

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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and

The Idea of Evil

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NANDA, THE CHIEF SHEPHERD'S DAUGHTER.

BY EDUARD BIEDERMANN.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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AMBIGUITIES.

BY THEODORE GILMAN.

“The ambiguity of language, uncertainty of meaning, vagueness of thought, and confusion of ancient and figurative speech, underlying literature and tradition; the effect of ambiguity upon customs, laws and creeds.”

YONKERS, April 29, 1904.

IN the fall of 1869 there occurred a public discussion between Dr. Mark Hopkins, President of Williams College, and Dr. James McCosh, President of Princeton, regarding what Dr. McCosh called “the very peculiar ethical theory of Dr. Hopkins.” It was a battle between trained champions in the maturity of their powers and excited wide interest. The chief relation of their discussion to the above topic is to be found in the difficulty these accomplished writers and teachers had in understanding each other. Dr. Hopkins wrote: “and here I must notice a misapprehension of Dr. McCosh respecting the place assigned by me to the moral reason. He says my ‘confusion arises from making the moral reason come after the end, after the end has been chosen.’ I not only do not do this, but it never occurred to me as possible that any one should.”

The chief characteristic of Dr. Hopkins's style was clearness and cogency of thought, and yet here in a studied and deliberate controversy, after carefully weighing his words, Dr. McCosh completely misunderstood him.

In closing the discussion Dr. Hopkins wrote, “But enough, all metaphysical points lie within a narrow compass, and it is both amusing and annoying to me to see what a fog of discussion, and often *nimbus*, will gather round them. Those involved in this dis-

cussion seem to me simple and luminous. Most of the difficulty in making them appear so to others arises from the imperfection of language. This has seemed to me so great, that for years I was deterred from attempting anything. I saw so much on these subjects of mere logomachy. This has been a difficulty between Dr. McCosh and myself. We evidently do not always attach the same meaning to the same word. If we could do that, I am confident it would bring us nearer together than we have seemed, for not only are all the intuitions of men on these subjects alike, but he and I belong to the same general school of thought, and are substantially working together." This discussion is an example of a class which seems to have been coexistent with language, the two contestants were skilled logicians, and yet the ambiguities of language were a constant stumbling-block in their way.

Few men have excelled Dr. Hopkins in lucidity of statement and clear thinking. The difficulty which deterred him from writing for publication may have been the cause of his great attention to definitions. His whole method in writing seems to have been the avoidance of ambiguity, uncertainty of meaning, vagueness of thought and confusion of figurative speech.

Nor do expert readers of an author get the same meaning from his words. As an example, Professor E. B. McGilvary writes in a late number of *Mind* as follows: "As I understand Hegel, he affirms exactly what his commentator (W. I. Harris) denies. And those who read Hegel's monism into a system in which there is no liberty, except the one single liberty of the one single whole, make Hegel do violence to the fundamental law of the totality of each logical distinction, a law which he himself made central within his system." Here two students read an author and come to exactly opposite conclusions as to his meaning.

It is said "Language affords one of the most intricate instances of creation by *consensus gentium*, and hence presents a field for astute sociological analysis. Now the word sociology may be stretched to cover everything in the heavens above, or the earth beneath, or be limited to apply to some narrow part of the universal field. Analysis of a word with reference to the science of sciences, it must be confessed, does require the gift of astuteness. Did not the writer mean that the analysis of language requires all the knowledge one possesses, or in other words, are not many high sounding words used because they are mouth-filling rather than mind-satisfying?

Or to take another example. Herbert Spencer in his *Social*

Statics, says, "If we would keep our conclusions from ambiguities, we must reserve the term we employ to signify absolute rectitude solely for this purpose." Yes, but the ambiguity does not reside in the term, but in the meaning we give to it. We could conduct a long discussion using the term, and at the end find that our opponent understood "absolute rectitude" in a different sense from that in which we did.

What different meanings Dr. Hopkins and Herbert Spencer would attach to absolute rectitude. One might have a human standard, the other a divine. The only way to prevent ambiguity in the use of this or any other term, is to define it. That requires a long discussion and the presentation of arguments and other definitions, and the statement of philosophies and their histories. The result would be a disagreement as to the meaning, and an agreement only that each would use the term in their own way, and with their own meaning. That by itself would be a great advantage. There is sure to be a misunderstanding by avoiding the question in an *ad captandum* way.

Says Professor Ritchie, "When people talked to Socrates of 'just' and 'noble,' 'unjust' and 'ignoble,' praising or blaming people or deeds, he insisted on asking them to explain such words. The average man thinks he understands them because he is always using them. Men have a picture before their imagination of certain cases, and they think that is a knowledge of the subject. Such a reference to cases does not satisfy Socrates. He is not satisfied unless he can obtain a definition of justice or temperance or friendship that will fit every case. He starts with some traditional opinion, and then proceeds to test it by taking concrete instances, and seeing whether they come under the accepted formula. This is the Socratic method." That is, he would avoid ambiguities by a course of dialectics.

