

VIII

FACT AND MEANING

J. A. PASSMORE

Philosophers very commonly contrast «facts» and «meaning». Science, many of them have said, restricts itself to facts; but philosophy looks beyond facts in order to determine their meaning. This contrast, I want to suggest, is a mistaken one; meanings are facts and are discovered by observation.

We can easily see, of course, how the contrast arises. Consider a set of marks on a piece of paper. We often cannot tell — when, for example, we do not understand the language — whether the marks have a meaning, or what they mean, merely by looking hard at them. So meanings, the conclusion is naturally drawn, cannot be observed; they lie beyond what we can observe. Again, consider *the book is on the table* as it is written, or spoken, in Greek, in Chinese, in English and in French. These various sentences have on the face of it nothing in common; the noises the Chinaman utters are quite different from the noises the Englishman utters and so are the marks he writes on paper. Yet we nevertheless say that all these utterances *have the same meaning*; they all mean what is meant in English by «the book is on the table». So, it is once more concluded, the meaning of these expressions cannot be anything observable, anything in the nature of a fact.

Take a third case. A statement can be meant in various ways: it can be meant as an example, it can be meant ironically, it can be meant as a warning. A little while ago, I meant «the book is on the table» to be taken as an example; on some other occasion I might make the same remark in order to tell somebody where the book is. Yet the same set of words is involved in each case; so once again, it is concluded, what is meant must be something wholly distinct from the observable facts.

Then there are other cases. We say in English «those clouds mean rain». But what we observe is simply the clouds; that they «mean rain», it is therefore argued, is not discovered by observation. Clouds in themselves «mean» nothing. Thus, once more, meanings lie beyond facts.

Again, a person may complain that this life has no meaning; an anthropologist may try to discover the meaning of a religious ceremony; the meaning of a play may baffle the critics. In all these cases, or so it is said, the meaning, the significance, is something quite distinct from the observable facts. That a man spends his life in Paris, that a religious ceremony involves the use of bread and wine, that a play is by Beckett: these are facts. But what a person's life means, what a ceremony means, what a play means — to inquire into these matters, it is said, is to pass quite beyond the realm of facts.

These, then, are the views — of course I have been able to describe them only briefly and to give only a few examples — which I reject. I wish to argue that in all these cases, if there is anything to be discovered, what is to be discovered is a fact; and it is to be discovered by further observation. Yet I do not at all deny that when we inquire into the meaning of anything we look beyond it; what I am denying, only, is that «looking beyond» consists in looking *beyond facts* as distinct from looking beyond *the particular fact from which our inquiry begins*.

Consider first the simplest case. An archeologist picks up a stone which has regular markings on it. He asks himself whether these marks have a meaning and, if so, what that meaning is. Then he wishes to know, simply, whether these marks played a certain sort of rôle in human affairs, whether they formed part of a language. Certainly he has to look beyond the marks to discover what they mean. But he will not make any progress by engaging in metaphysical speculation, in the hope that, by reflection, he will be able to break through to a realm of meanings. He has to conduct further inquiries, to make more observations; inquiries which will issue in such conclusions as that «In Ancient Egypt these marks were a way of representing the name of the Pharaoh.» Egyptologists, not philosophers, find this out; and they find it out by empirical inquiry, by research into facts.

More generally, to discover what a set of noises or a set of marks means is to discover certain facts, facts about the part played by these marks in a system of communication. To say that marks in different languages *have the same meaning* is to say that they play the same part; they are used in similar circumstances, as a way of achieving the same objective. (Just as an archaeologist might discover that the Greeks used *amphorae* where we use jute bags). The shape of the marks may be quite different; we cannot discover that the marks have the same meaning simply by looking at them more

carefully; we have to look beyond them. But we look beyond into a wider context of facts; we do not look beyond facts.

