

II.

THE TEACHING OF MEANING

J. FINDLAY

Modern philosophy is distinguished by the emergence of a new question: how we give meaning to the expressions used in ordinary and philosophical discourse. Earlier philosophers simply inquired into the truth of this or that assertion, without troubling to raise the prior question as to what precisely such an assertion meant, or whether it really meant anything at all. When the question of sense had been raised, it led to yet another inquiry: in what way or ways a sense had been *given* to some assertion, or in what way or ways a sense *could* be given to it. This question led to yet another question, which is our main concern on this occasion: in what way or ways the sense of an expression could be *taught* or imparted, so that many men could use the expression in an identical way, and give it the same sense. This obviously is a truly fundamental question. For it is plain that most expressions acquire sense for us through a process of teaching. And even in the rarer cases where we ourselves act creatively, and arbitrarily give senses to expressions, there is still some teaching in the process, though it is we who are the teachers (or teachers *in posse*). For to legislate semantically is to desire others to use expressions as we do, even if only for the space of some discussion, and if we do and can attach sense to expression for our own quite private purposes, this is at least a singular and not very valuable performance, of which it is not easy to give a plain instance. In each field of discourse, therefore, teaching plays a necessary role: it must be possible for us to be taught the use or sense of an expression by others, and it must be possible for us to teach the use or sense of the expressions *we* use *to* others. And if it can be shown that no such teaching has occurred, or that for some reason it can not occur, then we may be spared troublesome inquiries into the sense or the truth of some assertion in question.

The purpose of this paper is not, however, to pursue the method indicated, but to inquire into its foundations. It is to ask whether we can hope to understand the possibilities of giving sense to expressions, by considering the ways in which such sense can be taught or imparted, and whether we should not rather strive to understand what

teaching is and achieves, by considering the senses we *do* manage to attach to expressions.

This is after all the method we adopt in other fields. We do not determine whether a man has been taught French properly by considering the way in which he was taught it: we see whether the man really knows French at the end of his course, and by his proficiency we assess the method of his teachers.

It will perhaps bring out the light thrown by the study of teaching on the communication of meaning if we consider the familiar case of the ostensive teaching of descriptive adjectives: words like 'blue', 'hot', 'loud', 'round', etc., which we are taught to use by having our attention directed to objects to which these descriptive words are applied. It has long been clear that the success of such ostensive procedures is mysterious, and that nothing in the mere rite of uttering words in the presence of objects makes clear how the understanding of their meanings 'gets across', nor even what precise meaning does get across. I may murmur the word 'red' in the presence of a geranium, and you may show by our subsequent use that you take the word to be a proper name for this geranium, or a name for flowers in general, or a name applicable to all objects warm or deep in hue or which attract attention or which please the eye etc. etc. Only close examination of my subsequent utterances, in situations themselves requiring interpretation, will show whether the meaning I wished to teach has in fact been communicated, and it is notorious that even extended examination of your usage need not *conclusively* show what sense you attach to the word in question. If I can never be sure a man understands a word from his actual use of it, how much *less* can I be sure of it by examining the way in which he was taught it?

The points I have brought forward are commonplace, but they invalidate two arguments that modern philosophers constantly employ. The first argues from the fact that some circumstance mediates our learning the sense of an expression, that this circumstance enters crucially into that sense, that it represents a 'criterion' essential to the use of the expression. The second argues from the fact that some circumstance is *not* actually present on an occasion of teaching, that it is *not* an essential part of the use or sense taught. By the 'presence' here talked of is meant the sort of presence that a scientific 'observer' might recognize, not the sort of presence that requires divination, intuitive understanding, imaginative supplementation and so forth. Now it appears that both of these types of argument are misguided: they suppose that the world of the learner and student of meaning is the artificially stripped, standard world of the scientific 'observer',

