

The Meaning of "The Meaning of Meaning."

by

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When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge I listened for several years to the Lectures of two celebrated philosophers. They spoke at the same hour in the same building, one on the ground floor, the other just above him on the second floor. Each spent much of his time discussing the views of the other. Dr. A, on the ground floor, would say several times an hour, "I cannot imagine what Professor B *means* by saying..." and just as often Professor B would say, "I do not pretend to be able to grasp Dr. A's *meaning*." The only point upon which they ever seemed to agree was that the other "could not possibly *mean* what he said."

After some years of this, it began to dawn upon me that there must be something radically wrong with their use of language if two very able and acute and distinguished men behaved so strangely. At the same time I noticed that neither of them ever spent any time discussing *meaning* itself; and a little inquiry showed that other philosophers did not behave very differently in this regard, although the word '*meaning*' was as constantly in the mouths.

A very astute English woman, Lady Welby, who had been Lady in Waiting to Queen Victoria, used to urge our philosophers, psychologists and linguists to look into this matter. She had been struck by the frequency with which serious discussions turned into disputes about words. This convinced her that language often betrayed and misled men who thought deeply, and that a new science, the science, of 'SIGNIFICS' or of 'SYMBOLISM' was badly needed. But few of these upon whom she urged this opinion ever understood 'what she *meant*.' Among the few was Mr. C. K. Ogden, then a young classical scholar of great brilliance and promise at Magdalene College, Cambridge. The war, however, prevented him from

doing much work upon the subject although his position as Editor of the famous English war-time weekly paper, *The Cambridge Magazine* gave him an unrivalled opportunity to study the uses and abuses of works in propaganda and politics.

In 1918 Mr. Ogden and I began a discussion of *Meaning* which went on for more than a year almost continuously. His extraordinary range of learning and wide knowledge of contemporary European thought upon an unusual variety of subjects, coupled with his rooted mistrust of accepted opinions were great advantages. My interest was rather that of the psychologist and literary critic. These different approaches enabled us to cover the subject in a way which a single mind could hardly have done. Further, we soon grew able to collaborate with an unusual degree of ease and enjoyment. Practical experience in collaboration is very desirable for those who wish to work at this subject, since the study of *meaning* is really the study of the instruments by which men understand one another, and nothing tests understanding so much as collaboration in original and constructive work. In addition, this study of *meaning* is apt to be disheartening and two workers can more easily remain cheerful than one.

As we explored the history of the subject we discovered that very many great authorities in the past has deplored the absence of a science of *meaning*. John Locke, one of the three great English Philosophers, wrote a whole volume on the matter, the Third Book of his great *Essay*. This Third Book was devoted to the difficulties which the use of words occasions in discussion and in the study of difficult and abstract matters. This, he said, "cost me more pains to express than all the rest of my *Essay*," Yet Locke's Third Book is never read and is usually unknown even to professional students of English Philosophy.

We soon learnt not to be surprised by this neglect. Great economists, sociologists, political theorists, logicians, moralists, aestheticians and experts in all the abstract sciences can easily be found agreeing in the prefaces to their works that words are in fact the very Devil, and that all these sciences are being endlessly delayed by the ambiguities and shifting *meanings* of words.

But everyone who has yet attempted to discover exactly what is wrong with language as an instrument for abstract discussion, or who has tried to improve matters, has been treated in the past as a crank, if not as a fool, for his pains. A deep-lying, very strong, resistance is offered by most minds to the suggestion that we do not know what we *mean*. Such a view seems to take away the foundations of our existence and, since a close study of *meaning* usually shows that we are far less clear in our *meaning* than we suppose, this distaste for investigation is easily explained.

The physical sciences are the great exception to this universal *verbalism*, as this disease—the use of words without sufficient scrutiny of meanings—may be called. These sciences are free from it because ultimately everything said by physics rests upon something that is done in a laboratory. Physics, though the fact is often hidden by its mathematical complexities, deals in the end with things that can be touched, seen and handled. The misleading influences of words and symbols do not come into physics except, it may be remarked, at those obscure confines of the subject where we do not yet know whether the latest utterances of Einstein, or Schroedinger are physics or mathematics.

By contrast, all the studies which rest, not upon physics but upon psychology, and these include ethics, æsthetics, sociology, political theory, economics—in fact all the subjects which are of human interest—are hampered and sometimes nearly paralysed by verbalism. Psychology itself, though full of new life and ready to advance, suffers disastrously from its uncontrolled and misleading vocabularies.

To take one example—the word 'meaning' itself is an important term in psychology. A large part of the task which we set ourselves consisted in a description and classification of the different senses (or *meanings*) of the word 'meaning.' We found, of course, that it has several meanings, but we were hardly prepared for the degree to which in current discussions these *meanings* were confused. We found it necessary to distinguish no less than 16 different

senses of 'meaning,' in order to clarify the types of linguistic misunderstandings we encountered.

