"THE MEANING OF MEANING"—WORDS AND IDEAS

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

"WORDS, words, words", said Hamlet, and on similar occasions we make the same contemptuous remarks about orators, rhetoricians and politicians, or even about solemn theologians and moralists, who use words, labels, cliches, tags, overworked phrases, without attaching any real, sincere and definite meaning to them.

Many a fallacy or pompous, high-sounding assertion may be punctured by simply asking the speaker: "Pray, just what do you mean? Please define your terms with some approach to precision."

To give one example. The late Luther Burbank, the eminent horticulturist and experimenter, observed that most of those who say that "God is a spirit" have not the faintest idea of what "a spirit" is, and actually imagine God as an elderly gentleman with a white beard and austere mien. The same may be affirmed of those who, less naive, tell us that God is conceived by them not as a person resembling man, but as "a super-person." Of course, they cannot possibly tell you what they mean by a "super personality". The compound term has *no definite meaning.* It is a conscious or unconscious substitute for other terms, which *had* a meaning, but a meaning outgrown and rejected as no longer entertainable. Burbank was right, though he was abused for his blunt remark.

Again, there are words which, though possessing or carrying no *definite* meaning, are charged with emotional significance and conjure up, in any connection or context, a rich variety of images. Words, as the poet said, not realizing the full deep meaning of his words, "are deeds", alluding no doubt to words of this character. To this category belong such words as *love, beauty, virtue, truth, justice, mercy.* To say "beauty", for example, is to call on a hundred different memories, images, perceptions and emotions. One

may think of beautiful women, beautiful sunsets, beautiful landscapes, beautiful gardens, beautiful birds, beautiful poems.

In general, however, the meaning of meaning is a problem the solution of which bristles with difficulties. And never has the importance of a correct and satisfactory solution of that problem been appreciated as keenly as it is to-day, by reason of the new theories now current among psychologists, philologists, anthropologists and philosophers concerning the origin and function of language, its relation to thought and its role in promoting civilization and progress.

Generally speaking, there are two views of the genesis and early development of language. According to one school, there is a significant and vital correspondence between words and natural objects, sensations, sounds and simple feelings. This school has even sought to explain *things, phenomena,* by studying the *words* which represent them. The other school treats language as, in the main, *conventional* and *artificial.* It does not deny that *some words* were suggested by sounds or appearances, but it finds little significance in such correspondence. Words like gurgle, tinkle, rattle, clatter, chatter, hum, etc., clearly enough indicate their source and origin, but it is absurd to suggest that analysis and contemplation of them will aid us in fully *understanding the things they represent.*

It is the second school which is rapidly gaining ascendency. And of the remarkable and illuminating books produced by it, "The Meaning of Meaning", written by Prof. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards of England, is unquestionably the most profound and philosophical. Its central propositions, moreover, are supported or confirmed by Prof. B. Malinovski, an anthropologist and ethnologist of note, who writes of language and of meaning in the light not of library research alone, but also of direct and practical contact, under varying conditions, with surviving tribes in primitive stages of culture. (Prof. Dewey, by the way, quotes Prof. Malinovski with warm approval in his work on "Nature and Experience", which the present writer has reviewed in this magazine.)

The book has attracted much attention and high praise, though it is confessedly introductory and tentative. Its central thesis is, perhaps, best summarized in the following brief statements of Prof. Malinowski:

"Language and all linguistic processes derive their power only from real processes taking place in man's relation to his surround-

ings."

"Language serves for definite purposes; it functions as an instrument used for and adapted to a definite aim."

"Language in its primitive function and original form has an essentially pragmatic character; it is a mode of behavior, and indispensable element of concerted human action."

"Neither a word nor its meaning has an independent and self-sufficient existence. . . . Words must be treated as symbols, and a psychology of symbolic reference must serve as a basis for all science of language."

"The meaning of a word must always be gathered, not from a passive contemplation of it, but from an analysis of its functions, with reference to a given culture."

The authors of the volume under discussion, Messrs. Ogden and Richards, show by illustrations drawn from philosophic, metaphysical and aesthetic literature that even the term "meaning" is not properly understood today, and that it is used actually in no fewer than *sixteen* distinct senses. They argue that to *understand* any word, it is necessary to regard it as a *symbol* and to know what particular thing it refers to, while definition of a term is merely the substitution of a better understood and better known term or symbol. They stress the importance of distinguishing between the symbolic and the emotive uses of language, and show that much confusion in discussion and even in science is due to different uses of the same terms by the disputants. They show that language often influences and distorts thought by its vagueness and ambiguity.

Indeed, the influence of language upon thought is but little understood by the average thinker. To quote the authors:

"There are three factors involved when any statement is made or interpreted.

"(1) Mental processes. (2) The symbol. (3) A referent—something that is thought of.

"The theoretical problem of symbolism is, How are these three related.

