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 anything.

“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 clarification of “Virtue is its own reward” would be:
  - “Anyone who is virtuous is benefited 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 idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories?”