Ryle on Systematically Misleading Expresssions

G. J. Mattey

Fall, 2005 / Philosophy 156

Ordinary-Language Philosophy

- Wittgenstein's emphasis on the way language is used in ordinary situations heralded the beginning of a new philosophical movement.

- "Ordinary-language" philosophers try to dissolve philosophical problems by showing that they are based on some misinterpretation of ordinary language.

- More positively, they investigate ordinary language with an eye to discovering important ways in which it works.

- The movement was centered at Oxford University and hence is sometimes known as "Oxford philosophy."

- Among the leading practitioners of ordinary language philosophy at Oxford were Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin.

Systematically Misleading Expressions

- There are many expressions occurring in ordinary language which have two features:

    - They are perfectly well understood by those who use them in a non-philosophical way.
    - Their grammatical form improperly characterizes the facts which they record.

- Such expressions are called "misleading" because their improper form is not apparent in everyday usage.

- The misleadingness is "systematic" because "all expressions of that grammatical form would be misleading in the same way and for the same reason."

Philosophical Analysis

- "Philosophical arguments have always largely, if not entirely, consisted in attempts to thrash out 'what it means to say so and so.' "

- People use expressions in non-philosophical situations.

- Philosophers isolate from these a class of "certain more or less radical" expressions.

- Then they ask what all expressions of this class "really mean."

- To say that they analyze "concepts" or "judgments" is itself misleading (as will be seen below).

    - What the philosopher does is to try to discover the meanings of the general terms of certain sentences.

A Paradox of Analysis

- Why must the philosopher even ask what an expression "really means?"

- If the expression is used intelligibly, then there is nothing there to explain.

    - In fact, the philosopher must already know what it means if he is to analyze it.

- If the expression is not used intelligibly, then there is no reason to suppose they mean anytihng.

- "So there is no darkness present and no illumination required or possible."

Clarification

- Perhaps the task of the philosopher is to clarify expressions whose meaning is only confusedly known by those who use them in ordinary communication.

- If there is real confusion about the meaning, then the expression is not intelligible, and it is not the business of philosophers to clarify it.

- If there is no confusion in meaning, there may still be confusion in the conveyance of the meaning.

- But this sort of clarification is the domain of linguists, not philosophers.

- The expressions philosophers clarify are ones which are well-understood by their users but have an inappropriate grammatical form.

- If the grammatical form is taken literally by philosophers, they will be plunged into error.

Quasi-Ontological Statements

- The first class of "radical" expressions examined by Ryle is labeled "quasi-ontological."

- Quasi-ontological statements have the grammatical form of attributing existence to something, but they do not really do so.

  - Ryle exists.
  - God exists.
  - Satan does not exist.

- The grammar of these sentences indicates that it is about a subject (Ryle, God, Satan) who has existence as an attribute.

- Compare, "Ryle is a man."

  - The sentence is about Ryle, and it attributes to him the quality being a man.

The Misleadingness of Quasi-Ontological Statements

- Kant observed in 1781 that existence is not a real property of objects.

  - Thus he could deny that existence is a perfection, undercutting the ontological argument

- More recently, philosophers have observed that the logical subject of some quasi-ontological statements is not about a subject of attributes.

  - Given the truth of "Satan does not exist," Satan is not the subject of any attributes.

- This has come to be known as "the problem of negative existentials."

In Search of a Subject of Attributes

- It seems possible to preserve the claim that the logical subject of a sentence is the subject of attributes.

- The logical subject might be thought to be:

  - An idea, as with the idea of Satan,
  - A subsistent but non-actual entity, as with a subsisting but not existing Satan (Meinong).

- The problem with such attempts is that they are too liberal.

  - The truth of "Round squares do not exist" would imply either that there is an idea of a round square or that round squares subsist.

- With no other plausible fixes at hand, the claim that logical subjects are subjects of attributes should be rejected.

Clarification of Quasi-Ontological Statements

- We need to find another way of getting at the meaning of quasi-ontological statements.

- A clue can be found in the denial of the existence of kinds of things.

    – Carnivorous cows do not exist.

- The expression "carnivorous cows" is the logical subject, but it is not used "to denote the thing or things of which the predicate is being asserted."

- A reasonable analysis, which does not presuppose the existence of any thing or kind of thing, is:

    – "Nothing is both carnivorous and a cow."

- Using this as a template, we get the following analyses:

    – For "God exists": "Something, and one thing only, is omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely good."

    – For "Satan does not exist": "Nothing is both devilish and called 'Satan.' "

- In each case, some attribute is asserted or denied of an x which is not named in the statement.

The Trap

- People who utter statements such as "Satan does not exist" understand perfectly well what they are asserting.

- But there is a trap in that the grammatical form of the sentence seems to indicate the having (or not) by a subject of a specified status, e.g. existence.

