

Philosophy of Language, Units 10-12 – Question 4: ‘Assess the philosophical significance of the claim that to understand a proposition is to know its truth conditions’

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The claim that to understand a proposition is to know its truth conditions presupposes truth realism as a condition for meaning, which is consistent with how we naively take propositions to work, at least in a global sense (12/243; 253), even though the link between any given proposition and its truth grounds may be indeterminable. This very indeterminacy, however, gives the realist presupposition little work to do in the account of meaning and, as Michael Dummett has shown (12/247-250), it undermines the meaning as use account itself. It is through the idea of general natures or types or conceptions—in other words, something like the idea of universals—that the meaning as use view of language can be shored up, and, in the process, the nature and role of truth realism is also clarified, though more work would still need to be done on that front.

The importance of truth realism is evident in Professor Klempner’s final dispatch of Dummett’s anti-realist scruples (12/263), *viz.*, that, whatever the challenges arising from the lack of effective decision procedures for any given proposition about the past, one *can know* the states of affairs intended by a proposition without knowing whether any of them obtain (11/223): we know what ‘rain’ means; we know what ‘ago’ means; and in plugging in the appropriate time reference, we come to know perfectly well what the proposition about rain in the past means even though its truth conditions are not effectively decidable (12/263). On this view, understanding the meaning of a proposition is to know what is the case *if* the proposition is true (12/265) and such knowledge presumes that there is a case about which it can be said, truly or falsely, that it is the case.

To the extent that our knowledge of what is the case if true is disconnected from any “final, definitive” knowledge of whether the relevant truth condition obtains (11/231), what is knowing the case a knowledge of? While truth realism, in a global sense, provides some kind of (minimal) account of this knowledge, one can discern here an opening for what is an echo of the Intuitionist critique of classical mathematics (12/254), *viz.*, that meaning can be read as generating its own truth conditions such that it can be said to be our invention, reflective of the

creative way we use words not only to apply to new situations of the same general type, but also to extend the range of application of any concept by stretching the meaning of concepts according to certain principles (11/224). Unlike natural numbers, however, and barring absolute skepticism, there is no deep doubt that reality exists independently of our minds and grounds meaning, at least globally. All the same, the dispatch of Dummett runs contrary to Klemperer’s earlier doubts about the efficacy of basing the meaning of propositions upon the meaning of individual words, citing examples like ‘colourless green ideas sleep furiously’ or ‘a rose has no teeth’ (11/223-5; 12/251). Klemperer notes that an understanding of the individual words does not fully suffice for manifesting one’s grasp of the statement as a whole, so if the ‘rain’-‘ago’ response is to carry the day something else has to be operative in understanding propositions, but what would this additional thing be and is this additional thing that which we need to have knowledge of to understand what is the case?

Klemperer offers a part response, noting that the very act of learning how to apply concepts includes an appreciation of “which combinations of a given concept word with other concepts make good sense” (11/224). Yet, something is missing still, and what we are relying upon is the idea of general natures, of a “general conception” (12/263)—of something like universals, really—which idea both grounds meaning and provides the generative soil for our extrapolations and new extensions (11/224): ‘ideas’ are just the sort of things which do not have colour (much less a colourless colour), nor are they the sort of things that sleep; nor is sleep, for that matter, the sort of thing (act) that can be done furiously.

One can see why, at this juncture, the alternatives of Platonism and mentalism / psychologism are seductive: where are we to locate these universals? One can also see, given the lack of effective decidability about the truth conditions concerning the nature of universals themselves, why full blown Platonism and mentalist/psychologistic options have had such staying power as fixed poles between which we sort out the question of meaning. Yet, the scruple about adding to our mysteries is well taken (12/252), and while Dummett seems to have provided a decisive

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argument against meaning as use due to the absence of effective decidability for certain kinds of truth conditions, the efficacy of that argument presumes a minimal threshold—or a particular model—of what use meaning requires.

If a time machine sent a crowd back the requisite million years, there may be frank disagreement along the lines of the heap paradox (3/63) about whether the rain proposition comes out true or false, but, despite the disagreement, has meaning failed? At a certain level of precision, yes, but if one steps back, no: with the heap paradox we understand the idea (the general nature, if you will) of a heap well enough to understand the nature of the paradox and the problem. Indeed, our very understanding of the paradox requires us to understand heapness at some level, despite all the attendant problems of defining the concept’s boundaries. The same can be said about the difficulties of meaning related to propositions about rain and the past. While the vague boundaries of such concepts may leave it unclear when precisely meaning fails it does not necessarily follow that meaning in a global sense has failed, and even the level of precision that is necessary for meaning to obtain may itself just depend on what the point is in using a term in any particular instance.

It is here that Klemperer’s genealogy of meaning is especially attractive, avoiding both platonic and narrowly psychologistic accounts and advancing along a broad path of metaphysical and truth realism, *viz.*, that concepts are: 1) operations of thinking and speaking; 2) associated with the use of concept words; 3) which are justified by having a ground; and 4) which have a point (sense), which predates its coinage “in the activities or ‘form of life’ surrounding it, or more precisely in the strain or pressure on linguistic resources that is eased when the concept word is coined.”(10/210) Given this, failing to grasp the sense of a concept is manifested in failing to competently use the concept, a use that is uninformed by a perception of its point (10/219). In the case of our time travellers, the point of the concept, ‘rain’, may be nothing other than the kind of weather event that will tend to make things wet up to and including a thorough soaking, and while all, going back in time, may disagree about whether there was or was not rain in the

particular instance they encountered, all the prudent ones, if given the chance, would, assuming they could not depend on the presence of reliable shelter, go with umbrellas or rain gear, suggesting that the sense meaning of ‘rain’ is perfectly understandable at some level, which understanding is manifested in the taking of appropriate precautions.

None of this gives us an adequate account of what our general conceptions are, and one can envision accounts that are consistent with each of meaning as use, Platonism or mentalism/psychologism, but, if we take seriously the view that language is, at root, an activity conducted amongst embodied agents acting in the world, what other starting point could there be than this very genealogy? Meaning, in this view, is something which arises necessarily out of the interaction of conscious, finite agents within a larger environment of multifarious processes which both do and do not act independently of those agents. The finitude associated with our embodiment and the particular conditions that need to be obtained for us embodied agents to persist as such give rise to angles of significance that either provide the basis of meaning or themselves constitute meaning at its most elementary (or primordial) level. While the details may not be clear it is not difficult to see that all concept usage is ultimately rooted in this initial act of coining a new word to ease the strain or pressure on linguistic resources associated with a certain activity or form of life, and that the very operation of thinking associated with the concept of universals is precisely the product of this interaction of conscious, finite agents with certain recurring patterns in the world that have a range of repeating concrete effects.