

ESSAY I

Traces of Meaning and Reference

From Epistemology to Linguistics to Hermeneutics

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEMATIC

A PECULIAR TRAIT of modern philosophy has been its obsession with the problems of meaning and reference. These intertwined problems became prominently inscribed in the annals of philosophical discourse as a result of the epistemological turn maneuvered by Descartes. With his invention of the mind as a translucent ego-cogito, whose principal function it was to provide accurate representations of reality, Descartes placed upon the quests for meaning and reference some rather staggering demands. The ego-cogito was shouldered with the formidable task of determining meaning through the instrumentation of clear and distinct ideas and delivering reference via a route of trustworthy inferences. It was in this manner that the problems of meaning and reference came to be defined against the backdrop of the modern theoretico-epistemological paradigm.

The repeated attempts to solve these twin problems in the history of continental rationalism (from Descartes to Husserl) and in the history of British empiricism (from Locke to Russell) continued to proceed within the parameters set by the epistemological paradigm. Some of these efforts were boldly metaphysical in design; others had recourse to a variety of reductionisms, either of a psychological or

logical sort. The story of the manifold vagaries that travel with the modern preoccupation with the epistemologically defined problems of meaning and reference has been masterfully told by Richard Rorty in his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.¹ Our project in the present context is not that of rehearsing the story that Rorty has told so well, but it is rather that of ferreting out the presuppositions of the theoretico-epistemological paradigm that are principally responsible for its resultant aporias in addressing the issues of meaning and reference. This will set the agenda for a discovery of a more suitable matrix for addressing the issues. Our central argument will be that this more suitable matrix is found within the space of communicative praxis.²

The fate of meaning and reference within the disciplinary matrix of modern epistemology has been that of a gravitation into a maelstrom of paradoxes and aporias. This has been the case in the traditions of both continental rationalism and British empiricism. Rationalism gravitated into a performative contradiction of looking for that which it had already presumptively found; empiricism landed in the predicament of not being able to find that which it was presumptively looking for. But the bugbear at issue was common to both approaches. It had to do with the shared presupposition that meaning and reference, either already found or yet to be found, were hard-knob determinables. Criteriologically defined in advance, they were deemed to be in possession of the traits of objectifiability, self-identity, and universalizability.

This presupposition as to the nature and status of meaning and reference played itself out in the empiricist tradition in such a manner as to produce undecidability as regards matters of meaning and inscrutability as regards matters of reference. Proceeding from the bare particularity of sense impressions (“sense-qualia” in the grammar of positivism), devoid of all intentionality, empiricism was unable to nail down the proper objects of its investigations. There was nothing universalizable down the road. All that lay ahead were collections of abstracted sensory particulars, ever changing, as they “pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations”—as Hume so eloquently stated the matter in *A Treatise of Human Nature*.³

The abstract empiricism of isolated and atomistic sense impressions was tethered to a species of psychologism in the guise of a foun-

dational science. Logic was viewed as a branch of psychology. Logical truths of evidence, inference, and generalization were seen as grounded in psychological acts. John Stuart Mill pushed psychologism to its limits in his *System of Logic* by construing the law of non-contradiction as one of our earliest generalizations from experience. In thus reducing all laws of logic to psychological laws, necessity to contingency, and apodictic certainty to the *feeling* of certainty, the empiricist was unable to find a place for meaning and reference that bore the marks of the sought-after constancy, universalizability, and necessity. Measured against these strict criteria, meaning was destined to remain undecidable and reference inscrutable.

The rationalist tradition was dedicated to the task of refuting the empiricists' epistemology of sensory-based experience and psychological foundations. Edmund Husserl's contribution in this regard was of particularly unique moment. His celebrated attack on psychologism in his classical work *Logical Investigations* demonstrated quite decisively that the logical and epistemic criteria for meaning and reference could never be met through an empirical observation of psychological acts. Psychology deals with natural laws that are contingent; logic deals with normative laws that are necessary. Logic has a distinct task in investigating the truth content of intellectual acts, the act-intentionality of the cogito. Its task needs to be distinguished from an empirical investigation of the causal origin of intellectual acts. Apodictic evidence is apriori rather than aposteriori. The certainty of proof and justification antedates the *feeling* of certainty.

