

Speakers' Intentions and the Meanings of Religious Statements

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Do the meanings of religious statements coincide with the *intentions* of the speakers that communicate by means of such statements? A number of philosophers of religion assume that this is the case. For example, in his recent defence of religious realism in *God and Realism*, Peter Byrne suggests that religious realism should be understood as consisting in an answer to the question whether the «*governing intent* behind the concept of God is to refer to an extra-mundane, extra-mundane, transcendent entity». ¹ Religious realism, he holds, answers this question positively, whereas religious anti-realism answers it negatively.

Although I agree with Byrne that (theistic) religion should be interpreted realistically, I find his suggestion that religious realism should be understood as an answer to a question about «the governing intent» of theistic discourse problematic. What is problematic with this suggestion is that it seems to involve the assumption that the meaning of a linguistic symbol (e.g. a word type), or complex of linguistic symbols (e.g. a sentence type), somehow *coincides with speakers' intentions*. The primary purpose of this paper is to seek to show just how problematic this assumption really is.

In saying that Byrne's suggestion «involves» the just mentioned assumption, I am not implying that this is more than *implicit* in his work. There are indeed passages in which Byrne seems to endorse this assumption explicitly; for

example, he speaks repeatedly of «the intent (the meaning)» behind theistic discourse, which strongly suggests that «the intent» and «the meaning» are held to be one and the same thing. ² On the other hand, Byrne elsewhere explicitly rejects the idea that religious realists need be committed to any particular «theory of meaning», ³ and since the above assumption could be regarded as constitutive of such a theory, it would seem that he does not regard his suggestion as committed to a theory of meaning either. Be this as it may, the presently made claim that Byrne's suggestion that religious realism be understood as a claim about «the governing intent» behind theistic discourse obviously involves at least an *implicit* assumption about linguistic meaning of the kind mentioned above, and that is all that need interest us at present.

In arguing against the assumption that the meaning of a linguistic symbol or complex of linguistic symbols somehow coincides with speakers' intentions, my first task shall be to make this assumption sufficiently clear so as to enable fruitful assessment. Drawing on some well-known work in the philosophy of language, I shall present two different ways of developing the assumption. The first way — the Gricean way — draws on some basic ideas of Paul Grice, and the second way — the Strawsonian way — draws on some basic ideas of Peter F. Strawson. These two ways of developing the assumption shall be treated as *types* of meaning-theories,

¹ Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 7.

² Byrne, 4.

³ Byrne, 99.

and our focus shall be on the fundamental characteristics of these meaning-theories rather than on their particular details. After having argued that both types of meaning-theories face serious difficulties, I shall go on to suggest and recommend an alternative way of understanding the role of speakers' intentions in theistic discourse.

Intention in Gricean Meaning-Theories

Perhaps the most well-known way of elaborating the idea that speakers' intentions coincide with linguistic meaning is that of Paul Grice. In his seminal paper «Meaning» Grice sketched an intention-based meaning-theory which has become prototypical for meaning-theories of this sort, and in what follows I shall outline the main ideas of this paper.

Grice's starting-point is a distinction between *natural* and *non-natural* meaning. The word «means» is used in the natural sense in sentences like «Those spots mean measles», and is used in the non-natural sense in sentences like «The remark 'Smith couldn't get on without trouble' means that Smith finds his wife indispensable». ⁴ One way in which Grice seeks to elucidate the difference between natural and non-natural meanings is by observing that whereas in the former case a phrase of the form «*x* means *p*» entails «*p*» (where «*x*» is an expression and «*p*» a proposition), this is not so in the latter case.

The kind of meaning which Grice seeks to elucidate in terms of speakers' intentions, is of course the non-natural kind of meaning. Grice seeks to indicate that he is discussing this kind of meaning by adding the index «_{NN}» to the word «means» when it is used in the non-natural sense, as is done in the sentence «The remark «Smith couldn't get on without trouble» means_{NN} that Smith finds his wife indispensable».

