THE PROBLEM OF THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF PROPOSITIONS AND THE THEORY OF MEANING (*)

Paul GOCHET

The problem of universals is often discussed nowadays in connection with the status of propositions. Modern realists have felt the need to raise propositions to the level of platonic entities independent of the sentences which express them. Modern nominalists are anxious to grant the status of entities to individuals only. They object to enriching ontology with propositions. One of their familiar manoeuvres to get rid of propositions is to reduce them to a class of synonymous sentences.

The problem of the ontological status of propositions is often treated exclusively in connection with the semantical question of the meaning of sentences. This lopsided account, which leaves out of consideration the *syntactical* character of sentences, is responsible for questionable theses from which originates the controversy between nominalists and realists. To find a solution which integrates the "logical facts" about the matter revealed by nominalists and by realists without following the latter or the former in the conflicting theories they have inferred from those facts, it is necessary to face, at the same time, both the *semantical* problem of the meaning of sentences and the *syntactical* problem of the nature of sentences. That is what I shall try to do here.

Some philosophers have assimilated sentences to linguistic expressions belonging to another syntactical category. Frege and Church have seen *sentences* as a kind of *names*; Baylis and Carnap as a kind of *predicates*. This move compelled them to analyze the meaning of sentences on the model of the meaning of names and predicates. Since Frege it has been customary to

(*) Traduction abrégée d'une communication présentée au *Congrès de Vienne*, en septembre 1968.

ascribe to names a two-dimensional meaning: they have a sense and a reference. Almost the same can be said about predicates. Since Aristotle it has been customary to ascribe to them a two-dimensional meaning also: they have an intension and an extension. Transferring his analysis of names to the meaning of sentences, Frege raised the following questions: "What is the sense (or intension) of the sentence, what is the reference (or extension) of the sentence ?"

To the latter questions, Frege answered in *Sinn und Bedeutung* that the sentence *names* a truth-value and that it *signifies* a proposition. A proposition was supposed to be an object distinct from a mental idea and even independent of sentences. That a proposition is not a mental idea or a subjective property, should be conceded. The sense of words or sentences is determined by common use and common use is the *standard* and the *rule* for private performances. It is consigned in dictionaries and exists dispositionally before it is re-activated by individual speakers. This acknowledgement of the *objectivity* of sense, however, does not commit us in the least to admit *also* that the sense is *independent* of the *language* and can be captured directly without the mediation of linguistic expressions. To Frege one should concede that the proposition is *objective* and that it *differs* from the sentence, but not that it is *independent* of and *separable* from the sentence. The more arguable position seems to be neither realistic nor purely nominalistic but somewhere in between.

To the question of the reference of sentences, Frege answered by saying that "sentences name the Truth or the False". This is obviously counterintuitive. It is *too much* to say of false sentences that they name something. They do not name at all. It is *too little,* on the other hand to say of the true sentences that they name the True. All truths are *equivalent* in truth value but it does not follow that they are *identical* in reference. These are, in my opinion, the reasons which led Russell to give up the Fregean theory, in the *Philosophy of logical atomism,* and to make a fresh start. In that essay Russell rightly emphasized the distinction between sentences and the other parts of speech. Whereas proper names, monadic and polyadic predicates are

linked by a *one-to-one* relation with individuals, properties and relations respectively, true and false atomic propositions on the contrary, are related to facts by a *many-to-one* relation. Russell here finds his way out of the Fregean confusion between names and references for the other parts of speech.

Russell implicitly identifies meaning with reference and drops the sense. He does that already in *On denoting*. "Russell, says Quine, tends to blur meaninglessness with failure of reference. This was why he could not banish the king of France without inventing the theory of descriptions. To make sense is to have a meaning, and the meaning is the reference (1)". Quine finds two different defects in Russell's semantics. First Russell does not account for sense as opposed to reference, second Russell commits himself to entities a nominalist cannot bear, i.e. properties, relations, facts, when he tries to account for the reference of monadic predicates, polyadic predicates and true sentences. I shall go deeper into Quine's semantics as an analysis of some of its consequences proves rewarding for my purpose.

Quine, as a nominalist is anxious not to make any ontological commitment to anything beyond individuals. Since it is one of his tenets that ontological commitment coïncides with the use of bound variables, he allows himself to quantify over individual variables only and he replaces propositional and predicative *variables* by sentential and predicative *schematic letters*, which are not even metalinguistic variables, since they cannot be quantified over. Schematic letters are like blanks which resemble variables only in so far as they are apt for a substitution which complies with the requirement of uniformity. They differ from variables in this: instead of naming ambiguously as variables do the constants which lie in the domain they range over, schematic letters abstract what is common in the configurations formed by their substituends. So the chief difference is this: variables are *semantic* devices, schematic letters are *syntactic* ones. Hence, in Quine's theory, monadic predicates, polyadic predicates and sentences do not have as reference respectively

(1) W.V.O. QUINE, Russell's ontological development, *J. of Ph.*, 1966, p. 663.