"The practical problem, since we must use words in discussion and argument is, How far is our discussion itself distorted by habitual attitudes toward words and lingering assumptions due to theories no longer openly held but still allowed to guide our practice."

Phantoms and superstitions associated with words that are inherited from the past, from cultural stages long since outgrown,

prevent clear thinking and mutual comprehension. Savages attributed magic to words; they were not altogether wrong. There *is* magic in words, and it plays havoc with much that passes for exact, scientific writing.

Hence, the greatest of all reforms now needed in philosophy and the socalled social inexact sciences is reform in the use of words—the deliberate and careful attaching of clear meanings to all words employed for other than emotional purposes.

In the light of such observations and conclusions as these regarding the relation between words and the things expressed by them, it is not difficult to point out the fallacies of writers on religious, ethical and metaphysical subjects who mistake words for ideas or realities. Take a few examples.

We still often meet with the assertion that science and religion are totally distinct provinces, with a high, insurmountable wall between them, and that the methods and procedure of science are utterly alien to religion. "Faith", or "belief", is all that religion needs and demands, we are told, and without the emotional reactions which beget faith and belief religion is impossible. Men of science, therefore, are admonished to leave all their notions of evidence, proof, probability, and the like behind them when they close the door of the laboratory or the research library, and become simple and child-like again, or heed the very different *logic of the heart,* before venturing to deal with religion.

Those who use such phrases have simply failed to define the significant words in them or to ask themselves whence those words came and how they acquired any meaning, *if they possess one.*

There is no such thing as faith or belief without apparent evidence or reasonable ground. Not every pretender, impostor or self-deluded faker inspires faith in us. Christians do not take the claims of Mohammed very seriously, and the followers of the Arabian prophet, in turn, do not accept the claims put forward by the worshippers of Jesus of Nazareth. Jews read the New Testament and the Koran with a critical mind, and the emotional reaction produced in them is *esthetic,* not religious. They may admire the style here, the form there, the substance or ethical message elsewhere. But their "heart" jumps to no conclusion of the sort said to be "spontaneously" drawn by the orthodox believers.

Again, the orthodox and naive Monotheist is overpowered and awed by such a phrase in the Old Testament as "Thus saith the

Lord". Those who think of the Lord as a jealous ruler, a stern law-giver, an occupant of a celestial throne surrounded by angels and archangels, attach a concrete, definite meaning to that phrase which the Agnostic and the atheist deem childish, and the latter, therefore, are neither overpowered nor impressed. On the other hand, Agnostics and Atheists *are* confessedly impressed by the mystery of nature, the glories of the universe, the phenomena of space and time, the miracle of life. They do not, however, solve riddles by changing their names, or by inferring other and greater riddles behind those sought to be explained.

Let us imagine a dialogue between one who uses words carefully, with appreciation of their value, and one who uses them without reflection or understanding, the subject being the supposed essentials of Christianity as a religion.

Believer: I respect and value science within its proper sphere, but it has no jurisdiction over religion. It can neither prove nor disprove my profoundest beliefs. Faith has its own logic.

Skeptic and Agnostic: And what, pray, *are* your profoundest beliefs with which, you admit, science has nothing to do?

Believer: The existence of a personal God, the Supreme ruler of all things, the creator of all things, and the divine origin and mission of His only begotten Son, Jesus, the Christ, the redeemer of man.

Skeptic: And how did you reach and form those essential beliefs?

Believer: They are spontaneous—in the nature of revelations. They satisfy my soul and heart; they give life meaning; they solve the riddle of existence; they are supremely rational.

Skeptic: Are you certain of the *spontaneity,* or the *revelation?* Would you possess the same beliefs if your education had been different, if your parents, teachers and other early guides had professed Buddhist or Mohammedan doctrines, or Agnosticism? Do persons born and reared in a wilderness, or among savage tribes, and not taught Christianity, *acquire that faith spontaneously?* As to the *rationality* of your beliefs and their interpretaion of life, perhaps you are too easily satisfied, and mistake words for ideas. What seems to you irrefutable seems to me and to many others very shallow, empty and not worth refuting. God, you say, created all things, gave men free will, suffered him to fall, and then sent Jesus, His Son in human form, to redeem man. You have no real con-

ception of God, in the first place, and you have no notion as to his purpose, if any, in creating man, or in letting him fall, or in saving him, if he *is* saved, or if the word "saved" has any definite meaning, which is debatable, to say the least. Begin, if you please, by attempting a definition of God.

Believer: Ah, to define God is to limit Him, and He is infinite. The best we can do is to think of Him as *pure spirit.*

Skeptic: And what *is* pure spirit? Where do you find it and how do you know it exists?

Believer: Why, even science tells us that matter is ultimately resolvable into—into force, and that there is no such thing as matter. No matter, then there can be no materialist philosophy. We revert, then, to force, spirit, as the stuff of the universe, and the creator of all this stuff, of course, is pure spirit.