Similar considerations apply to the other cases I mentioned. How do we discover whether a sentence is meant as an example, is meant ironically, is meant as a warning? Pick up a piece of paper with that sentence written on it, as an isolated set of marks, and we cannot tell how it is meant. In that sense, we have to look beyond the facts. But if we *can* discover how it was meant, it will be by reconstructing the context in which the sentence was uttered. You all know that «the book is on the table» was meant in this paper as an example; you did not when I uttered these words, look around to find a table, or ask yourself what book, or what table, I was referring to. But you knew it was an example because you are familiar with the practices of philosophical discussion; you have gradually become acquainted, in the course of your experience, with «example-using» as a human habit. If there were some dispute about the matter, if one of you were to say that I really meant to draw your attention to a particular book, then the question would be settled, if it could be settled, by considering the context in which the remark was made. And surely it would be quite arbitrary so to limit the conception of «fact» that it counts as a fact that a piece of paper has marks on it, but not as a fact that philosophers have such-and-such habits.

Suppose we set out to persuade somebody that his life has a meaning. All we can do, surely, is to try to show him that his actions have a certain kind of social rôle, that he exercises a certain kind of responsibility. We might try to tell him, for example, that his work, although monotonous, is yet important, that his friends rely upon him, that his family value his judgment. And if none of these things were true, if his life were a dreary round, quite devoid of spontaneity or of the experience of any sort of responsibility, then we should agree with him that his life is meaningless. The question whether his life is or is not «meaningless», that is, is a question about what he does, what he achieves.

What about «those clouds mean rain», «the resignation of those Cabinet Ministers are very popular». In other words, we consider the beyond the clouds, we look beyond the Cabinet Ministers. But we look, not beyond facts, but rather to facts about the relation of the clouds, the Cabinet Ministers, to a wider situation. Suppose somebody disputes our judgment: suppose he says: «Those clouds do not mean rain»; «the resignation of those Cabinet Ministers does not mean trouble», then we argue with him by bringing forward such consideration as these: the clouds have come down from the earth, the

Cabinet Ministers are very popular. In other words, we consider the cloud, the resignations, in a wider, but still factual, still observable context.

What about the meaning of the Universe? Here, surely, there can be no question of a wider context, seeing that the Universe, by definition, is the widest context there is, the all-embracing context. Now I should agree with Bertrand Russell in *Mysticism and Logic*, that «there is no such thing as the Universe». So the question of discovering its meaning does not, for me, arise. But I should add that *if* there were a Universe, then, just because it was the Universe, it would *have* to be without any meaning. For to discuss the Universe would be to take it to be related to something else, to a wider context, and hence, it could not be, in the philosophical sense of the word, «the Universe» — it could not consist of the totality of facts. The conclusion «the Universe is meaningless» sounds somewhat alarming. But what I have said is not this, but only that «*if* there were a Universe, it would have to be meaningless». This does not seem to me to be at all a perturbing conclusion. Our utterances, our actions, have a meaning in the sense that they have a rôle to play. What more do we want than this? But, of course, even if it were alarming this would be nothing against it; the important question for us, as philosophers, is what is true, not what is alarming.

A. C. EWING

My question will be concentrated on Prof. Passmore's final paragraph since it is the only part of this paper with which I do not in the main agree. It also seems to me much the most important philosophically in the issues it raises.

(1) I should like to ask Prof. Passmore to say more about his suggestion that there is no such thing as the universe. I should like to know what he means by this statement and what grounds he has for it. Does he reject the notion of a universe because the number of facts included in it would be infinite? But Russell himself whom he quotes as an authority if he has taught us anything, has taught that we can talk intelligibly and consistently of infinite series as a whole. Does he reject it because he thinks that the totality of things or of facts cannot constitute a unity? (I prefer myself to speak in terms of things rather than of facts, but if Prof. Passmore prefers, let us say «facts»). No doubt there are many senses of «unity» in which it would be at least very daring, perhaps quite absurd to speak of all that is as a unity. But to what degree of unity in the whole does the sense of the

term «universe» commit us? It might indeed be contended that, if the universe is all the things or all the facts there are, they must have something in common in that they are all things or facts, and that this is already to say that all that is is a unity in same sense. But need any philosopher, however pluralist, be offended by this degree of unity? It may be doubted indeed whether merely have being a fact or being a thing in common is to have a common property at all. The teaching of Russell certainly leads again to that conclusion and I should be prepared to agree with him.