whereas it essentially must be his *own* world, with the distinctions he recognizes in it and the peculiar stresses he puts upon it and the unseen coordinates and standards that run through it, a world which we enter when we become deeply familiar with a man's use of expressions and see things as he sees them. I should therefore like to frame the two following counter-assertions: (a) that it is never right to argue that because some observable circumstance mediates the communication of a meaning, that it necessarily plays an important role in the communication, or that it does more than touch it off; (b) that it is even more wrong to argue that because some circumstance cannot be observed when an expression is taught it is not playing a vital role in the teaching. Whether a meaning *has* been put across satisfactorily is shown solely by the interpretability of a man's subsequent use. A man might learn what it is for something to be so and so, or for such and such to be the case, by being shown something that illustrated the exact *opposite* of the sense we desired to impart, or by being shown something that *vaguely approximated* to it or pictured it, or by being shown something of which it was in some sense a *natural complement*, or even by wild words and ritual gestures that somehow 'got it across'.

If we are to evaluate the teaching of meaning by considering what it successfully imparts (as measured by our own successful interpretation), I think the following propositions may be laid down: (1) The sense communicated by a process of teaching always has a much wider generality than the materials used in teaching, how much wider, and wider in what directions, being something that only long study and careful interpretation can throw light on. (2) The senses collected from presented instances are almost always more extreme, simple and pointed than any sense which the instance on careful examination really illustrates. The paradigm meaning of many words, e.g. 'round', 'empty', 'linear', 'equal', 'free' etc., is paradigmatic in the Platonic rather than in the recently current sense. (3) The sense communicated by a process of teaching often involves elements going quite beyond the things used in communicating that sense, and not, if we speak with a care for scientific observability, strictly illustrated by those things at all. Our understanding of ordinary terms descriptive of people's states of mind arguably involves much of this sort. (4) A process of teaching may successfully communicate senses which it is plain never *could* be illustrated at all. We all understand, after a few pregnant indications, what it is to 'go on for ever', or what sort of difference there is between *your* feelings and *mine*. Whether one cares to talk of the innate or the *a priori* in such contexts is a matter

of taste. (5) It is never legitimate to deny that there may be obscure, dubious, queer, even contradictory elements in the senses of ordinary expressions merely because the cases in which we were first taught to apply them had no such *observable* oddities.

The outcome of this paper is negative: it is to suggest that an examination of the circumstances in which we learn the use of words throws comparatively little light on our learning or on what we may learn. It is also to suggest that if we are to find a model for the processes of teaching meaning, the Platonic model of reminiscence is perhaps more suitable than any. The teaching of meaning may, with some pardonable exaggeration, be said to be the use of inadequate indications to achieve the more or less doubtful communication of a sense whose subsequent application is itself always doubtfully correct. The wholly correct use of an expression, and the wholly successful communication of its meaning, are in short Platonic paradigms like the meanings they presuppose.

DISCUSSION

Prof. Joseph MOREAU

Quand j'ai accepté d'engager la discussion sur la rapport de M. Findlay, je n'en connaissais que le titre, qui éveillait en moi une vive curiosité; car il soulève un problème d'un intérêt capital. Mais les procédés d'analyse de M. Findlay, le caractère technique de ses considérations, ne me sont pas très familiers; aussi devrai-je me borner à présenter deux remarques, et à déplorer l'absence de M. Nikam, autre orateur désigné, qui aurait pu sans doute apporter des observations plus précises et plus complètes.

Ma première remarque est une réserve concernant l'assertion initiale du rapport de M. Findlay. Avant de s'interroger sur la vérité d'une assertion, il convient observe-t-il, de s'assurer de sa signification. Cela est incontestable; mais est-il certain que cette question préalable n'intéressait pas, comme l'assure M. Findlay les philosophes du passé? Il est permis d'en douter, si l'on s'en réfère à deux grands exemples.