Grice's basic idea can now be introduced by correlating the notion of the non-natural meaning of an expression with the three notions of (1) a speaker *A*, (2) the speaker *A*'s intentions, and

(3) the speaker *A*'s audience. An arbitrary expression *x* (or complex expression *p*) is said to have a non-natural meaning insofar as the speaker *A* intends (or intended) it to produce some effect in an audience by means of their recognition of *A*'s intention to produce this effect. Grice says:

«*A* meant_{NN} something by *x*» is (roughly) equivalent to «*A* intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention». ⁵

In the case of complex expressions that have the form of indicative sentences, which are typically used to make statements (including religious statements like «God is almighty», «God is creator of heaven and earth», «God is gracious», and so on), the effect that the speaker *A* typically intends to produce in his audience is that of «inducing a belief», the character of the belief differing from case to case depending upon the particular intention of the speaker. ⁶

Grice's theory, as formulated above, faces two immediate difficulties, which Grice sought to accommodate in his paper «Utterer's Meaning and Intentions». The first difficulty is how to account for the obvious meaningfulness of speech in the absence of any audience toward which a speaker's intentions are directed (this is the so-called argument from solitary discourse ⁷). If a speaker *A* utters, in the absence of an audience, the phrase «God is almighty», then, obviously, this phrase has a meaning *in spite of* the absence of an audience toward which the speaker's intentions are directed.

Grice concedes the above point, but seeks to accommodate for it within the framework of his theory primarily by introducing a notion of *possible audience*. An expression *x* is now said to mean_{NN} something if it at least is intended to produce some effect *had there been* an audience present. ⁸

⁵ Grice, *Studies*, 120.

⁶ Grice, *Studies*, 219.

⁷ Cf. Max Black, «Meaning and Intention: An Examination of Grice's Views», 257–279 in *New Literary History* 4 (1973), 264.

⁴ Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 213–214.

In spite of the above modification, Grice's meaning-theory still seems to face a serious difficulty. What gives rise to the difficulty is the absence of any explicit acknowledgment of the important role that syntactical and semantic conventions play in linguistic meaning. For sure, the above Gricean theory does not logically exclude the possibility of acknowledging the importance of such conventions, as Grice himself has pointed out⁹), but on the other hand there is no noteworthy integration of such conventions into the actual account.

That the absence of syntactical and semantic conventions in Grice's account gives rise to a serious difficulty has been argued convincingly by John Searle. In his classic paper «What is a Speech Act?» Searle developed a surprisingly simple objection to Gricean meaning-theories, which can perhaps most cogently be put in the form of an example. Suppose that I as a philosophy teacher intend to make my students believe that I can speak Latin, whereas in fact I can't. In order to make them believe this I quote a Latin phrase that I happen to know, namely René Descartes' well-known phrase «cogito ergo sum» (I think, therefore I am). In uttering this phrase to my students I *intend* to make them believe that I can speak Latin; is this, therefore, what the phrase «cogito ergo sum» actually means? *Of course* not, for it means (in English translation) «I think, therefore I am».¹⁰ Hence it is clear that the absence of any noteworthy role played by syntactic and semantic conventions in Grice's meaning-theory is more than intuitively unsatisfactory: it flies in the face of clear examples derived from ordinary speech-act situations.

⁸ Grice, «Utterer's Meaning and Intentions», 147–177 in *The Philosophical Review* 78 (1969), 175–176.

⁹ Grice, «Utterer's Meaning and Intentions», 161.

¹⁰ Searle's famous example is of an American soldier in World War II who, after having been taken captive by the Italians, utters the German phrase »Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen?« (i.e. «Knowest thou the land where the lemon trees blossom?»), intending hereby to say «I am a German officer». See John Searle, «What Is a Speech-Act?», 115–125 in *The Philosophy of Language* (ed. A.P. Martinich; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 120.

The lesson to be learnt from Searle's objection is, as Searle notes, that an account of the meaning of an expression can't rely on speakers' intentions to the exclusion of syntactic and semantic conventions, instead such conventions must be *integrated* into such an account.¹¹ An integration of this kind can be achieved in various ways. In the next section we shall take a look at the Strawsonian way of achieving such an integration.

Intention in Strawsonian Meaning-Theories

Strawson's attempt to account for linguistic meaning in terms of both speakers' intentions and syntactic and semantic conventions is put forth with admirable elegance in his programmatic paper «Meaning and Truth». In what follows I shall outline the fundamental ideas of this attempt and then seek to show why I find these ideas problematic.

Strawson makes important use of the well-known token/type distinction as applied to sentences, where a type sentence is understood as a repeatable linguistic word-unit and a token sentence as a particular use on a particular occasion of a type sentence. One way in which a token sentence can occur is as a «statement», which Strawson understands as a speaker's particular use on a particular occasion of a sentence type in order to make an audience know or think «that the speaker has a certain belief».¹² The same sentence type can be used by the same or by different speakers on different occasions to make different statements. For example, the sentence type «I hid the money in the bank» can be used to state that I hid the money in the river bank and also to state that I hid the money in the financial bank.