Indeed, if anything exists at all, can it fail to be the case that all the things (or facts) that exist exist? And is not to talk of all the things (or facts) that exist already to talk of the universe? (As I have suggested already, we can talk of all the members of an infinite series and even give their properties). Even Wittgenstein admitted that you could speak of the totality of facts, and if so are you not speaking of the universe?

Or is Prof. Passmore's objection to «the universe» based on the argument that the term is senseless because the meaning of a term depends on its contrast with something else and there is nothing outside the universe with which it could be contrasted. But might it not be contrasted at least with things which might, as far as we can see, exist and do not in fact do so? Any child could give a long list of such things.

Does Prof. Passmore suppose that there is merely not in fact a universe or that the very term is meaningless? If the latter, is he entitled to make statement about what should happen if there were a universe e.g. that, if there were a universe, in the different sense in which things as opposed to terms have a meaning, it would have no meaning beyond itself.

(2) Let us now turn to the problem whether the universe, if there is one, could have a «meaning» (in a very different sense of «meaning» from that in which it would be asked whether the word «universe» had a meaning). Now the question I want to put is this. Is it not the case that most people who ask this question are using «universe» to mean the physical universe and any embodied minds in it, not everything that is, and that for them the question means: Is there or is there not over and above the physical universe a being who created and maintains that universe with a purpose, which purpose would constitute the meaning of the universe? Perhaps Prof. P. does not like, philosophically at least, such an explanation of the universe, but can he rule it out simply on the ground that the «universe» is identical with everything that is, seeing that the people

who put it forward are not using «universe» in this sense at all? And to a person who holds or has held the comforting and inspiring belief that the physical universe has a supremely good purpose beyond itself which gives it meaning, the suggestion that the universe has no «meaning» may well seem «alarms», although I hasten to add that this does not prove the suggestion to be false. I am not of course suggesting that we can apply the term «meaning» to the universe in the sense in which we apply it when we ask what certain words e.g. «universe» mean, but then Prof. Passmore has already left this sense behind when he talks about the «meaning of life», even in the sense in which he admits such a question. A question about the meaning of the universe or the meaning of life involves a reference to values and is in this surely quite *unlike* a question about what a particular word means or how words mean anything?

This brings me to a third question. Does Prof. Passmore regard values as themselves facts? If he does, might it not be said that the meaning of the universe is constituted by the values in it, e.g. by the satisfying character of certain experiences? This would not lead us outside the universe, and this is the type of answer he gives to the question of the meaning of life. So in that case he would not have excluded an affirmative answer to the proposition that the universe has a meaning after all. If on the other hand he regards values as something other than facts, why should all question as to the meaning of the universe be excluded simply because the universe includes all the facts?

Prof. PASSMORE

Reply to Dr. Ewing

My paper was extremely compressed, and it is quite natural that it should have given rise to misunderstandings. I took a large number of cases — cases differing in fundamental respects — in which we speak, in English, of something as «having a meaning» and tried to show that in each of these cases the question what meaning it has is to be settled by investigation, investigation which is not, generally, of a philosophical sort. One of these cases, on which Dr. Ewing has concentrated, is «the Universe is meaningless». As ordinarily used, of course, this is not equivalent to «the expression 'the Universe' has no meaning»; it is not about the expression «the Universe» but about some supposed entity *the Universe*. I did not set out to show that the expression «the Universe» is meaningless, and in so far as Dr.

