

Philosophy of Language, Units 13-15 – Question 5: Explain the meaning that you associate with the statement, 'I am XYZ'.

A' Amer Ather

As a preliminary matter, if we accept the view that there is a distinct, but incommunicable, meaning associated with the proposition 'I am XYZ', we become involved in an aporia if we also accept the view that truth conditionality commits us to a robust view of extension's necessity to meaning (15/327), and that truth conditions are indispensable to meaning (13/267). Because any perspectival meaning associated with the proposition 'I am XYZ' by its very nature does not have extension, it should fall under the category of private entities or objects, which, as the private language argument determines, do not provide any grounds for meaning.

What allows for the possibility for each of perspectival and extensional forms of meaning to hold is the anti-realist argument, as further developed in units 13 to 15, which delivers a severe drubbing to any robust idea of extension's necessity to meaning by reducing all talk of truth conditions to that of a convergence of judgment, thus laying the ground for the idea that mind is the fundamental bearer of meaning: for what else is a convergence of judgments other than one or more minds converging with one or more mental judgments made by other minds about the world? If mind is the primary locus of meaning, then we are on track to an account of meaning which involves mental representations, intentionality, and the domain of private objects. The separation between perspectival and extensional meaning is not absolute in this light. Yet the meaning associated with the proposition 'I am XYZ' continues to be a different kind of meaning precisely because it could never be the subject of a convergence of judgments given its exclusive, private, and incommunicable nature, absolutely unique to the utterer of the proposition notwithstanding its basis in a publicly intelligible, physically embodied proposition of the form 'I am XYZ', which, admittedly, does have an extensional sense. Interestingly, something similar can be said for propositions about color, or other phenomena, notwithstanding the physical existence of the object(s) over which those colour or other phenomenal experiences supervene.

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If physical objects, which have extension in the traditional sense, can have their meanings so bifurcated, it would appear that either there isn't any real difference between the two meanings—which, given what we have just observed about the nature of each kind of meaning, would be impossible—or that perspectival meaning is broader than extensional meaning, that it is of a different order altogether, and that it ranges over all objects, whatever their ontological status. Upon further consideration, there are any number of statements that have this perspectival property, where no one but the speaker of the words can appreciate how precisely he means those words notwithstanding the separate physical existence of the object of the proposition: 'This is my book collection;' '[XYZ] is my sister.'

So much for the preliminaries. What this meaning might be can begin to be answered by responding to Wittgenstein's analogizing of meaning to the exchange of cash or gifts, which, as far as it goes, provides a compelling argument against the idea that meaning is individually asserted *ex nihilo* and preserved by individual fiat. What this objection misses is that there are aspects of human experience that cannot justly be characterized in this way because they are a kind of givenness of reality itself: poets and songwriters report experiencing their creative process as being a kind of taking dictation; novelists describe their invention of memorable characters as being nothing other than an experience of them emerging into their consciousness fully realized as distinct persons. Talk of Muses may be literal or figurative, depending on the culture or the age, but the talk precisely captures this sense that one is being given something from outside oneself. By the same token, it is not inconceivable that, from time to time, as a result of our interaction with the world and its objects, we experience, much like an epiphany in a short story, that very perspectival sense that 'I am I and not another', that 'I am here', which experience is merely a bringing to the fore of what is a more fundamental existential reality.

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The transactional element which undergirds extensional sense meaning—arising as the result of an exchange between a speaker A and B each competent in the subject language—can therefore be said to subsist (though analogously) in the perspectival sense of meaning though there it arises out of the relation between the self and existence (or, more portentously, Being) as such. This relation is specifically of the self's sharing in, or being a part of, existence itself.

Given this, one might expect that, as the perspectival account of normativity suggests, perspectival meaning grounds meaning in its extensional sense. Yet, it is worth observing that the kinds of perspectival meaning associated with 'I am XYZ' may not be insulated from the influence of extensional forms of meaning either, particularly as they relate to such metaphysically contentious ideas as 'self' and 'existence'. What A might mean by 'I am A', may differ considerably or even in a material, if subtle, way depending on his metaphysical and religious commitments, especially as they concern the existence of Divine Being(s) or transcendent domains, and the soul. The Dalai Lama is said to have regarded a statue of Thomas Jefferson before saying, 'I was Thomas Jefferson'.¹ We are surely justified in expecting that the Dalai Lama's perspectival meaning of 'I am the Dalai Lama' is significantly different than what he would take himself to mean were he a thoroughgoing materialist. Yet, by the same token, a given perspectival sense may itself influence the metaphysical and (ir)religious commitments that one adopts as one's own.

We have run into the arms of an explanatory circle: the perspectival sense may determine the extensional sense which may determine the perspectival sense and so on. The pat resolution to this would be to recall anti-realism's contribution which permits us to hold both kinds of meaning together and which lays the ground for a primarily mental or intentional account of meaning, which would

¹ Trent Pomplun, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World*. (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1. The author does not relate the Lama's precise words, however.

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suggest, further, that explanatory priority goes to perspectival sense since it lies squarely within the domain of the mind. That perspectival sense also ranges over all manner of objects, whatever their ontological status, is another mark in favour of its priority.

The difficulty remains, however, that we are again on the cusp of something that lies beyond language, if it does not precede it. We use the social tools of language to explicate something that, despite the chains of mutual influence alluded to above, may, by its very nature, have only a passing and accidental relationship to whatever propositional content happens to express it or be expressed by it. It is not impossible that a certain perspectival sense could be associated with a proposition "P" as easily as a "not P", but how are we to judge? Indeed, this sense of meaning is so private that even the question of whether there is any personal sense of meaning associated with the words 'I am XYZ' may depend upon who is answering the question, and, for lack of the norms ordinarily associated with extensional forms of meaning, who is to say that I am wrong to deny (for myself, anyway) that there is even such a thing as a perspectival meaning associated with the words 'I am XYZ'?

There is a vista, however, that the idea of perspectival meaning opens on to, and that is that whether our considered attention is on objects 'out there' or 'in us', what undergirds that attention is a primordial sense of significance, understood, as a first approximation, as that which is found to be worthy of attention: something, therefore, which has value—however that value is determined—which commands (or should command) the direction of our consciousness upon it, with there being a proportionate relationship between the perceived value of the thing and the extent, degree or duration of the attention paid. This sense of significance, though in us, does not come about from our efforts but seems to be the essence and inheritance of all animal life, the very basis of survival. Yet, it does not itself have a propositional content as such, and, as the case of animals suggests, it is not a sufficient

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condition for language, even though it is not difficult to see how language derives its ontological heft from its presence.

If perspectival meaning reduces to this sense of significance, then perspectival meaning does not ground linguistic meaning after all. The aporia that we began with continues to be compelling despite our efforts, with the idea of perspectival meaning being the worse for it.