The picture of eternal human misunderstanding thus opened out seems at first sight depressing. But a very encouraging fact soon appeared. In order to check our results as regards the word 'Meaning' we also examined, in the same fashion, other words which are famous, and should be infamous, in controversy, among them the word 'Beauty'. Although the question 'What is Meaning?' never has been much discussed, the question 'What is Beauty?' has been the occasion for endless dispute. We found, of course, that 'Beauty' has many senses and also that these senses run parallel to those of the word 'Meaning' in an interesting and suggestive manner.

The result of the two investigations was the beginning of a new technique of study which we hope to develop in the never future. A student who has made himself familiar with the senses of the words 'Meaning' and 'Beauty' at once finds himself in a very advantageous position if he turns to the study of 'Wealth' 'Truth', 'Good', 'Value', 'Progress', 'Life' or any other of the great watchwords of the social sciences. He will know already some of the ways in which these instruments of discussion are likely to mislead him unless critically handled.

But words besides being instruments of intellectual discussion are also powerful agents for swaying our feeling and influencing our attitudes to life. How powerful they can be is shown by Poetry, which in our modern civilization is becoming not less but more important in life. This branch of this subject called for a separate study which I undertook. Mr. Ogden meanwhile continued with the problem of fictions (logical, legal and others)—a problem originally raised by Bentham—and with the considerations pertaining to international and auxiliary languages. The result has been his very remarkable project, Basic English, May own attempt to apply whatever light we seemed to gain from our joint reflections on *meaning* incidentally brought out a fresh mass of evidence to show that words are not to be trusted. Even very well-educated readers, it appears,

only occasionally apprehend the various *meanings* of words in poetry with sufficient accuracy to make critical discussion desirable. A result, this, which only our natural social prejudice, in favour of exaggerating the degree to which we normally understand one another, would make us doubt.

It appears then that history as well as general literature must join the list of subjects urgently requiring a closer study of the modes of *meanings* than has hitherto been thought necessary. More obviously, all comparative treatments of literature require it—especially when translation is in question. No one who has made any special study of ambiguity can regard translations with anything but suspicion, even in the case of cognate languages; and where languages so different as Chinese and English are concerned, the arguments in favour of a direct comparative study of their resources by the light of modern logical and psychological analysis seem very clear and pressing. Such a comparative survey of Chinese and English would certainly assist the theory of meaning, it would probably make important contributions to psychology and it would help to reduce the great dangers of inaccurate or one-sided translation. No one who considers, for example, the endless trouble that has been caused in the past by hasty and crude translations of the pivotal terms of Greek thought into Western languages will underrate these dangers. A crude translation of an important word produces a strain of bastard thinking which generations of scholars are sometimes not able to overcome.

This comparative survey would need the close collaboration of at least three students—a Chinese scholar with a taste for exploring impartially the subtleties of Chinese thought and especially the systematic ambiguities of Chinese philosophy; a translator with as free and plastic control of the resources of the two languages as possible, with a taste for definitions, and a cultivated distrust of accepted equivalences, thirdly, a student of Meaning whose business it would be to analyse, generalise and classify the linguistic situations which he observed arising in the course of the discussion. It is not likely that these various acqui-

rements aptitudes, and tastes will ever be combined in one mind. Yet to explore the real problems that contact between Chinese and Western thought will raise in the future they are all needed. The only possible plan is organised collaboration.

This project must not be confused with such undertakings as dictionary making or the compiling of a Thesaurus. It stands to them much as algebra stands to arithmetic. It would endeavour to reach a higher degree of generality; the theory of meanings is the attempt to *generalise* on the practice of definitions and of drawing distinctions. The lexicographer is concerned with the practical task of noting distinctions of meaning. When he has listed the various meanings of a word faithfully as he can, he passes on to another word. It is not his business to reflect upon the relations of these various meanings, or to compare various words in respect of the patterns which their several groups of associated meanings present. He has too much work in hand to attend to these matters; he must leave them to students with a different kind of interest in meanings, and equipment. The relation between them may be compared with that of the man of business to the economist, the engineer to physicist, or the physician to the physiologist or bio-chemist. The parallel will perhaps bear pressing.

More assistance from logico-psychological theory might bring to the linguist as great an increase of power as science has brought and is bringing to medicine. And at this moment the linguist is particularly in need of assistance. The two greatest systems of thought in the world are at last coming into close contact. To mediate between them they have only *words*, which every reflective person accustomed to discussion will recognise to be delicate and untrustworthy instruments. The only way to make them more reliable and to overcome their treacheries is through an improved and more critical discipline, making us more aware of the principles by which they work and better able to control their ambiguities and confusions. This is the case for a comparative theoretical survey of Chinese and English, and, in the practical sense, the 'meaning' of the study of *meaning*.