Ewing's criticisms presume that this is what I was trying to do they rest on a misunderstanding.

On the complex metaphysical problems raised by Dr. Ewing's other remarks, I can only comment briefly:

(1) It is, of course, a tautology that «all the things that exist exist». But this only means that «anything which exist, exist». It throws no light on the question whether there is a totality of «things that exist». Nor does the fact that we can describe the members of an infinite series, or the rule which governs the series, do anything whatever to suggest that there could be such a totality. Even if we can give a description of all facts, in the sense that every fact is constituted in the same way, this does nothing to show that there is a totality describable as «all facts».

(2) As for Wittgenstein, his doctrines about «the totality of facts» in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* amount to this: that the totality could only be apprehended «mystically». I do not think that he produces any argument to show that there must be such a totality, but he does, rightly, argue that if there were such a totality, we could say nothing about it — which is the only point I was concerned to make. I should add that once we reject the conception of «atomic facts», the idea that there could be a totality of facts is much less plausible. If there are no atomic facts (or elementary objects) then there is nothing for the totality to be a totality of.

(3) Finally, popular or theological notions of the Universe are so obscure that it is difficult to make out what they are saying. But if the Universe — or «the *physical* universe» (whatever a non-physical universe could be) is not conceived as a totality then I agree that it can have a meaning or purpose. But then what that «meaning» or «purpose» is can only be settled by our investigation of the rôle this «Universe» plays in some larger system — which is the only point I was at the moment concerned to make.

(4) If when somebody says that «the Universe has meaning» all he means is that some human experiences are valuable I have no objection — except that this is a very odd and misleading way of expressing a straightforward point.

M. EBBINGHAUS

I begin by presupposing that concepts and propositions have a meaning. Thus let us take the concept of a Centaur. This concept means a living being partly man, partly horse. Now, if Mr. Passmore

should tell me, the Centaur was a fact, I dare say he may possibly be wrong and we have got a meaning, which may not be a fact. If on the contrary I am wrong in denying the Centaur's being a fact, he is refuted again. For then what I mean by my denegation is not a fact.

Now let us consider the evidence Prof. Passmore gives for the identity of meanings and facts. He considers such statement as: «those clouds mean rain» or «the resignation of those ministers means trouble». These are propositional implications disguised by the use of the word «meaning» in current language. What the second of these sentences means is: If those Cabinet ministers resign, there will be trouble. Now I hope again, Mr. Passmore will agree, that this may be a mistake. But then what is meant by the propositional implication is not a fact — and therefore the thesis of Mr. Passmore not true. But if on the contrary he tries to escape refutation by saying, I was wrong in denying the facticity of the implication — he is refuted again. For he says that the meaning of my saying was not a fact.

Reply to Professor Ebbinghaus

Professor Ebbinghaus takes me to be asserting that when we ask what an expression means we are asking to what fact it refers. This obviously would not do because, as he quite rightly points out, not all expressions refer to facts. But what I say, simply, is that asking what an expression means is asking a question of fact, *i.e.* what part that expression plays in some language. Then to ask what «Centaur» means is to try to find out how «Centaur» is used in English. Or if it is a question of «the concept of 'Centaur'», it is to ask what the Greeks took Centaurs to be. And it is a question of fact what they *did* take them to be.

Prof. A. J. AYER

I have no quarrel with Professor Passmore's last paragraph, but I do have serious qualms about his main thesis. He has shown by his examples that many questions about meaning are not philosophical, but of course this does not entail the converse proposition that few if any philosophical questions are questions about meaning. I admit that attempts to fit philosophical activity into a single mould tend to be Procrustean, but surely those philosophers who have