Ambiguities may be said to be the result of dialectics. The keen and trained logician analyzes his opponents' words and arguments, and discovers their ambiguities and confusions of thought. From Socrates down to modern philosophers, the work of the learned has been to force upon their fellow men a conviction of their ignorance, and to expose their false conceit of the possession of larger knowledge. Thus each successive school of thought has its own terminology. To understand any system or science we must first learn the language of its teachers. How true this is of Kantism. Idealists, nominalists, conceptualists, theologians, and philosophers of all sorts, have each their language. Chemistry, botany, medicine,

surgery, and every technical trade, have each their special terminology. We thus find many artificial systems of phrases and words used to describe ideas and facts.

One of the most popular words of modern times and one concerning which there is great ambiguity of meaning is "evolution." Some understand it to mean necessarily a slow process of development which requires millions of years for its completion. Others say that time is not the essence of its meaning; it rests chiefly on the materialistic theory, and requires that the power of development shall inhere in the matter, and therein is the potency which sets in motion all the phenomena of nature. Others say that evolution means that the forms of life have been orderly and continuous, and whether the time of their development has been short or long, or whether the progress has been *per saltum* or gradual, does not enter into the idea. Others that it means the survival of the fittest, and others natural selection. Others say evolution dispenses with God, others that evolution is God's method of creation. Questions therefore about evolution, and about other subjects also, are exceedingly difficult to answer without ambiguity.

A categorical answer to a question, yes or no, is often demanded by practical men. Frequently such an answer would be ambiguous, and create confusion of thought. You are asked whether you believe in this or that statement or theory or doctrine. Then you are pushed into a corner by being asked to assent to some deduction from the position your categorical answer seems to require you to take, and yet which you dissent from, though consistency seems to demand your assent to it. The contest in such cases should be made on the question, because it generally contains words or thoughts which are susceptible of different interpretations, and concerning which there is doubt as to which view is reasonable and true. The one who asks the questions is the attacking party, and has the advantage over the one questioned, who is on the defensive. The questioner assumes the chief point which is that his questions are based on acknowledged fact, and are a fair and complete statement of what should be taken as the true starting-point in the discussion, whereas the true starting-point is back of the question, and many things should be said and discussed before the question is reached. Putting the question should come after the discussion. Even a child can ask questions which it is hard for the parent to answer.

So to the question, are you an evolutionist, yes is an extremely ambiguous answer. The question should rather be, if you are an evolutionist, what kind of an evolutionist are you? for if you say

yes to the simple question, you are liable to be classed by some as an avowed infidel and materialist. The only way to escape ambiguity in using the word evolution, is to define the sense in which you are using it, whether general or specific, and if the latter, then give the special meaning you attach to the word.

Another modern ambiguous term is "natural selection." The meaning given to it depends upon the school of thought to which one belongs. It may be taken to mean selection by nature, or as Darwin expressed it, the selection by a shepherd to improve the flocks under his care. That involves a being different from the sheep, controlling them to attain a result of which they have no understanding or apprehension. This being acts with an intelligence which the sheep have no participation in. That is one meaning of natural selection. Another is that there is in matter a natural, though blind, force which determines the selection without the interference or help of any outside power. The selection under this view is one of the attributes of matter, and starting with the atom, it has progressed by chemical and other changes, until gradually the higher forms of creation and finally man, have been produced. The ambiguity of this term thus becomes apparent, and unless one carefully defines the sense in which it is used, great confusion of thought must result.

Confusion of thought is apt to arise in translating from one language to another. Professor Ritchie says, "It is clearly wrong to call Plato's ideas 'things.' The necessities of language unfortunately compel us to interpolate this word in translating Greek neuter adjectives and participles. τὰ ὄντως ὄντα are not properly 'things in themselves.'" And in another place he says, "If we ask ourselves in what sense a law of nature is real, we have perhaps the best clue to the meaning, and also to the ambiguities of Platonic language. The word real is ambiguous. 'Exist' is always apt to suggest existence in time and space. The Greek word εἶναι, 'to be,' had always the twofold meaning of existence and of validity and truth. 'Most really existent' is a less accurate translation of τὰ ὄντως ὄντα than 'most thoroughly true and valid.'" And in another place, "Apart from the misunderstandings likely to result from too literal an acceptance of Plato's occasional use of highly figurative language, it must be admitted that Plato led people to think of the intelligible realm as another world alongside of the phenomenal."