- This is reflected in the use of various locutions:

    – (British Prime Minister) "Mr. Baldwin is a being," and (fictional character) "Mr. Pickwick is a nonentity."

    – "Mr. Baldwin is an actual object or entity," and "Mr. Pickwick is an unreal object or entity."

- But as negative existentials show, often there is no subject whose existential status is being affirmed or denied.

- The worst offenders are philosophers who make "Being" or "Reality" the subject of their propositions, or who treat "real" as a predicate.

The Diagnosis

- Ordinary people generally do not fall into the trap.

- And only some unwary philosophers are victims of it.

- Anyone who "abstracts and generalizes" is vulnerable.

- Such people want to know "what different facts of the same type" have in common.

- To do this, they must "use the common grammatical form of the statements of those facts as handles with which to grasp the common logical form of the facts themselves."

    - "Capone is not a philosopher" (denies a character of someone).
    - "Satan is not a reality" (appears to deny a character of someone).

Fictions

- Another example of the attempt to generalize based on grammatical form is this:

    - "Mr. Baldwin is a statesman" (affirms a character of someone).
    - "Pickwick is a fiction" (appears to affirm a character of someone).

- There is nothing in the world of which we can say "*There* is a fiction," as we can say of Dickens, *There* is a story-teller."

- Instead, we clarify the statement "Pickwick is a fiction" roughly as implying:

    - "Some subject of attributes has the attribute of being called Dickens and being a coiner of false propositions and pseudo-proper names."

Quasi-Platonic Statements

- A second class of systematically misleading expressions is that of "quasi-Platonic" statements, or statements seemingly about universals.

- Once again, there is a misleading parallelism in grammatical forms.

    - "Jones gave himself the prize" (affirms a character of someone).
    - "Virtue is its own reward" (appears to affirm a character about a universal).

- But it is absurd to plug the expression allegedly referring to a universal into the subject-position of the first sentence.

    - "Virtue gave himself the prize."

- Ryle would later call this kind of attribution a "category mistake."

- The correct clarifcation of "Virtue is its own reward" would be:

    - "Anyone who is virtuous is benefitted thereby."

Against Universals

- Ryle opines that all statements seemingly "about universals" can be clarified to show that they are not "about universals."

- If the need for "universals" is eliminated, then general terms need not be taken to stand for them.

- Then questions about what kinds of things "universals" are (such as were asked by Plato) turn out to be bogus.

- Doubly misleading are "Platonic" and "Anti-Platonic" assertions, which are quasi-ontological and quasi-Platonic statements.

  - "Equality is a real entity."

- Ryle does not commit himself to the elimination of "universals" in general, but only in some cases.

- As before, ordinary speakers know what they mean when using quasi-Platonic statements, and often their statements are true.

Quasi-Descriptive Phrases

- A third class of systematically misleading expressions concerns sentences with "the"-phrases.

- In many cases, these phrases are used "referentially" as descriptions of a unique individual (definite descriptions).

  - "The King of England."
  - "Tommy Jones is not the King of England."

- But in some statements they are used "non-referentially" and thus function as "quasi-descriptions."

  - "Poincaré is not the King of France."

- If "the King of France" were used referentially, there would have to be an entity intended as its denotation, but there is none.

- So definite descriptions are systematically misleading expressions.

The Meaning of an Expression

- There are many ways in which quasi-descriptions are misleading.

- One particularly important one occurs in "the meaning of expression 'x.' "

- It is not intended that there be a "meaning" in the way that there is a person about whom it is asserted "our village policeman is fond of football."

- So there is no need to assert that there are "concepts" to serve as the meanings of expressions.

- And questions about the character of "concepts," such as whether they are subjective or objective, are not about anything.

- Nonetheless, we can intelligibly discourse about meanings of expressions.

    - "The meaning of x is y" can be clarified as:
    - "x means what y means."

Occam's Razor

- A common feature of the types of systematically misleading that have been discussed is that they lead to the presumption of the existence of new sorts of objects.

    - Non-existent beings,
    - Universals,
    - Meanings.

- In each case, entities are multiplied needlessly.

- Thus Occam's injunction not to multiply entities without necessity can be understood in terms of grammatical forms.

    - "Do not treat all expressions which are grammatically like proper names or referentially used 'the'-phrases, as if they were therefore proper names or referentially used 'the'-phrases."

Some Puzzles

- In what sense are we to say that a grammatical form is proper to a set of facts, without lapsing into a Wittgensteinian picture theory or conventionalism?

- How are we to discover whether particular cases are systematically misleading? (They lead to paradoxes.)

- How can systematically misleading expressions be exhaustively catalogued?

- Can it be proved that an expression contains no systematic misleadingness at all?

- Does philosophy have a higher calling than merely to detect "the sources in linguistic idoms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories?"