

The metaphysics of meaning III (and a small lesson from 20th century philosophy)..

Consider the following two sentences: (a) “The board is white.” and (b) “White is the color of the board.” They are grammatically different as well as being physically distinct strings of symbols. They are distinct sentence tokens. However, when understood correctly, they have the same meaning. They are the same sentence type. Empiricist philosophers from the modern period of philosophy considered sentence types to be abstract ideas, e.g., (c) an idea of the white board, and advanced the following argument:

1. Distinct sentence tokens (a) and (b) are strings of physical marks which have nothing in common physically with one another, but they do have a common meaning.
- 2* If 1., then there is some thing in common to which they are related and this thing is an abstract idea.
3. Hence, then there is some thing in common to which they are related and this thing is an abstract idea.

The result of (3) is to psychologize meaning. We all know what (a) and (b) means and we all have our distinct ideas (c) of that meaning which is sufficiently general for us to identify other tokens as having the same meaning. But (c) is only my idea and it is an abstraction from my ideas of (a) and (b). If this argument is successful in accounting for how any single person understands the common meaning in a variety of tokens, it is unable to account for how many people can understand the common meaning of a variety of tokens. For while my abstract idea (c) is appropriately linked to my ideas of (a) and (b) - by being an abstraction from them - they are not linked to your ideas (a) and (b) in the same way. Furthermore, if you are Italian speaker, then when you understand the token (d) “La lavagna e bianca”, then our respective abstract ideas may well be very different even though we understand a common meaning. Indeed, it is hard to see how any one person’s ideas can provide the sameness of meaning to a potentially wide ranging set of tokens which may include foreign languages.

What has gone wrong here? The error in the original “Platonic” argument was to presume that “having a common meaning” implies “having something in common.” This means that when two sentences have a common meaning, then each sentence literally has the same thing as a part of itself. If this is so, then this thing in common between two physically distinct sentences must be non-physical. This second version of the argument takes “having a common meaning” more like “having a common source.” This means that when two sentences have a common meaning, then each sentence stands in some relationship to some other thing, i.e., an idea from which it derives its meaning. But now it seems clear that no one’s abstract idea could stand in such a relationship to all possible tokens!

Recall that empiricists believed that meaning was best understood as an idea. Indeed, they thought that our ideas were the best candidates for a psychologically realistic

account of meaning. For example, when I learn that (c) “Lory ha un naso piccolo,” means the same as tokens (a) and (b), I now have an idea of what (c) means and I understand that it is the same as the meaning of both (a) and (b). However, we can now ask what makes my abstract idea correct. Afterall, mistakes can be made. My ideas of the tokens (a), (b), and (c) are concrete and, as my subsequent idea of the common meaning that these tokens share is not identifiable with the idea of any token, we can call this an abstract idea. This suggests that meaning, or sentences types, are simply abstract ideas, not abstract objects.

Wittgenstein and Following a Rule.

The 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein believed that meaning was best understood as use. Afterall, we come to believe that someone understands that (a) and (b) mean the same thing, when they use (a) and (b) correctly. It is not enough that someone says I understand (a) and (b) or that I have a correct abstract idea (c). Because, if that person’s usage of (a) and (b) is not correct, then that person does not understand (a) and (b). This allows us to rephrase the key second premise of our argument as follows:

1. Distinct sentence tokens (a) and (b) are strings of physical marks which have nothing in common physically with one another, but they do have a common meaning.
- 2** If 1., then when we understand the common meaning of (a) and (b), we are able to correctly use (a) and (b).
3. Hence, when we understand the common meaning of (a) and (b), we are able to correctly use (a) and (b).

We are all familiar with premise 1. Premise 2. depends on taking the phrase “having a common meaning” to mean “having a common use.” When various people all understand the common meaning of (a) and (b) and other tokens of this type, then these people use the tokens in a common way.