Le premier est celui d'Aristote. Il est, suivant la doctrine des *Analytiques*, des choses qu'il n'est point nécessaire d'enseigner, qui ne font l'objet d'aucune science particulière, d'aucun enseignement particulier; par exemple, que toute proposition est vraie ou fausse. Si l'on vient recevoir l'enseignement d'un géomètre ou d'un physicien, il ne nous enseignera pas ces vérités générales communes, que nous sommes

tous censés connaître; mais il nous enseignera, par exemple, ce que c'est qu'un triangle, quelles sont les propriétés essentielles de cette figure. Mais pour cela, précise Aristote, il devra nous expliquer d'abord ce qu'on entend par triangle, ce que signifie ce nom. C'est seulement après nous avoir expliqué ce que signifie (τί δηναίνει) le mot triangle, quelle est la *signification* de ce nom, qu'il nous montrera que la figure ainsi désignée *existe* (ὅτι ἔστι), c'est-à-dire qu'il est possible de la tracer. Car il peut y avoir des significations qui ne soient pas effectua- bles. De même, il nous faut entendre ce que signifie une proposition comme celle-ci: la somme des angles d'un triangle est égale à deux droits, il faut qu'on nous ait enseigné la signification de cette propo- sition, avant qu'on la puisse démontrer, c'est-à-dire prouver qu'elle est vraie. (ὅτι ἔστι). La distinction que propose M. Findlay entre *en- seigner une signification* et *établir une vérité* est donc une distinction qui n'est point nouvelle, mais classique.

Ce n'est pas tout: non seulement la nécessité d'enseigner une si- gnification (*to teach a meaning*) avant d'en prouver la vérité a été reconnue par Aristote; mais on peut citer l'exemple d'un auteur an- cien pour qui seule la signification peut faire l'objet d'un enseigne- ment, non la vérité (*only meaning can be taught, truth cannot*). Cet auteur est Saint Augustin. Son traité *de Magistro* est consacré à éta- blir qu'un maître peut bien nous présenter certaines propositions, nous en faire connaître la signification; mais pour ce qui est de la vérité de ces propositions, c'est à l'élève seul d'en juger. Une signifi- cation peut être enseignée, montrée, car elle s'explicite en un énoncé, qui est un contenu objectif de pensée; mais la vérité est une valeur que nous reconnaissons à tel énoncé, à tel contenu de pensée. Re- connaître cette valeur est un acte qui relève du sujet seul, qui ne peut lui être imposé; c'est affaire de réflexion, de jugement personnel, pro- noncé dans le for intérieur, en consultant la souveraine vérité, qui nous éclaire intérieurement. Dieu seul, ou le Maître intérieur, présent à notre conscience, peut nous instruire de la vérité; lui seul est notre Docteur.

Ma seconde remarque se réduit à une demande d'explications; ou plutôt, je dirai d'abord comment j'entends les explications de M. Findlay dans son rapport, et je lui demanderai de me dire si je l'ai bien compris.

Comment peut être enseigné le sens d'un mot? Il ne suffit pas pour cela de montrer l'objet qu'il désigne; cela n'est pas suffisant (exemple des géraniums) et cela n'est pas non plus nécessaire; il faut que celui qui m'écoute comprenne mon *intention*.

Mais comment puis-je faire comprendre mon intention et m'assu-

rer qu'elle est exactement comprise ? Comment vérifier si celui qui m'écoute s'accorde avec moi sur la signification d'un mot ? Cela n'est possible, semble-t-il, que si la signification se ramène à une opération.

Si notre esprit se bornait à recevoir des impressions, à accueillir des représentations, aucune communication ne serait possible; ma représentation ne saurait en aucun cas être comparée avec la représentation d'un autre sujet. Mais nous sommes capables d'opérations; or, l'opération que j'accomplis peut être accomplie aussi par un autre, et chacun peut voir si elle est accomplie pareillement par lui et par moi. Là réside le principe de la communication entre les esprits, la condition pour qu'une signification soit enseignée et comprise. Faute de telles opérations, susceptibles d'être accomplies identiquement par divers sujets, il n'y aurait pas de communication intellectuelle, ni d'objectivité. On saisit par là pourquoi il ne suffit pas de montrer l'objet pour que la signification du mot soit comprise; c'est qu'il n'y a pas, à proprement parler, d'objet, tant qu'il n'est pas désigné par un nom, tant qu'il n'est pas constitué par une signification.