properties, relations and facts. They do not refer at all. Only individual variables *refer.*

The next question is: do monadic predicates, polyadic predicates and sentences *signify* respectively attributes, relationships and propositions or should we deny to those linguistic expressions both *reference* and *sense* ? Quine does not go so far as the latter alternative. He does not deny that predicates and sentences have *sense,* he does however deny that they have *independent sense,* and by this he does not mean "independent of the linguistic expression» as I did before, but "independent of the sense of other predicates and sentences". Predicates which fill in the blanks depicted by schematic predicate letters are to be interpreted *syncategorematically.* As to sentences which are substituends of schematic sentence letters, they do not have an *independent sense* either according to Quine. For him the *unit* of meaning (sense) is therefore not the *word,* it is not even the *sentence* but the *whole fabric of our knowledge.*

There are two main arguments in favour of that holistic and contextualistic conception of meaning. Both will be considered here for they have a bearing on the point at issue. First, Quine's holism appears as an improved version of the theory of meaning associated with logical Empiricism. Schlick defined the meaning of a sentence as the method of its verification. But scientific practice shows that we never verify statements in isolation. "Our statements about external reality" as Quine puts it, "face the tribunal of sense experience not individually, but as a corporate body (²)". Since there is no verification at the level of isolated sentences and since meaning is defined in terms of verification, it follows that sentences have no *meaning in isolation* either. This argument, correct though it be, is not sufficient, however, to refute a platonistic theory of propositions. Even if propositions communicate with and cannot be separated from each other, it remains conceivable that they can be separated from the language which expresses them.

The second reason on which Quine grounds his holistic theory of meaning, however, can be used to refute a realistic

(²) W.V.O. QUINE, *Methods of logic,* 1952, p. XII.

theory of propositions and contributes to grounding a nominalistic account of the latter. This reason is the impossibility of *absolute translation.* In *Word and Object* Quine establishes that in so far as sentences to be translated from one language to another are not observation-sentences, the translator has to rely upon hypotheses (analytical hypotheses) which he cannot test *independently.* In other words every attempt at *radical* translation is condemned to failure. The circle of the translator's language (or the circles when he is multilingual) cannot be broken. "Most of the semantic correlation is supported only by analytical hypotheses", and of these Quine says that they extend "beyond the zone where independent evidence for translation is possible" (3). From this it follows that we must give up the traditional picture of propositions as Meanings *waiting* to be pinned down and captured piecemeal by sentences of various languages.

Propositions are not *independent* of sentences, they are not even what is *common* to intertranslatable sentences, since there is no such a thing as radical translation, for want of a criterion. With that conclusion one might agree. But Quine seems to claim also that sentences have *no sense in isolation.* And that, I am more reluctant to admit.

One *must* acknowledge independent sense *both* to *sentences* and to *predicates* if one wants to account for a feature of language rightly emphasized by the theoreticians of generative grammar and earlier by Wittgenstein and Schlick, namely, the fact that we are able immediately to understand sentences we have never heard before, provided that they are well formed and that we know the sense of descriptive terms and the syntactical rules of formation. "Since the set of sentences is infinite and each sentence is different", say Fodor and Katz in *Introduction to semantic theory,* "the fact that a speaker can understand any sentence must mean that the way he understands sentences he has never encountered before is compositional" (4).

(3) W.V. QUINE, *Word and Object,* 1960, p. 71.

(4) FODOR and KATZ, Introduction to semantic theory, ex *Readings in philosophy of language,* 1964, p. 482.

But we cannot consistently speak of *composition* unless we also speak of *elements* which resist deformation, thus Fodor and Katz' argument is also an argument in favour of an *atomistic theory of sense* which clashes with Quine's *holism*. Yet both semantic atomism and semantic holism seem to rely on convincing arguments. This is a puzzling situation.

The way out of such a situation must be some sort of *compromise* or some *terminological distinction* which will enable us to embrace the two apparently conflicting theories without being charged with inconsistency. In *Sense, Denotation, Context of sentences,* Francesca Rivetti Barbo has tackled the same sort of puzzle successfully, in my opinion, and I shall here freely avail myself of the result of her investigations. The difficulty she faced consisted in reconciling Frege's principle "never ask for the meaning of words in isolation, but in the context of a proposition" with the semantic autonomy of words, which seems to be presupposed by the very feature of the language emphasized in Fodor and Katz' above mentioned statement. To smooth out this difficulty she *distinguishes* two sorts of context. This is not an *ad hoc* verbal stipulation, for the distinction fits in with Frege's distinction between sense and reference or "designation" as she calls it. "The difficulty" she says, "vanishes if we state that what the context (of the sentence) provides is the designation of words and not their sense. The latter is to be found in words even isolated from sentences, since the context relevant to the sense of words is the one of languages, not of sentences" (5).