Now in developing the idea that intentions together with syntactic and semantic conventions play a significant role in an account of linguistic meaning, Strawson makes use of the

¹¹ Searle, «What Is a Speech-Act?», 120.

¹² Peter F. Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London: Methuen, 1971), 181.

notion of a sentence type and of the notion of a sentence token. One of his basic ideas is that the primary context of linguistic meaning are particular occasions in which word or sentence tokens — rather than word or sentence types — are used, for example to make statements. In such contexts speakers use sentence or word types for specific purposes, for example to get an audience to think that they have a certain belief. If the use of a word or sentence type is successful, speakers are in effect — Strawson holds — establishing and upholding word and sentence types, for word and sentence types supervene on such successful uses of word and sentence tokens.¹³ The word and sentence types that successful uses of word and sentence tokens tend to establish and uphold, yield the kind of syntactical and semantic conventions that we have spoken of above as needed in an account of linguistic meaning.

The above point enables Strawson to locate the primary context of linguistic meaning to particular uses of words or sentences, for it is here that linguistic conventions are generated and it is from here that they are ultimately upheld. Having located the primary context of linguistic meaning thus, Strawson proceeds to integrate intentions into his account. The way in which this is done is as follows.

If we limit our inquiry to the particular use of sentence types in which statements are made, the question arises as to what elements are present in such speech acts. That syntactic and semantic conventions are present is already granted — they determine the sentence types used to make the statements in question. But a more basic element is involved, according to Strawson, namely the presence of audience-directed intentions. As Strawson puts it:

[...] we cannot, the [intention] theorists maintain, elucidate the notion of stating or asserting except in terms of audience-directed intention. For the fundamental case of stating or asserting... is that of uttering a sentence with a certain intention — an intention wholly overt in the sense required by the analysis of utterer's meaning — which can be incompletely described as that of letting an audience know, or getting it to think, that the

speaker has a certain belief; as a result of which there may, or may not, be activated or produced in the audience that same belief.¹⁴

An immediate objection to Strawson's above claim that we «cannot» elucidate the notion of stating or asserting other than by invoking audience-directed intentions, is the same objection discussed in connection with Grice's theory: how can we reconcile this claim with the possibility of meaningful discourse in the absence of any audience. Strawson resolves this problem in Gricean fashion by saying that there must at least be a possible audience, an audience which would have understood the speaker's intention in a certain way had it been present.

Note that Searle's further objection to Grice's theory — i.e. the example of speech in which a speaker's intention doesn't coincide with the meaning of what the speaker says — doesn't bite as effectively against Strawson's theory, since the presence of sentence types with conventionally established syntactic and semantic features is regarded as an essential ingredient of the particular speech act in question. For example, if one sought to object to the theory by appealing to a philosophy teacher who utters the Latin phrase «cogito ergo sum» to his students intending hereby to make them believe that he or she knows Latin but in fact meaning something quite different, one could quite easily reply by saying that the speech act in question didn't employ the normal conventionally governed word types in order to make such a claim and hence failed for that precise reason.

There is a further objection to Strawson's theory, however, and this objection seems to be more difficult to circumvent. The objection concerns explanatory circularity. Suppose that Strawson's theory is correct and that the meaning of a statement involves grasping a speaker's intentions and the syntactic and semantic conventions that govern the sentence type used by the speaker to make the statement in question. Suppose furthermore that sentence types supervene on sentence tokens as explained above.

The question that now arises is how sentence types can supervene on sentence tokens when

¹³ Strawson, 174.

¹⁴ Strawson, 181.

according to the theory sentence tokens are made by means of sentence types? If sentence types are established and upheld by means of successful uses of sentence tokens, then obviously sentence types cannot be presupposed in the notion of sentence tokens without explanatory circularity.

But what would happen if we conceded that sentence types don't supervene on sentence tokens, but that the relation is instead of the reverse kind, i.e. such that sentence tokens supervene on sentence types, would we then circumvent the objection? It would seem so, but such a concession can be seen to come at a price: we would have to radically alter the present account of the role that intentions should be recognized as having in an account of linguistic meaning. For suppose that (1) sentence types are granted as primary vis-à-vis sentence tokens, and that (2) statements are made by particular uses of sentence types on particular occasions, and, as seems reasonable, that (3) grasping a sentence type is equivalent to knowing the sentence type's meaning. From these three suppositions it follows that sentences have meanings prior to statemental speech-acts. And this conclusion tells against Strawson's account, for according to that account intentions occur in speech acts, and this — in conjunction with the conclusion just made — would imply that intentions occur in contexts that *presuppose* linguistic meaning.¹⁵ Hence it seems that if sentence types are admitted as primary vis-à-vis sentence tokens, one can't account for linguistic meaning in terms of intentions on the one hand and syntactic and semantic conventions on the other hand, for linguistic meaning will then have been granted to exist prior to the communicative situations in which intentions occur.