It is along these lines that Husserl's attack on psychologism unfolds, proceeding from the protocols of a logic-based theory of judgment instead of from an empirical observation of psychological acts. But that which needs to be noted at this juncture is that the basic presupposition of the contending parties, the rationalists on the one hand and the empiricists on the other hand, remains intact. The meaning of meaning carries with it claims for universality and necessity, if not of a metaphysical clearly of an epistemological sort. The question then remains whether such a criteria of meaning can indeed be achieved in our philosophical discourse. We have already noted that the empiricist has chosen to remain skeptical on this matter. Yet to be examined is where the ruminations of a rationalist epistemology lead us.

Might it be that the rationalist epistemology leads us to the same environs as did the empiricist epistemology, namely to the dead ends

of an undecidability with respect to meaning and an inscrutability with respect to reference. In its efforts to capture meaning and harness reference through appeals to doctrines of essence, apriori and universal conditions, and invariant rules of inference, rationalism succumbed to the aporias of representationalism and the illusions of foundationalism. Theories of meaning based on a doctrine of essence make purchases on the universalizability of meaning through a procedure of *representation*. A doctrine of essence travels hand in glove with a claim that a meaning that was present in a given context can be *re-presented* in another context. But that which remains problematic in such a putative state of affairs is not only the possibility of retrieving or repeating a presentation that is no longer present in its presentational immediacy, but indeed the sense of what it means to experience “presence” in its alleged original presentment. On this particular point, Jacques Derrida’s broadside attack on representational theories of essence and meaning merits particular attention.⁴ Although Derrida’s specific target is Husserl’s construal of meaning and representation, implications abound for any claims for a representational theory of knowledge, be they rationalistic or empiricistic. And again we see how the vagaries of modern rationalism and empiricism, although differing in some significant details end up pretty much in the same ball park as regards presuppositions for a project of epistemological grounding. The bugbear for both is the elusive nature of a foundational *presence*—and here it matters not whether the sought-after presence be that of a universally reclaimable essence, an apriori rule, or a discrete and granular sensory impression.

What may, however, still hang in the balance is whether or not Husserl’s later phenomenological project remains immune to the criticisms that Derrida offers in response to Husserl’s earlier project. Husserl may indeed remain an “epistemologist” until the bitter end, but if so he becomes quite chastened and restrained in his later work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. It is here that he informs the reader that his earlier project of “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” is a dream that has been dreamed out. The earlier project that responded to the call of “*Zu den Sachen selbst*” becomes tempered with a “*Rückgang auf die Lebenswelt*.” This “return to the lifeworld,” in the aftermath of its objectivization and occlusion of the functioning intentionality of

concrete lifeworld experiences, does appear to make all things new with regard to any philosophical project of the future. It is not that “rationality” is now somehow left behind, but rather that the naive rationalism of modern epistemology is placed into question.⁵

It is thus that deliberations on the status of meaning and reference in the epistemological paradigm of modernity appear to stand at an impasse. Neither modern rationalism nor modern empiricism seem to have the resources to secure reliable criteria of meaning and trustworthy strategies of reference. The search for epistemic foundations, either of an empirical or transcendental sort, has resulted in failure. The indeterminacy of cognitive processes appears to have won the day. The very science of epistemology as the *logos* of *epistēmē*, as a reconstruction of the foundations of the act of knowing, has gravitated into philosophical incoherence. To inquire about knowing *that* one knows and *what* it is that one knows when one knows, involves one in a circularity of reasoning which, at best, perpetually defers that which is sought after and, at worst, involves one in a quite blatant performative contradiction. The modern theoretico-epistemological paradigm seems indeed to have become profoundly problematized.