Or, une signification ne se définit et ne peut être enseignée qu'au moyen d'opérations. Cela me paraît attesté par deux exemples:

1° l'exemple des définitions d'objets usuels: un objet usuel se définit par son usage, par la façon de s'en servir, par une opération. Un couteau, c'est pour couper; c'est un objet qui sert à couper. Un objet de cette sorte est défini par référence à une opération;

2° l'exemple des définitions mathématiques: les objets mathématiques se définissent par leur mode de construction. Le cercle, c'est la figure engendrée par telle opération.

Cette théorie opératoire de la signification, il me semble l'apercevoir à travers les explications de M. Findlay. Ai-je raison de l'entendre ainsi ? Du moins, peut-on la reconnaître chez Berkeley.

Toute représentation, observe Berkeley est singulière; c'est la représentation d'un objet singulier chez un sujet singulier. La connaissance objective n'est possible que par le moyen des mots qui ont une signification générale.

Or, comment un mot peut-il recevoir une signification générale ? Comment le mot «triangle» peut-il désigner n'importe quel triangle ? — A condition, dirons-nous, de ne considérer dans chaque triangle que les propriétés qui résultent de sa définition, autrement dit qui correspondent aux opérations par lesquelles une telle figure est construite. Le mot «triangle» s'applique à toutes les figures sur lesquelles telles opérations déterminées sont possibles. Les choses sont toujours singulières; si les mots peuvent avoir une signification générale, c'est parce qu'ils ne désignent pas immédiatement des choses, mais des

opérations délimitant une catégorie d'objets, à savoir l'ensemble des objets qui se prêtent à telle ou telle opération. Les mots ne s'appliquent aux choses que par l'intermédiaire des opérations, qui seules peuvent être immédiatement désignées, dénotées par des signes.

Berkeley illustre ces vues par l'exemple de la numération, parlée ou écrite, utilisant des *noms ou des caractères*; les uns et les autres sont des signes qui ne peuvent s'appliquer aux choses, aux objets nombrés, qu'en vertu des opérations par lesquelles se définissent les nombres, et d'où les nombres écrits (les caractères), ainsi que les noms de nombre, tirent leur signification. «*The names are referred to things, and the characters to names, and both to operations*».

J. HYPPOLITE.

M. Moreau ne peut pas faire l'économie d'une synthèse d'identification en rejetant l'identité sur l'opération seule. D'autre part, le progrès dans la signification s'effectue par la distinction des significations à partir de situations confuses.

M. MERCIER.

Après la première remarque de M. Moreau, il me paraît impossible que M. Findlay pense que le problème d'enseigner, de communiquer des significations ne se soit jamais posé autrefois. Si donc il dit que le problème de cet enseignement se pose aujourd'hui différemment, c'est d'une façon qui fait de lui un problème nouveau. Quelle est la différence, qu'y a-t-il dans l'enseignement des significations que les anciens auteurs ne pouvaient voir ?

M. ZARAGUETA.

Il y a lieu de distinguer entre la transmission du sens et celle d'une conviction. Elles sont parfaitement séparables. Il y a des convictions sur des propositions qui n'ont pas de sens, qui sont même un contre-sens ou tombant sur un sens étranger à celui qu'on veut et croit transmettre. Cela vient de ce que la conviction s'attache souvent à une simple formule verbale, ou à une formule prise dans un sens figuré ou topologique. De là le cas fréquent où deux personnes croient être d'accord alors qu'elles ne le sont qu'en apparence, ou par contre se croient en désaccord total ou partiellement apparent.

Prof. A. J. AYER.

I agree in the main with what Professor Findlay has had to say against the Wittgensteinians. There are, however, one or two points which I should like to see further elucidated and one or two on which I should like to enter a mild protest.

It seems to me that the reason why the Wittgensteinian school lays so much emphasis on the ways in which words are learned may be that it assumes that if a child can acquire a concept by being shown a certain state of affairs, then the extension of the concept must be identifiable with states of affairs of the type in question. I should like to know whether Professor Findlay rejects this assumption or whether he holds only that his opponents take too narrow a view of what can be shown. For example, I agree with him entirely that Professor Malcolm's account of dreams is very perverse. But may not the trouble be that Malcolm oversimplifies the context in which a child learns the use of expressions like «I dream» ignoring the fact that the child not only reports the dream but also remembers it?