The Primacy of Sentence Types vis-à-vis Sentence Tokens

It was maintained above that Strawson's theory can be objected to on grounds of explanatory

circularity, and that the obvious way of overcoming this objection — namely, by conceding the primacy of sentence types over sentence tokens — must lead to an account of the role of intentions in linguistic meaning which differs radically from the account advocated by Strawson.

The question that I shall now consider is whether there is any support for the claim that sentence types are primary vis-à-vis sentence tokens in addition to the circumstance that this doesn't involve explanatory circularity. In his book *Meaning* Paul Horwich claims that this is the case, and produces an interesting argument to this effect. In what follows I shall give a brief outline of the argument.

Horwich starts by asking the questions:

Which is more fundamental, the meaning of a word *token* or the meaning of the *type* to which it belongs? Should we first give an account of how a specific utterance, made at a definite place and time, means what it does, and then proceed to explain, in terms of that account, how it comes about that the general type that the utterance exemplifies has a certain meaning in the language?¹⁶

He then notes that it is tempting to think that the answer to these questions is that token sentences in fact are primary, on the ground that «a person can mean whatever he wants by a given utterance token»,¹⁷ an answer which seems to be reinforced by the phenomenon of ambiguity (for if the same word or sentence type is ambiguous and hence can have different meanings in different contexts, doesn't that mean that a word or sentence type doesn't have any one meaning at all?). But this line of thought is misguided, Horwich argues. And the reason why is that:

[...] although ambiguity indeed exists, it is strikingly *limited*: there are billions of more word tokens than there are word types. And this suggests that the physical character of a token — the type to which it belongs — plays a central role in determining its meaning.¹⁸

¹⁵ This sort of objection against intention-based meaning-theories was urged by Max Black in «Meaning and Intention».

¹⁶ Paul Horwich, *Meaning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 80.

¹⁷ Horwich, 81.

I find this line of thought quite convincing. Indeed, if word types (and, by implication, sentence types) were supposed not to have primary meanings, but only to have meanings by supervening on meaningful word tokens, then it would be strange indeed that there are so few word types in comparison with the enormous numbers of word tokens that exist, and even stranger that such enormous numbers of word tokens could properly be regarded as associated with one and the same word type; indeed, such uniformity in the specific usages of word tokens would appear to be almost miraculous.

But what are we to do with the phenomenon of ambiguity, i.e. how can we account for the fact that so many word and sentence types have different meanings? Horwich suggests that we make a simple distinction between *types* and *subtypes*. A word or sentence type can be thought of as a regularity and a subtype as a regularity which *stems* from the first regularity but which nevertheless is a regularity of its own.¹⁹ This allows us to say that when word and sentence types seem to have different meanings, we are really dealing with different subtypes. For example, the word type «true» can have as one of its subtypes the subtype which can be elucidated as «genuine» (as is the case in the sentence type «everyone wants a true friend»), and as another of its subtypes a subtype that can be elucidated as «can be proved» (as is the case — at least according to mathematical intuitionists in the mathematical sentence type « $2+2=4$ is true»).

We can thus see that the view that word and sentence types have primacy vis-à-vis word and sentence tokens can be supported by an argument in addition to the circumstance that it doesn't involve the kind of explanatory circularity that Strawson's theory involves.

An Alternative View: Intentions as Ambiguity Eliminators

In the foregoing sections I have argued against two major attempts to integrate speakers' intentions into an account of linguistic meaning. Given that the arguments that have been adduced are convincing, the question arises as to what alternative role intentions should be said to play in an account of linguistic meaning.

The answer to this question which seems to me to be least problematic, is a view urged by Michael Dummett in *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, and more recently, in a somewhat different form, by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Divine discourse*. The two basic ideas of this view are that intentions do not coincide with, or determine, linguistic meaning, but that they nevertheless still play an important — and for linguistic communication necessary — role. And that role consists in *selecting between possible meanings in cases of ambiguity*.

The first of these two basic ideas is supported by the arguments against taking meanings to coincide with intentions which were put forth in connection with our discussion of Gricean and Strawsonian meaning-theories in the foregoing, and shall not be repeated here. The second basic idea may need some spelling out, though.