Against the backdrop of these internal developments within the modernity problematic itself, which have brought all efforts at achieving meaning and reference under suspicion, our response is not that of a quick and facile jettisoning of the issues at stake in the pursuit of meaning and reference (as some of our more vocal postmodernist friends have recommended), but rather that of recontextualizing and refiguring the issues involved in the problem as traditionally defined. The theoretico-epistemological paradigm of modernity may indeed have depleted its own resources because of a too heavy investment in theory. But from this we need not draw the conclusion that the usages “to mean” and “to refer” ought to be excised from the philosophical lexicon. We will still continue to make use of the vocabulary of meaning and reference, and we have no animosity against talk about “knowing” this and that. The rejection of epistemology as a foundational science does not entail an elimination of knowledge. We will continue to know much about many things in quite ordinary senses of knowing.

The displacement of meaning and reference as protocols of pure theory, devised in the interests of epistemological grounding, does

not in our view entail a rejection of meaning and reference in every sense possible. Admittedly, meaning and reference as a display of bold metaphysical and epistemological exercises may well have outworn its usefulness, but there is another role that these concepts, which are deeply ingrained in our everyday discourse and action, can perform. This role is of a more socio-pragmatic sort in which meaning and reference are seen as traces that provide apertures for a discernment and evaluation of the discourse and action that comprise our quotidian existence. Our central thesis, which we are now able to formulate as an alternative to the theory-laden approach of modern epistemology, is that the issues pertaining to meaning and reference can be creatively rethought by refiguring them within the space of communicative praxis. We are motivated by the call for a *return to praxis*—which may find a certain analog in Husserl’s celebrated “*return to the lifeworld*” of his later philosophy. The task that we envision is that of tracking the traces of meaning and reference so as to discern their imprints within the concrete lifeworld of our intertextured discourse and action.

We speak of “traces of” meaning and reference rather than of “criteria for” meaning and reference. The grammar of criteria buys into a morphology of static structures and pregiven conditions that occlude the dynamic functioning of the trace in its spatial and temporal inscriptions. Criteria are theory based and front loaded. They are installed prior to the adventure of meaning disclosure. Traces are affiliates of praxis, resident within the space of the discourses and actions of the concrete lifeworld, always contextualized within the configurations of sense that inform our intertextured speaking and acting. They comport a presignitive and prepredicative intentionality that antedates any objectivating theoretical act-intentionality.

It is of primal importance to recognize the grammar of trace as testifying of an entwinement of temporality and spatiality within the texture that binds meaning and reference. And this brings us to one of the pivotal and highly suggestive notions invented by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, namely “*the chronotope*.” The chronotope, as the peculiar time-space field of the “dialogic imagination” is an assimilation of historical time and historical space. Quite clearly, time and space, within Bakhtin’s scheme of things, is not time and space under the guise of a *mathesis universalis*—objectively measured and dissected into discrete instants and points. We are not here dealing with the

time of clocks and calendars and the space of geometrical lengths and distances. We are dealing instead with historically lived time and space—time and space as existential coordinates that configure our social practices. Time and space in Bakhtin's economy of the chronotope are from bottom up *lived* time and *lived* space.⁶

It is in this dynamic chronotope that meaning and reference live and move and have their being. The project of tracking meaning and reference is thus that of discerning their traces within a heteroglossia of voices that bespeak patterns of perception, configurations of values, and aesthetic sentiments—and all this against the backdrop of historical memories and anticipations. In such a chronotopal economy meaning and reference are understood as socially and historically imbued practices rather than as achievements of a solitary mental act. They stand in the service of praxis rather than theory. At issue here is not a subject-centered mental operation in the form of a Cartesian ego-cogito, a Kantian transcendental subject, or a Humean sensing self as a bundle of perceptions. Meaning and reference become operative within a wider context of communicative associations. One can well speak of this wider context as a *praxial chronotope*.

THE TURN TO LANGUAGE

The turn to language in the interests of solving the entwined epistemological problematic of meaning and reference ought be neither puzzling nor unexpected. A claim for the inseparability of language from meaning and reference strikes one as approximating a truism. It is in and through language that we articulate meaning and it is in and through language that we designate objects of reference. So much would appear to be quite self-evident. That language should play a role in the quest for meaning and reference would surely seem to be uncontroversial. However, matters become somewhat murky when the issue is raised as to how language might play its invited role. How is language at issue in the achievement of meaning and in the postulates of reference?