Oliver Wendell Holmes said that in every conversation between two persons there were six who took part. There was the imaginary person, whom the first person in the dialogue thought himself to

be, second the imaginary being whom the first person thought the second person considered him to be, then there was the true person who might have been very different from both the conceptions regarding him. The second person in the dialogue was likewise three-fold, and in the conversation words might be spoken in the character of either of the six. The first person might utter some lofty sentiment which in his sleeve he rather laughed at. He said it only because he thought it was such a sentiment as he thought the second person would expect to come from such a person as the first person thought the second person thought he was. Or the first person might say something *in propria persona*, and the second person would explain it to himself as coming from the person he thought the first person thought he was, but not coming from the first person as the second person thought he was. How to get at the true expression of ideas from both sides of a dialogue without confusion of thought, is a difficult thing. When mutual confidence exists, so that each is sure the other is speaking as he truly feels and believes, there is established the best basis for friendship, trust, and clearness of thought.

Then there is a class of ambiguities which arise from misconception and mistakes in the logic of an ignorant person, as when a woman was asked how she distinguished her twins. She replied that it was easy enough, she put her finger into Pat's mouth and if he bit real hard then she knew it was Mike. Or the emotional speaker who said, changing the first letters of two words, "brethren, you all know how it feels to have a half warmed fish in your hearts." There is also a confusion of thought in the term "to eat humble pie," the word "humble" having been put in the place of the original word "numble," which is a part of the carcass of a deer, and would make very poor pie. The words "humble pie" have the same original meaning as "to eat crow," a phrase common in political life. There is an enforced humility in this process, and the change from "numble" to "humble" introduced a thought which harmonized with the idea sought to be expressed, and the last form of the phrase has entirely supplanted the original.

One of the most remarkable words in the history of science is "phlogiston." It actually did not mean anything. The definitions of it used seriously by scientific men now provoke a laugh. And yet the theory of phlogiston was taught in all the universities of Europe up to the time of the chemical revolution. Then it was discarded almost unanimously by all scientific men. When the scientific investigations of Lavoisier revealed the truth as regards the com-

position of water, the confusion of thought in the word phlogiston became apparent.

The revolutionary period in science and thought is like the mutation period in plants. It does not always exist, but when events conspire to produce it, then new systems and new species of thought and science appear and propagate, and maintain themselves because they are true, and the confusion of thought contained in the old is exposed.

There are intuitions which are common to all men, but this is ground on which we should tread carefully. The brain of man is such a marvelously complex organ that there are many propositions which when presented to it by consciousness, are intuitionally accepted as true. The mind is built up by its intuitions and conclusions. Its formation is determined by the kind of propositions it accepts as intuitions. The mind, however, in the interest of clear thinking should be trained to rest not on intuitions only, but on definitions, or rather to test its intuitions by definitions. In modern phrase the universe is one intelligible system, of which the human mind can come to understand some part, just because and in so far as it applies the test of coherence or non-contradiction. The mind looks at any object presented to it, not only with two eyes but from a thousand or more standpoints of memory and association. The mind covers every object with a maze of triangulations from each point which it has verified by the base line of experience. Plutarch ascribes to Plato the saying "God always geometrizes." So truth may be said to be not a mere matter of personal opinion, but true to all intelligence. Given one base line of actual well defined truth, and we can triangulate and explore the entire universe.

The chief duty of every speaker or writer is to make his meaning clear, and this is by no means an easy task. Almost like this is the duty to think clearly. If these two objects can be attained, the writer or speaker will render a service to himself and to those who hear him. Of two words the one should be used about which there is the least ambiguity, and which has the greatest precision. The subject to be treated should be defined, and the sense in which topical words are used, clearly stated. Science began in Greece by the attempts of philosophers to arrive at the truth by means of definitions, and like the Corinthian pillars, those early Greek models are never to be surpassed.

There is yet a word to be said on the effect of ambiguity on customs, laws, and creeds. The frontispiece of the last *Open Court*, by C. Goldsborough-Anderson represents an old man reclining on

his bed; his white beard can hardly be distinguished from the coverlet; his erect head is fringed with snow white hair, making most prominent the massive development of his brain. Though lying on his last bed, his eyes have lost none of their keenness and his face beams with intelligence and kindness. On one side, his aged wife is looking tenderly into his face. On the other his daughter lies prostrate with her emotions, her face buried in her hands. At the foot of the bed, facing the old man, kneels a priest holding up to his gaze a crucifix.

The story is told. The church with its authority and the wife and daughter with all the power of their tender love and religious devotion are urging the man of science to recant. How can he recant when he has reached his positions by processes as inexorable as those of geometry, and when he knows that if words were only rightly understood, all confusion of thought would vanish in the clear light of truth.