That the words of a natural language like English may be ambiguous in the sense that they may have multiple meanings, is admitted on all hands and is needless to argue. Examples of ambiguous words are «bank» (which can mean either a financial bank or a water bank), «saw» (which can mean either having perceived something or a hand tool for cutting wood), and «statement» (which may mean either the act of stating, or the content of such an act). An interesting question that arises in cases of ambiguity is whether words are ineluctably, or necessarily, ambiguous, or whether there in fact are ways of eliminating such ambiguity. It seems to me that the answer to this question is, in a large number of cases, quite simple: *of course* ambiguities can be eliminated. If I say to my wife that I'm going to put money in the bank, it is — except perhaps in some extreme cases — simply out of the question that the word «bank» might be taken by

¹⁸ Horwich, 81.

¹⁹ Horwich, 81.

her to mean a river bank instead of a financial bank.

A further question that now arises is *how* ambiguity is eliminated. And it is here that intentions come into the picture. According to theorists such as Dummett and Wolterstorff, the intentions of speakers *select* the sense a word or sentence should be taken to have in a given linguistic context, and those who in turn interpret the word or sentence — i.e. «the audience» — interpret correctly or incorrectly depending upon whether the intention they take the speaker to have is the intention that the speaker in fact has. And what intention they take the speaker to have is often dependent upon many factors, some of which pertain to the immediate linguistic context and others of which pertain to the larger context of life in which that linguistic context is situated.

One way in which Dummett has put the above point is as follows:

When there is an undeniable ambiguity, produced by there being two distinct conventional uses of the linguistic form, what determines the force attached to the utterance is how the speaker intends to be understood: this intention *selects* between two existing linguistic practices but *creates* neither of them.²⁰

Similarly, but in terms of a different conceptual apparatus, Wolterstorff says:

What do we do if the sentence has several meanings? We consider the possibilities ... And then, in the light of all we believe, we settle on that one which is the noematic content of the speech act that we judge to have the greatest likelihood of being the one that he intended to perform with this sentence.²¹

Returning to the example of me telling my wife that I'm going to put money in the bank, we can in the light of the above view of intentions explain her taking the word «bank» in the sense of a financial bank by saying that this word was

taken by her to have this sense given her beliefs about my intentions, which become clear against the background of my routines, my actions, and indeed my life at large. My wife knows that I sometimes go to the bank to put money there, she knows that I never go to the river bank to do anything of this sort, and so on, and so she naturally takes me to be intending to use the word «bank» as meaning a financial bank. We can thus see that the present view of intentions can quite naturally be applied to ordinary speech-act situations.

Concluding remarks

The question that I raised at the beginning of this paper was whether the meanings of religious statements coincide with the intentions of those who communicate by means of them. The answer that I have argued for is largely negative: I have argued that intentions *cannot* be taken to coincide either substantially or even partly with speakers' intentions. Instead I have suggested that the role of intentions in communication, and hence also in religious discourse, consists in selecting between possible senses of words and sentences in cases of ambiguity.

I shall conclude by pointing out three consequences of the view of intentions propounded in this paper which may be of special interest to philosophers of religion, theologians, and others interested in the question of the meaning of religious statements.

A first consequence is that radical individualism about the meanings of religious statements is simply not tenable. It is not tenable to say that religious believers are free to «intend» whatever they want by means of religious statements on the ground that intentions give such statements their meaning. Statements are made by means of sentence types that are governed by syntactic and semantic conventions, and it is against the very nature of syntactic and semantic conventions to suppose that each person is free to make whatever he or she likes of them.

A second consequence is that *in cases of ambiguity* there can be no such thing as understanding or interpreting a speaker without simultaneously having beliefs about the intentions of

²⁰ Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 119.

²¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine discourse: philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 191.

that speaker. The reason for this is that it is precisely via believing something about the intentions of a speaker that one is enabled to eliminate ambiguities from the speaker's statements. Interpretations of statements which don't involve presuppositions about the intentions of those who communicate by means of them, are simply not possible in cases in which ambiguities are eliminated from statements, for such elimination is enabled by beliefs about speakers' intentions.

A third consequence is that in cases in which there is no apparent ambiguity of words or sentences, there is *no need to appeal to anyone's intentions at all*. For since words and sentences have meanings prior to the speech acts in which speakers' intentions figure, and since intentions are only relevant in communicative contexts in which there are ambiguities, there is simply no need to invoke intentions in such contexts.