I am a little puzzled by Professor Findlay's use of the phrase 'detached observer' which he seems to equate with 'scientific observer'. He seems to be suggesting that such an observer can only deal with what is public. But since Professor Findlay holds, I think rightly, that it is possible to communicate information about one's inner states, why should they not be amenable to scientific treatment? I don't think Professor Findlay wishes to hold that a scientific psychology must be behaviouristic.

Neither can I follow Professor Findlay in his denunciation of Ockham's razor. He seems to overlook the fact that the principle states that entities are not to be *unnecessarily* multiplied. The question at issue is what one takes to be necessary. To some extent this is a matter of temperament. I tend, as it were, to go in for landscape gardening. Findlay's outlook is more romantic: he likes the scenery to be lush. Still, there is more to it than this. If it turns out that certain types of entities are eliminable, we have discovered something of interest about the world. Even the attempts at reduction which don't succeed may be illuminating. An example would be the phenomenalist programme which I am now disposed to think cannot be carried through. But surely the attempt to carry it through has thrown light on the nature of physical objects and on the problem of perception. If we gave up philosophizing in this fashion, I think we should feel the loss.

Finally, I think it may be a little dangerous to reify meanings to the

extent that Professor Findlay and others have been doing. We must not lose sight of the fact that meanings are properties of signs. What we still lack, it seems to me, is a satisfactory theory of what it is to use or interpret a sign. What exactly happened to Helen Keller when she realized that the tapping on her wrist *meant* water?

Prof. H. ROTENSTREICH.

Prof. Findlay rightly opposed the genealogical view which attempts to derive knowledge from simple data, pre-knowledge ones. Yet he himself suggested in a way a genealogy in his allusion to Plato's theory of reminiscence. «Anamnesis» is a state of pre-knowledge and it suggests a primordial art of knowing. As against this I would like to suggest that there is no primordial art at all. Every art of knowledge presupposes in terms of arts and in terms of meanings a former art and a former meaning. This regression implied in every knowledge is due to the fundamental structure of meanings. Meanings are interrelated — e.g. if one knows the meaning of «uncle» he knows by the same token the meaning of «father» and «brother» and if one knows the meaning of 1 he knows the meaning of 2. One can be taught the meaning of «B» because one knows already the meaning of «A». This structure of regressive and progressive continuum of meanings is reflected in human reality in two parts: (a) human reality is a reality permeated with language — and meanings in language refer to other meanings; (b) human reality is a reality of roles — composed of roles of being a father, a teacher, a friend. To grasp a role is to grasp a meaning.

One can teach a meaning because one knows a meaning beforehand.

Prof. M. BARZIN

Nos entretiens portent sur la notion de signification. Mais nos premières discussions font ressortir la confusion de cette notion et l'urgence d'établir à ce propos de nécessaires distinctions.

1° S'agit-il de la signification de notions ou de l'interprétation du sens d'une proposition affirmée vraie?

Le premier problème est d'importance mineure. Les définitions de mots sont conventionnelles. Il n'y a pas de vraies ou de fausses définitions. Les définitions de mots peuvent seulement être plus ou moins pratiques.

Le deuxième problème est au contraire, cardinal, car il touche aux notions de vérité ou de fausseté. Il a une portée ontologique.

2° La deuxième distinction, plus nécessaire encore, s'il est possible, serait de mettre entre les significations ne comportant pas d'élément de valeur, et les significations qui comportent de pareils éléments. L'enseignement peut servir ici de pierre de touche.

Je puis parfaitement enseigner à quelqu'un qui n'en connaît pas le premier mot, une théorie objective. S'il a ce minimum d'activité qui s'appelle l'attention, la théorie passera de mon esprit au sien, sans perte ou tout au moins sans grande perte. Tandis qu'il est impossible d'enseigner une signification comportant un élément de valeur, à quelqu'un qui n'éprouve pas, au moins inconsciemment, cette valeur. Les conditions de réceptivité sont très différentes dans les deux cas. Il faut donc les traiter à part.