distinguished questions of meaning from questions of facts have had good grounds for this view. Let me try to illustrate this by taking a concrete example. A work like Professor Ryle's *Concept of Mind* may be said to be factual in a broad sense of the term, inasmuch as it contains theories which are true or false, but it is not factual in the way in which the work of a psychologist is factual. The kind of information which we get from it is not at all like the information which we get from a study of the way in which drink affects people's reactions or an explanation of neurotic behaviour in terms of unconscious feelings of jealousy. What Professor Ryle is doing is something of a different order. He is inviting us to take a different view of the facts, to construe them in a different way. To use his own kind of terminology, he is concerned with the cartography of concepts. This kind of conceptual analysis need not be reductive, though I think that Professor Passmore is not justified in ruling out reductive analyses a priori. We have to try them out in various fields and see whether they work. Professor Passmore tries to cover cases of this kind by saying that it is a matter of situating facts within a wider context, but here again there is a distinction to be made. A scientist who investigates the causes of some phenomenon is situating facts within a wider context; but this sort of activity is of a different type from that of a philosopher like Hume who tries to persuade us that causality consists in constant conjunction. Surely it is quite proper to say that Hume's theory was a theory about the meaning or causality and to contrast this with causal theories which are factual. No doubt there are other ways of making this distinction, perhaps the word «meaning» is growing a little threadbare, but it is an important distinction which we ought not to lose sight of. My objection to Passmore's argument is that its effect is to blur it.

Reply to Professor Ayer

My object was to establish that the philosopher is not *in general* the person we go to if we want to know what something means. But I do not at all wish to deny that we *sometimes* turn to him. If we want e.g. to inquire into «the meaning of causality», we shall turn to a philosopher, because that is the sort of topic in which he particularly interests himself.

Nor do I want to deny that a good deal of the time the philosopher concerns himself with «problems of meaning», in the sense in which Socrates asked, e.g. «what piety means», problems of definition and

classification. But he does this not by getting beyond facts, but by reminding us of facts we had over-looked, or had never looked at carefully enough. Hume, to take Ayer's example, reminds us that we cannot tell prior to experience what effect something will have, or that we cannot by looking at a thing discern within it a «power to produce a certain effect». Then he goes on to ask whether there is *any* difference between the case when we say of A and B that they have been constantly conjoined in our experience and the case where we say that A is the cause of B. Philosophers — here like museum-classifiers rather than field-workers — spend a great deal of time reflecting upon and trying to reorganize familiar material. But this is not to say that their concern is with «meanings» rather than with «facts».

M. ZARAGÜETA

Je suis heureux de déclarer mon accord avec M. Passmore dans le contraste qu'il établit entre les faits bruts — tel qu'un livre sur une table — et leur signification. Ce mot est sans doute pris par M. Passmore non pas dans le sens de signification verbale, mais dans celui que nous adoptons quand nous disons d'une situation embrouillée qu'elle «n'a pas de sens». Or, ce sens réel vient aux faits bruts de leur insertion dans un triple système de rapports, des rapports d'intégrité spatio-temporelle, de causalité et substantialité, d'utilité et de finalité apparentée à la valeur des choses et des personnes. Prendre conscience de ce système de rapports est le propre d'un esprit synthétique, par contraste avec les analystes qui ne regardent que les éléments d'un ensemble et pas l'ensemble comme tel. Cela arrive aux purs physico-chimistes avec la vie, dont ils ne parviennent pas à capter la caractéristique de sa totalité organico-fonctionnelle et partant sa signification.

G. RYLE

I expect and hope that all of us here are by now beginning to feel acute mental indigestion. For we have had substantial-sounding «Meanings» constantly thrust down our throats, as if we should all be perfectly familiar with some special things denoted by this ostensible sort-name.

The Greeks of Plato's and Aristotle's time were in one way in a much better position than we are. For, virtually, they had no subs-

tantive, corresponding to our «Meaning». They could, of course, ask or say what a given expression signified or conveyed. But they had, virtually, no genus-noun to stand for what-is-signified-by-the-expression-E'. I am going to avoid using the substantive, i.e. deliberately to model my practice on that of the Greeks.

