**Snapshots of Meaning: Augustine, Swift, and Carroll**

Philosophy 360  
Spring 2015

**WHAT IS MEANING?**

We can get at what emerges in the readings with the following three questions:

I. In what does meaning consist?
   
   A. Meaningful terms and expressions typically line up with the world in some way—they stand for or refer to it. Perhaps meaning is exhausted by the thing to which the term or expression refers.
      
      1. As Swift writes, “words are only names for things” (235), which is apparently what he means when he says that “all things imaginable are but nouns.” (234)
      
      2. Names would appear to be paradigmatic examples of meaningful expressions, on this model.
   
   B. On the other hand, perhaps meaning is richer than this: perhaps in addition to referents, meaning corresponds to concepts associated with terms or expressions. This would appear to be what HD is talking about when he insists that names have meaning.
   
   C. One last question: do terms and expressions refer to objects out in the world, or as Locke would have it, ideas in our heads?

II. To what does meaning attach? Are sentences the fundamental bearer of meaning, or are words? (Augustine)

III. How dependent is meaning on the speaker?

   A. Is it something we can modify as we see fit, according to whim and fancy, as HD would have it?
   
   B. Or is it public and resistant to moment to moment change, as Alice would have it?
QUESTIONS

I. Is it really the case that we don’t know what ‘meaning’ means? Doesn’t our correct use of this word prove that this concern is unwarranted?

II. Perhaps ‘meaning’ is ambiguous between ‘definition’, i.e., what words mean, and ‘intention’, i.e., what people mean.

III. Perhaps meaning is different for each of us, given that we associate different images and concepts with words uttered. On this view, definitional meaning would be the overlap between individual sets of associations.

RANDOM THOUGHTS

Augustine:

I. "I did not always manage to express the right meanings to the right people." This sentence suggests, among other things, that:

   A. There is such a thing as the right meaning independent of particular speakers, which marks this as a theory in opposition to Humpty Dumpty's. (Thought: this assumes that the problem lies with the utterances produced by the speaker and not with the speaker's own desires; if it were the latter, then failure to express the right meaning would be due to failure to identify what one really wants. On this reading, Augustine would agree with Humpty Dumpty about the meaning of language---failure is due to the confusion that led one to attach the wrong meaning to the words.)

   B. The people to whom one is speaking are relevant parts of the context of utterance, and so should be taken into consideration when one is deliberating about what to say.

II. You can recover a theory of meaning for the language from a theory of language acquisition. Behind this assumption is the assumption that in acquiring a language, one comes to know the meanings of its parts. (Gloss: language is a code for thoughts, and language acquisition is the acquisition of the code.)

III. Augustine grounds the meaning of the spoken language in the meaning of a gestural language which he considers "a kind of natural language common to all races". (Problem #1: Isn't this circular? Aren't you defining meaning in terms of meaning? Problem #2: Even if we ignore #1, it certainly isn't the case that the gestural language is as semantically unproblematic as Augustine suggests.)
IV. Meaning is identical to reference, where the reference of a word is the thing in the world that the words stands for. This is clear from the way in which one learns the meaning of words. (Problem #1: there are many words, expressions, etc., that do not appear to have a tangible presence in the world and so do not appear to be learnable via pointing (etc.); words like "ineffable" would be examples of this. Problem #2: how does this account for abstract terms that refer to properties, if anything? Or what about terms that purport to refer to abstract objects, such as numbers and times?

V. Augustine suggests that in learning the meanings of words, he was aided by sentences. This makes sense, given that we often rely on sentences to help us determine lexical meaning (i.e., word meaning), but doesn't this assume a great deal of linguistic ability? Did Augustine pull himself up by his bootstraps here? Also, this suggests the importance of linguistic structure that concerns the combination of words, which doesn't receive much attention in the passage.

Swift:

I. The professors of the language school describe two different languages, both of which rest on the identification of meaning with reference. This is particularly clear in the case of the second language, which involves no use of symbols that represent the world: the idea behind this language is that it would be better for speakers if we just dealt with the meanings of the words directly. (Problem: as with Augustine, restriction of meaning to reference seems to reduce the range of things we can talk about, although this problem is much more severe here than with Augustine.)

Carroll:

I. Do names have meaning? They certainly have reference—that is not called into question here—but do they have a meaning on top of that? HD believes they do: what is it that he is talking about? Also, should we distinguish between having a meaning and being meaningful? It certainly seems that names are meaningful, but is that what HD is talking about here?

II. Do words mean what we intend them to mean, or do they come prepackaged with meaning? That is, are we free to intend whatever we wish, or are there constraints on our intentions?