M. DEL CAMPO.

Deux questions:

1° Quand vous parlez de *teaching of meaning* doit-on comprendre une autre chose que communication ? La notion de communication n'enveloppe pas celle de *teaching*.

2° Vous croyez que le phénomène de la signification naît seulement avec l'enseignement ou bien plutôt la communication est-elle un phénomène inextricablement lié et inséparable de la pensée ? Peut-on enseigner sans avoir déjà la signification ?

Réponse du Professeur FINDLAY.

In reply to M. Moreau, I must admit that my statement that philosophers in the past discussed the truth of statements without first asking what they meant, is very exaggerated. Certainly Aristotle realized that one must be clear about meanings before inquiring into truths, and I am not surprised that St. Augustine showed a similar clarity of perception. But *in his practice* even Aristotle very often affirmed statements, particularly those about the mind, of whose precise meaning he did not give a clear prior account: what, e.g., does it mean to say that the mind is the place of forms, or that it contains the forms of things without their matter, that it is potentially all terms, that it is raised to actuality by an intelligence that is actually all terms, etc..., etc... These are not propositions one can readily as-

sent to or reject, for it is not clear what they assert. The same holds of S. Thomas's assertion that in God essence and existence are the same, that the minds of angels contain 'similitudes' of things, etc..., etc... Of post-Renaissance philosophers it is likewise throughout time that they discuss many issues to which no clear sense has been given. That it is all important to clarify sense *before* discussing truth *does* seem to me have been *more* emphasized by recent thinkers than by any previous philosophers.

To what M. Moreau says about 'operations' I am less sympathetic. In the case of *some* meaning operations are central, in the case of others only the operation of emphasizing some aspect or pointing to some limit is relevant, and here the 'operational' aspect is not the important one. As far as I can see, M. Hyppolite agrees with me that M. Moreau wishes 'operations' to do mere work than they properly can.

In reply to M. Mercier I think that modern thinkers have been incomparably more *rigorous* than ancient ones in their demand that a precise meaning should be *given* to every expression used in philosophy, and that it should be shown *that it is possible* and also *how it is possible* to give certain expressions to certain sorts of meanings e.g. meanings involving reference to private experience. Many such questions were certainly never raised in the past.

I agree with Monsignor Zaragüeta that the communication of meaning is quite a different thing from the communication of conviction, and that a person often *accepts* what I am trying to communicate in a form which only indirectly or inadequately represents its true meaning, or which positively misrepresents it. One of the uses of the word 'true' is to *assent* to formulae one perhaps cannot repeat and certainly cannot understand.

I do not disagree with Professor Ayer that Wittgensteinians can be said to have too narrow a view of what can be shown. But I still think that we probably should not use the word 'show' so widely that it covers any case in which we make plain to a person the sort of thing a word stands for. I doubt e.g., whether A can show B, what it is for B to have a dream. As regards my use of the term 'scientific observer' I of course did not wish to suggest that information about inner states is unamenable to scientific treatment. I think, however, that protocols have an importance in theories about inner states, that they do not have in the case of theories about physical things, if for no other reason than that the interpretation of these protocols is infinitely more obscure in the former case than in the latter. I am not ashamed of my romanticism: I like the universe to be rich and

full, though I also believe that it is so. And I agree that to talk about 'meanings' too hypostatically is extremely dangerous.

I think I agree with Professor Rotenstreich that the teaching of meaning is only possible on a background of pre-existent meanings.

In reply to M. Barzin I do not agree that the communication of meaning is of secondary importance. The notion that it is easy to communicate meaning, and that it requires little proof of success, seems to me to be one of the prime errors of past philosophy. I agree that the communication of meanings involving values is much harder than the communication of merely descriptive meanings.

In reply to M. del Campo I hold the now unfashionable view that meanings often exist in thought before being attached to words, but that few abstruse meanings are communicated except by teaching people how one proposes to use words.