Passmore concentrated on enquiries of the general pattern «What does this expression mean, if it means anything?», instancing the enquiries of philologists, archaeologist and others. But besides questions of this sort, i.e. questions about expressions, there are questions like this: — Does what is conveyed by the sentence «Today is Wednesday» imply or follow from what is conveyed by the sentence «Today is the 12th of September»? Here the phrase «what is conveyed by...» is not a question, but a relative clause. We are interested not in a hermeneutic problem about sentences, but in the implications or non-implications between that which is conveyed by one sentence and that which is conveyed by another. Our problem would remain unaltered if the whole thing were translated into French or German. The hermeneutic question would not.

Aristotle was, very properly, much concerned with the notion of chance or the Fortuitous. But this question was not the question which a Persian might have asked, «What is the meaning of the Greek dissyllable «Tyche»?». What Aristotle wanted to know was how that which is conveyed by sentences containing «... by chance ...» or «... fortuitously ...» is connected with or opposed to what is conveyed by sentences containing «... on purpose ...» and «... as an effect of ...».

The methods of philologists, archaeologists, cryptographers, etc... would have been of no help to him; and his question survives unaltered when translated from Greek into English or any other tongue into which it is translatable. His question can be considered only by a person who does know, and does not therefore wonder what is conveyed by «Tyche» or «Fortuitously» etc...

In the sense of «factual» in which the questions of philologists, archaeologists, cryptographers, etc... are factual questions, Aristotle's is not a factual question, and the jargon-title «conceptual question» can conveniently be employed to mark its difference in kind from questions of the other sorts. Or we can call Aristotle's a «philosophical question», and so distinguish it from the «hermeneutic questions» in which it is asked what given expressions or ostensible expressions convey, if they convey anything.

Reply to Professor Ryle

I fully agree that there are not special kinds of entities called «meanings». Indeed, a large part of the purpose of my paper is to dispel the temptation to believe that there are such entities by suggesting that in a large range of cases to inquire into meanings is to inquire into the part which something plays in a wider system.

I agree, too, that philosophers are not primarily interested in the question how certain expressions are used in English. They do not ask themselves what the word «cause» means in English but rather, as I said in reply to Professor Ayer, how A. 's being a cause of B. differs from its constantly preceding B. I am as unhappy with «concepts» as Professor Ryle is with «meanings», but I have no serious objection to picking out as «conceptual questions» those which turn around problems of classification, *e. g.* the classification of human action into accidental and deliberate — provided only that it is not supposed that the philosopher discusses such problems by referring to something which is «higher» or «lower» or «beyond» facts. It is surely a question of fact, for example, whether or not the acts which people describe as «deliberate» (or by some comparable adjective in another tongue) are always preceded by a mental rehearsal of this act — even if this is a fact which is easy to recognize once it is pointed out to us that there are other grounds on which deliberate can be distinguished from accidental acts.

M. le prof. ROTENSTREICH

Mr. Passmore assumed in his overt presentation that there is some affinity between his view that there is no meaning to the term «universe» and Kant's criticism of the notion «world». Yet it has to be observed that Kant did not assume that the concept «world» is meaningless; on the contrary — he assumed that it can be *thought*, but cannot be *known*.

It seems to me that when Mr. Passmore spoke about the meaning of «universe» he referred to the question whether or not there is a purpose or an objective to the universe. But this meaning of the term «meaning» is entirely different from the various senses implied in Mr Passmore's previous illustrations.

Yet the main point is this: whether or not the fact that Mr. Passmore dealt with the factual aspect of meaning did blur the problems of the meaning of *being a fact*. This problem is not one of specific vocabulary. This is question of a philosophical category referring

to something the meaning of which is to be pre-given, given prior to the context in stake. Thus for him a centaur were a fact, because for him the object was assumed as pre-given. We do not consider a «centaur» to be a fact because we consider the content implied in «centaur» as created by mythical imagination and thus not as pre-given.