In other terms, as we understand F. Rivetti Barbo, the dependence of the sense of minimal units such as *words* upon the context almost amounts to independence if we enlarge the context enough. In this case, the context is not the *sentence,* not even *the fabric of our total knowledge,* i.e. the collection of all true propositions known to us, but the *language.* And here she could have said, not the language, but the *lexicon.* As far as sense is concerned, the lexicon is not an amorphous collection but a whole which divides into parts — the words —

(5) F. RIVETTI BARBO, Sense, Denotation, context of sentence, ex *Contributions to logic and methodology in honor of J.M. Bochenski,* 1965, p. 240.

the sense of which comes from the relations of opposition, incompatibility, entailment, synonymy and hyponymy they bear to each other (cfr Lyons, *Structural Semantics*). As far as *reference* is concerned however a *lexicon* is only a collection of *unconnected* elements. A claim about the *connections* between the reference of descriptive words is only made within the context of *sentences*. Through quantification or specification of the individual variables which accompany predicates one asserts which predicates *referentially overlap* and which predicates are *referentially discrete*. The recognition of the *double context* (lexicon, sentence) together with the recognition of the sense-references dichotomy enables us to reconcile Quine's holism with Fodor and Katz' atomism.

If words isolated from sentences have sense, — I do not say reference, a fortiori *sentences* have sense, even in isolation from systems or theories, and, I would add, they also have truth value, though we must concede that this truth value cannot be *known* apart from the knowledge of the truth value of other propositions plus some inferential procedure, except where the sentence considered is a tautology. To denote the sense of predicates, it is convenient to use the word "concept" and to speak of "attributive" or "relational concept". To denote the sense of a sentence, I shall use the word "proposition". Owing to the admission of the sense-reference dichotomy (and in the case of sentences, the sense and truth value dichotomy), I am therefore driven to retreat from radical nominalism and to advocate concepts and propositions. But the latter are not Platonic entities, not even Aristotelian concepts, for they cannot be separated from the language in which they are expressed. They do not belong to a transcendent realm, they belong to dictionaries and grammars. In so far as this connection (which is not an identification) with language is unbreakable, the account presented here remains a nominalistic account, though mitigated by some concessions to Frege.

These concessions however are unavoidable if one wants to remain an empiricist. Frege has shown that unless one draws the distinction between sense and reference, one is unable to account for the cognitive value of statements such as "a = b".

If one considers the reference only, one turns all identity-statements into analytic statements whose truth should be knowable with the help of reason alone. For my part, I would add that the neglect of the sense-reference dichotomy brings about this effect for other kinds of statements too and probably for all kinds of statements. To make that clear, let us consider the statement "Some men are philosophers". If we leave aside the sense of the two predicates and if we interpret their reference along the lines of Martin's theory of multiple denotation, which is in the spirit of nominalism, that is to say, if we consider the *individuals* who collectively constitute the class of men and the class of philosophers rather than the classes themselves, then we shall know at once, simply by comparing the extensions of the predicates, that some individuals belong to both classes or that some names appear in both lists. In other terms, by dropping the sense out of our account of meaning, we transform a synthetic statement into an analytic one since our understanding of the statement is simultaneous in that case with our knowing of its truth value.

Thus, to allow for the synthetic character of the above mentioned statement, we have to distinguish between reference and sense or extension and intension. If we do so, we can say that we know the intension of the predicate "man" and the intension of the predicate "philosopher" *before* we know their respective extension and before we know the fact that those extensions overlap. In other words, we can grasp the difference between two kinds of similarities without knowing that there are pairs of individuals which exemplify both at the same time. However hostile he was to the notion of sense, Russell always recognised this implicitly, in so far as he said we could not do without the universal of similarity. Quine wants to explain away this universal as he does with the others by saying that the predicate "similar" can be interpreted syncategorematically, but this treatment does not seem to do justice to the objective relation of similarity which obtains between the individuals we subsume under the same predicate. (I do not claim however that similarity exists independently of the similar individuals themselves).

The notion of sense is also needed to explain how a sentence

can have the same meaning, be it true or false, that is to say to account for the meaningfulness of false sentences. Surprisingly enough, Carnap does not put the *sense* to that use when he tackles this problem in *Meaning and Necessity*. Though he admits there that sentences have intension and extension, he confines himself to considering the meaning which accrues to sentences from the *combination* of the *references* of their components. False sentences, he compares with unexemplified *compound predicates*. "Any proposition must be regarded as a complex entity, consisting of component entities, which in their turn may be simple or again complex. Even if we assume that the ultimate components of a proposition must be exemplified, the whole complex, the proposition itself need not be" ([6]).

In my opinion, to explain the meaningfulness of false sentences, it is not enough to call upon the syntactic complementarity of the compound and its components alone, nor for that matter to call upon the semantic opposition of exemplified and unexemplified predicates. We need to use them both *at the same time*. No simpler account will give us a true picture of the complex machinery of predication and meaning. In the sentences, the two processes are interwoven.

Université de Liège Paul GOCHET

([6]) R. CARNAP, *Meaning and Necessity*, 1956, p. 30.