Three Applications of an Austin/Wittgenstein Ontological Insight

Laurence Goldstein, Hong Kong

On the first page of *How to do Things with Words*, Austin claims that `making a statement' is primary, and `statement' derivative – a `logical construction', as he calls it, out of the makings of statements. Wittgenstein, in similar vein, takes `explaining the meaning' to be primary with `meaning' a derivative notion. He says that `[m]eaning is what an explanation of meaning explains (Wittgenstein 1974, 68). Part of Wittgenstein's point is that giving explanations of meaning is, like the making of statements, a perfectly common, everyday occurrence, but asking what meaning is is a perverse question of the sort that gives philosophy a bad name – Austin makes the same point in his paper `The Meaning of a Word' (Austin 1961, 23-43). Wittgenstein's diagnosis of why philosophers are misled is very simple: the mistake lies in supposing that, for every noun there is an object named (*unum nomen, unum nominatum*) and so coming to believe that there is something – some thing – named by the noun `meaning'. He says that he wants to cure us of the temptation to look about us for some object which you might call `the meaning' (Wittgenstein 1958, 1). This is hardly a new insight. Kant famously argued, in the Transcendental Aesthetic, that the noun `time' does not name a thing and one consequence of this conclusion is that talk of the Big Bang as marking the beginning of *time* is nonsensical. Are there some comparably important conclusions that can be drawn from the thesis that the nouns `meaning' and `statement' do not name objects? The answer, as I hope to demonstrate, is `Yes'.

Let us first get clear on the thesis. Wittgenstein says that (for a large class of cases in which we employ the word `meaning') the meaning of a word is its use in the language (Wittgenstein 1953, §43). But the use of the referring expression `the use' might, again, create the misleading impression that we are talking about some object. A useful comparison is between a screwdriver and the use of a screwdriver – we don't think of the latter as having such object-like qualities as a location, and likewise, meaning is not a locateable entity. So, straight away, we have Important Conclusion No. 1: Meanings ain't in the head – for they are not located anyplace, and in fact they ain't no `they'. Now Putnam, when he argued from Twin-Earthian considerations that meanings are not in the head, went on to suppose that, in part at least, they were *outside* the head -- hence Externalism. But, if Wittgenstein is right about the ontology of meaning, then meanings can't be outside the head either. In particular, understanding an utterance – grasping the meaning – is not to be construed as oneself or one's mind standing in relation to something, to a Russellian proposition, for example.

Important Conclusion No.2 now comes into view. Let us suppose that Portia has never come across the name `Tully', but knows that Cicero is a Roman orator. Since `Tully is a Roman orator' and `Cicero is a Roman orator' express the same Russellian proposition then if Portia thinks or understands that Cicero is a Roman orator, it seems that she must equally think or understand that Tully is a Roman orator. Yet, intuitively, it seems false to say that Portia thinks that Tully is a Roman orator. Once we free ourselves from bondage to the prejudice that to think or to understand is to stand in a relation to some object such as a Russellian proposition or a Fregean thought (again an object, but one existing in Plato's heaven) a simple explanation of our (correct) intuitions becomes available. When telling you about Portia, I assumed that you, as an educated scholar, knew that `Tully' is another name for `Cicero', or would have inferred it from what I said. But suppose that I were conversing with a person, Hans, who, unlike Portia, did not know the name `Cicero', but knew a lot about the Roman orator whom he (Hans) knew as `Tully'. It would be pointless my reporting Portia's belief to Hans by using the words `Portia believes that Cicero is a Roman orator'. I would, instead, say to Hans `Portia believes that Tully is a Roman orator' and, under these circumstances, what I say is *true*. Have I just concluded, then, that the proposition `Portia believes that Tully is a Roman orator' is both false and true? Not at all. The moral to be drawn here is that it is not Russellian propositions that have truth-value; the bearer of truth or falsity is *what is stated by the speaker*, and what is stated by the speaker is a function of context – in particular, of what the speaker takes to be relevant beliefs of the hearer. It is always such considerations of the particularities of context that allow us to escape from substitutivity puzzles.

