Philosophy 2101 - Introduction to Symbolic Logic Lory Lemke

The metaphysics of meaning II (and a small lesson from modern philosophy).

Recall the following: two sentences: (a) "Lory has a small nose." and (b) "Lory's nose is small." As distinct physical strings of symbols (as well as grammatically distinct), they are distinct sentence tokens. However, as they have the same meaning, they are the same sentence type. So it is clear that sentence types, or meanings, are not just sentence tokens like (a) and (b).

We come to know sentence tokens like (a) and (b) through experience: we see them. This is explained in part by the occurrence of a causal relation between the sentence tokens (strings of physical marks), their illumination by light waves, and the subsequent stimulation of our visual sense organs. Indeed, if someone says they see the token (a), but there is no such token in their field of vision, then we say that it is a hallucination or just a plain mistake. The physical string of symbols plays an important causal role in our knowledge of it. This presupposes a view of knowledge like the following: if we come to know that p, then it is by some causal relation with p.

According to the "Platonic argument" outlined on the previous handout on this topic, sentence types are best understood as abstract, non-physical, objects. If this is so, then the above causal account of how we know sentence tokens cannot work because there can be no causal relation between abstract (non-physical) objects and us. The best parallel is to say that meaning is the object of our mental intuition or apprehension. However, it is unclear how our minds can intuit non-physical objects which are independent of our minds. Psychologically, it seems more straightforward to say simply that I *abstract* to the idea of the meaning of the tokens (a) and (b). If this is true, then in order to account for sentences types we only need to consider abstract ideas, instead of abstract objects.

Recall the two premises of the previous argument for abstract objects.

1. Distinct sentence tokens (a) and (b) are strings of physical marks which have nothing in common physically, but they do have a common meaning.

2. If 1., there is some thing in common which they all share among them and this thing is non-physical, e.g., proposition (e).

The conclusion of this modus ponens argument concludes that there exist non-physical abstract objects that provide meaning to our sentences. If we look at the premises, the first is uncontroversial. The consequent of the second premise is a conjunction of two parts. The first assumes that "having the same meaning" implies "having the same thing in common." This means that when two sentences have the same meaning, then tokens (a) and (b) literally share a common part. A good analogy would be Siamese twins sharing the same internal organ. The second part simply follows from this assumption. Since the tokens (a) through (b) have no common physical part because they are physically distinct and, since a part must be either physical or non-physical, then there is

only one alternative: the common part that provides tokens with meaning must be non-physical.

The first assumption of this second premise can be rejected. "Having the same meaning" does not imply "having the same thing in common," because there is an alternative reading that suggests that it is like "having the same friend." This means that when two sentence tokens have the same meaning, then each token stands in some relationship to something else that is not a literal part of either token. An analogy would be two siblings sharing the same parent. This means that there is an interpretation of the phrase "common meaning" such that the conditional as it is stated in the above second premise is false. This alternative interpretation directs us not within, but outside of tokens in order to specify that which provides meaning to tokens.

Empiricists in the modern period of philosophy, following upon the earlier considerations of the difficulty of coming to know abstract objects, believed that meaning was best understood as something mental, in particular, an idea. They thought that our ideas were the best candidates for a psychologically realistic account of meaning. 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). 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.

This gives us a new version of the argument concerning meaning:

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, there is some thing in common to which they are related and this thing is an abstract idea.

The argument remains a simple modus ponens. The first premise simply restates the distinction between sentence tokens and types. The second premise is a conditional and the wording of its consequent is different from the above "Platonic" argument, as it interprets "sameness of meaning" in a different way. The "some thing" is not a proper part of each token, but it is something distinct from, but related to, each token. This allows us to offer a psychologically straightforward account of how we come know the meanings of sentence tokens. We come to know sentence types by *abstracting* to the idea of the meaning of the tokens (a) and (b). If this is true, then in order to account for meaning we only need to consider abstract ideas, instead of abstract objects.