Skeptic: Yes, there is no such thing as *matter* in the old crude sense of the term, but we do not know what matter resolves itself into. Call the ultimate constituents of atom spirit, if you like, but that is only a word; it has no definite meaning. What the stuff of the universe is, no one knows, and if that be true, as it is, to call the supposed creator of the ultimate stuff 'Pure Spirit' is not to throw any light either on the stuff or on its supposed creator. "Materialism" is nonsense as a philosophy, of course, but so is spiritualism or vitalism. *These terms simply have no meaning.* Science knows nothing and says nothing about *cause* or *ultimates.* Religion knows nothing, either, about these things, but says much, and *what it says seems intelligible only because believers do not ask for definitions and explanations of terms.* Religion is just as ignorant as science, and might better admit the fact, and belief in Jesus or in his mission is justified only if it *can be supported by evidence and probability.* The belief in the parthogenetic origin of Jesus is merely childish and superstitious. Like beliefs, equally childish, are to be formed in other and cruder religions. Talk of "saving" man is absurd. Man has risen very slowly, and is still rising. He has sinned and still sins against *his own better self,* but no one can *save* him from the consequences of his folly, malice and hate. He must learn to control his anti-social desires and impulses; he must learn to behave like a truly civilized being. He cannot be "saved" at a given arbitrary period and licensed to start all over again.

To purify itself and appeal once more to rational persons, religion must begin by learning the meaning of meaning and avoiding

the use of terms that conceal lack of thought and of ideas.

But some metaphysicians are as guilty as theologians of using terms without meaning and erecting philosophies on fog, mist and illusion. Take the naive old-fashioned idealist who asserts that nothing really exists save our own dream or idea. When he asks how we *know* that alleged realities are real, and not fancies of our own mind, he merely demonstrates the fact that he does not know the meaning of the words used by all intelligent persons, nor the origin and significance of words generally.

When I say, "I see a tree", it is idle for any metaphysician to tell me that I am deceiving myself, and that I have nothing but a notion or idea of a tree. I say *the tree is there*, because these words have to me a perfectly definite meaning. I can also think of trees in Paris, or in Peking. I can thing of trees painted by artists. I can think of trees I saw and climbed when a boy. Finally, I *dream* of trees and know that I have such dreams.

Common sense easily perceives the *difference* between all these images and ideas. Philosophy cannot afford to disregard and outrage common sense. Even if the naive idealists were right in some sense, their conceptions would be irrelevant to the problems of life and language. Perhaps there are no trees anywhere, and we only think and say "they exist"? But our words have grown out of our experiences, needs, feelings, contacts. We distinguish between trees seen, trees remembered, trees dreamt of, *because these distinctions are to us very real and very significant.*

In truth, most of the empty controversies between naive idealists and naive realists are attributable to carelessness, confusion and unconscious muddling and shuffling in the use of words. To start out with precise definitions and common meanings is to obviate nine tenths of the futile and pointless discussions in which we indulge.

Take, again, the dogmatic statement of some "mechanists" that man is "only a machine". If they were careful in the use of terms, they would realize that this proposition is pointless and empty. Physiologically man is a machine, of course, and no one disputes it. But do all machines act as man does, and does the application to him of the name machine take away his peculiarities, his distinctive traits, his unique endowment? Do machines write poetry, compose symphonies, construct philosophic systems, build cathedrals, evolve religions? Are machines conscious of themselves, capable of re-

flection, self-restraint and choice? Do machines reason, draw inferences, interpret facts? Do machines accumulate experience and profit thereby?

Since man does things which no machine fashioned by him can do, it is absurd to call him a *mere* machine. It is precisely his differences that call for explanation, and no verbal explanation which ignores those differences can possess the slightest value.

Illustrations of the essential theme of this paper, indeed, might be multiplied indefinitely, as they are not confined to the fields of philosophy, metaphysics and theology. We can find them in abundance in economic literature, in political discussion, in sociological treatises, in art criticism. Let one "burning" instance suffice—the different senses in which the word "radical" has been used of late and is still loosely used. What is a radical? One who goes to the root of things, traces causal connections, makes scientific diagnoses of social problems and prescribes adequate and genuine remedies, says the thoughtful radical himself. A radical is he who teaches destructive doctrines and would overthrow society by violence and civil war, says the conservative. A radical is he who denies everything, recognizes no principle, and demands license in the name of freedom to experiment, says the ultra-conservative. In France there is a radical party that is mildly liberal and a radical-socialist party which is neither radical nor socialistic. Yet how much energy, space and time have been wasted on attacks upon or defenses of "radicalism!"

Decidedly, the beginning of wisdom and of understanding is a correct and intelligent use of words and a firm grasp of their *intended* meanings. No meaning, no word. No idea to express, again, no word. New ideas require new terms, or frank and clear redefinitions of old terms retained for convenience. If we are determined to fight, let us fight not over misunderstood words, but over definite ideas and conceptions, over actual differences— of which, fortunately or unfortunately, there is no dearth.