If, as we argued earlier, it is not a sentence but *what is stated by a speaker* that has truth-value, what are we to make of Tarski's Convention T

S is true iff p

where `S' is a name or description of the sentence appearing on the right hand side of the biconditional? Tarski, as a result of examining a case where the sentence substituting for `p' was a Liar-type sentence concluded that ordinary language is incoherent. But if we `fix up' Convention T, allowing as substituends for `S' only expressions designating what is said by a speaker (i.e., the statement made) then a different possibility suggests itself; in fact, Important Conclusion No. 3: Liar-type sentences fail to make statements. This conclusion comes about as follows: Our reformulated Convention T is a most basic, incontrovertible truth about truth. If someone say that pigs can fly then what he says is true if and only if pigs can fly. So we wish to insist that Convention T is true: if someone makes a statement – says something that is either true or false – then Convention T applies to it. Now *suppose* that `L' designates a statement made by the sentence `L is not true'. Making the appropriate substitutions in our reformulated Convention T gives

L is true iff L is not true

and *that* is certainly *not* true. But, as we mentioned, reformulated Convention T is true in every instance, and we have no need to deny that, so long as we *reject* the assumption just made, that `L' designates a statement made by the sentence `L is not true'. In other words, there can be no statement that says of itself that it is not true. But, since the Liar Paradox (in this case, the Strengthened Liar) starts from the assumption that there is such a statement and derives a contradiction from it, a principled rejection of the assumption is a dissolution of the paradox.

This is very good progress: three important conclusions from one ontological insight, and we could stop here, well pleased. But considerations of space do

not allow me not to go into further details, so I shall add some more words on the third conclusion. The first thing to be said is that, although it has been reached by a novel route, that conclusion is not new. In mediaeval *insolubilia* literature up to about 1225, the idea that the Liar sentence fails to make a statement was quite common. Impatient critics in those days complained that the sentence contains good words in good grammatical order, with no category mistakes or any other infelicity, so how could it *not* be a statement? What the Austin/Wittgenstein ontological insight shows is that making a statement is different, in important respects, from producing a pheme or a grapheme.

Second, there is an alternative, utterly simple proof of the same result obtainable entirely within classical logic. Classically, we accept the Principle of Bivalence, which says that every statement is either true (1) or false (0) -- not neither, not both, not anything inbetween, i.e.

For all statements p, val(p) = 1 or (exclusively) val(p) = 0

Accept also classical negation:

For all statements p, val (not-p) = 1 - val (p)

Now consider sentence A, which is `B is not true'

Obviously val (A) = 1- val (B)

But now `let' A = B (giving us the Strengthened Liar)

We have, then, val (A) = 1 - val(A)

i.e. val (A) = ½

Therefore (from Bivalence) A is not a statement.

Likewise if, when doing elementary algebra, we discover that the value of x is 1 – the value of y, we cannot then `let' x be equal to y; no finite number can be 1 less than itself..

If A is not a statement, it doesn't say anything – it doesn't say anything true, false or anything inbetween; it doesn't say that it is either false or neither true nor false. That disposes of the simple and strengthened Liar.

The difference between sentences and statements is evident most obviously in sentences that contain indexicals. The type sentence `It's hot here' is clearly neither true nor false, but neither is a token of that sentence, if a token is taken to be a physical sign (grapheme). For I may take on an expedition to the North Pole a token of that sentence written on a slip of paper that I found at my starting point in Accra. This token, though it may have a meaning (in Kaplan's terms, a `character' in that it can be translated into a foreign language) does not have a content or a truth-value. It is the use of a token on a given occasion (i.e. a statement) that has a content. If, on reaching Greenland, I pull the token out of my pocket and show it to a deaf native in order to start up a conversation (as opposed, say, to making him a gift of the piece of paper) then it is my location that gives content to the utterance, and the temperature there that determines its truth-value.

One striking fact about paradoxes in the Liar family is the prevalence of indexical expressions. Thus (in a 16th Century variant) we have a card on one side of which is written `The statement on the other side is false' while what is written on the other side is `The statement on the other side is true'. The presence of the word `statement' should not fool us into thinking that there are any statements here (any more than we should be fooled into thinking that the phrase `this number which is 1 less than itself' denotes a number). In virtue of the *character* of the sentence on the first side of the card, we look on the other side of the card in order to determine the content and truth-value of what is written on the first side. And if what is written on the second side were `Pigs can fly', then the content would be established and we could rest content. But, in the paradoxical case, the sentence on one side needs to inherit content from the sentence on the other, but the latter needs to inherit content from the former. Result: no content and no truth-value for either. It's like trying to make a telephone call to someone when that person is trying to make a telephone call to you: neither person succeeds.

