered. Expecting that one can always resolve questions which turn on the meaning of a word - by putting more stress on it than it can bear - is thus a philosophical error. *Naming and Necessity* is an example, by no means the only one, of a philosophical work which commits this mistake over and over again (e.g. for "gold," "lightning," and most importantly "necessity" itself).

Being unclear in what one means, can produce or transplace error or even inconsistency from one's meaning to one's discussion and conclusions. It might seem that one of the first orders of philosophical business should thus be clarification. While it may indeed be valuable, one must be careful not to be fooled into thinking that the clarification is the original. It is, of course, something new - precisely because it is

clearer. And the more or more sharply one needs to clarify, the less and less like the original it is.

Of course one cannot clarify perfectly. For any clarification involves words or actions, which themselves cannot be perfectly clear. For instance, sometimes an individual will explain how he means "existence" in terms of a metaphor - for instance, that mathematical objects exist because they are "external" to us or because we can "perceive" them. The clarity of "exist" is no way improved by the explanation, as "external" or "perceive" reproduce, rather than reduce, its opacity.

If a term is defined or clarified, any subsequent discussion should pass the 'plok' test. That is, one should be able to substitute the word 'plok' to stand for the definition or clarification, rather than using the original term, without diminishing any of the conclusions drawn.

Even if a person's meaning is unclear or just outright incoherent, it is still *his* meaning, relevant and related to *his* life and experiences.

In the end, a philosopher can, if he is very careful, answer some of his own philosophical questions; but cannot control whether or not he answers someone else's.