Tarski's classic presentation of the Liar in his paper on the concept of truth in formalized languages employs an indexical – he uses the symbol `c' as a typographical abbreviation of the expression `the sentence printed on this page, line 5 from the top', and on line 5 of the page stand the words

c is not a true sentence

and nothing else. It is easy enough to modify the example so as to eliminate the indexical expression – instead of `this page', we could have `page 158 of J.H. Woodger (trans.), *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics'*. In so doing, we replace the expression containing the indexical with one that gives the geographical co-ordinates of a particular sentence. And, so long as we *assume* that where there is a sentence there must be a statement, we shall run into paradox. But, as we have demonstrated in the `card' version above, that assumption is vulnerable.

Let us, finally, consider a version of the Liar, discussed by R.L. Goodstein (1958) in which truth and falsity are ascribed to what is said by a person A. The following proof closely follows Goodstein/Slater (2001). In this version, A says that everything that he says is false, which we can formalise as

Sa§((x)(Sax $\supset$ ~Tx))

Write y as an abbreviation of §((x)(Sax $\supset$ ~Tx))

(x)(Sax $\supset$ Tx) Assumption

Say $\supset$ Ty 2, UI

Say (Rewriting of 1.)

Ty 3,4, MP

(x)(Sax $\supset$ ~Tx) -- since T§p $\rightarrow$ p

($\exists$x)Sax -- well, for a start, he said y

~Tb 6,7

Tb 2,7

~(x)(Sax $\supset$ Tx) 8,9,2, RA (discharging Assumption 2)

($\exists$x)(Sax & ~Tx)

This is the first part of the proof – A says something untrue.

12. (x)(Sax $\supset$ ~Tx) Assumption

13 Ty (since p $\rightarrow$ T§p)

14. Say $\supset$ ~Ty 12, UI

15. ~Ty 4,14, MP

16. ~ (x)(Sax $\supset$ ~Tx) 12,13,15, RA (discharging assumption 12)

17. ($\exists$x)(Sax & Tx) -- A says something true.

Goodstein takes himself to have dissolved the version of the Liar with which he deals. He says that `instead of a paradox [we find] a proof of the sentence: If A says that everything which he says is false then A says something false and something true'.

Yet this result is in itself paradoxical. For we are given that A made a statement, and we seem to have deduced, by pure logic alone, that A must have said at least one other thing. But why could A not just have said the one sentence we attributed to him and no other? Goodstein seems to have proved that, whatever the truth-value of A's statement that we are scrutinizing, he must have made other statements at least one of which has a truth-value opposite to that one. Can logic deliver us such a strong empirical result?

In the case where A just does utter the one sentence `Everything I say is not true' – so that he is effectively uttering the Strengthened Liar `What I am saying is untrue' -- then, if Goodstein is right that A says both something true and something false, his sentence must be both true and false, as Dialetheists claim, or it must be ambiguous, as B.H. Slater claims; that is, it must be one sentence expressing two statements, but those statements are ineffable. Unfortunately, Slater does not provide much support for this claim, save to offer for comparison the sentence `There is a thought for which there is no linguistic expression in English'. Obviously, if there is such a thought, then there can be no statement in English expressing it.

Recognizing ineffability in this special case goes no way towards making it plausible that at least one of the statements made by the Liar sentence is ineffable. And there seems a much simpler way to confront Goodstein: It will be noted that at steps 6 and 13 of the above proof, Tarski's classical Convention T was invoked. But to say that a non-statement (i.e. something without a truth-value) is true is to say something straightforwardly false. Truth-valueless items are not available for plugging into the Tarski biconditional, for doing so would make one side of the biconditional false, the other truth-valueless, hence the biconditional itself would be false. Once again, the answer seems to be that those 13th Century logicians were right – the Liar is a sentence, but it fails to deliver a statement.

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