Traveling a bit further with Bakhtin's vocabulary of the chronotope we find a veritable heteroglossia of voices seeking to instruct us on the way to language. There are the voices of linguistic science, the

voices of structuralist philosophy of language, the voices of Oxford ordinary language analysis, and the voices of a Heideggerian call to language as the “house of Being.” In the kingdom of language there indeed appear to be many, many mansions!

We need to begin with some distinctions. There is language as spoken, language as written, language as a system of semiotic units (phonemes, morphemes, and lexemes), language as a rostrum of syntactical rules, and language in the bounds of narrativity. The Saussurian distinction between *parole* and *langue* provides a convenient starting point, although it may not do as an end point. There are the events of speaking and writing a spoken tongue, and there is language as a linguistic structure. And then there is *discourse*—which we submit is the *concrete amalgam of the events of speaking and the structure of language within a social practice*. Neither isolated empirical speech acts nor the abstracted components of semiotic units and syntactical rules in themselves make up the fabric of discourse. Herein resides the limitation of speech-act theory on the one hand and structural linguistics on the other hand. Discourse antedates the abstractive maneuvers of empiricism and linguistic science alike.

The performance of discourse plays itself out as an articulation, a showing, a making manifest of variegated forms of life and styles of existence. Discourse comports a sense of *what* is being said and deploys a saying of something *about* something. It unfolds as an august event in which a semantics of utterance and a strategy of reference are amalgamated. Thus we see that already in this linguistic moment, fleshed out broadly as a moment of discursive praxis, the traces of meaning and reference become discernible.

This performativity of linguistic meaning and reference in our quotidian discursive practices, however, moves about within a broader space of textuality and narrativity. The sentential level of discourse is taken up into an embodiment of texts and an emplotment of stories already told and yet to be told. Ultimately we need to attend to the traces of linguistic meaning and reference in the various forms of emplotment that engage us as narrating beings. As *homo narrans* we are destined to tell the stories of our lives as we at once discover and constitute our world.

The contribution of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur to an elucidation of the dynamics of narrativity as a strategy of emplotment has been considerable and noteworthy. Seeking to attenuate the

conflict of existential-phenomenological with scientific-cosmological time, Ricoeur works out from a reconfigured Aristotelian definition of plot which he then grafts on to an Augustinian notion of time to provide a schema of signification that plays itself out both in fictive and historical narration.⁷ The point that needs to be emphasized at this juncture is that the semantics of linguistic meaning and reference plays in a broader arena. It requires a more expansive horizon than the space of phonemes, lexemes, and even sentences. The horizon in which the traces of meaning and reference are discernible includes the region of texts and narratives. Words and sentences are taken up into texts, and texts are taken up into narratives.

In this process of linguistic *Aufhebung*, meaning and reference are themselves refigured. Meaning partakes of a holistic configuration of sense, and reference reaches toward a world in which a heteroglossia of voices and a heterogeneity of stories are inscribed. Texts and narratives are clearly *about* something, but this aboutness is never exhausted by a sentential reference that can provide only cinematographic profiles of particularized speech acts.

This appeal to a broader horizon of language as text and narrative is indicative of certain limitations in the semiotic model in coming to terms with the problem of meaning and reference. These limitations are tied to the methodological decision that semiotics makes in opting for an elementaristic analysis of the constitutive signs used in discourse. Within such a model lexemes become peculiar “word atoms,” and phonemes and morphemes are called upon to provide an accompanying “subatomic” infrastructure. Linguistic science, guided by the semiotic model, proceeds via a dissection, atomization, and binary opposition of the constitutive elements that make up language as a system of signs. Within such a methodological matrix, questions regarding the voice of the speaker and the object of reference are necessarily bracketed. The investigations are restricted to the relations among the elemental signs themselves, yielding the special sciences of phonemics, morphology, lexicography, syntactics, and general grammar.

Plainly enough, these special sciences retain their own legitimacy and methodological integrity. The objectification of language as a relational complex of signs, decontextualized and set at a distance from the performances of speaking subjects and the intentionality of reference, is not only permissible but is indeed a requirement for the

doing of linguistics as a science. The point at issue here is not that linguistic science lacks an internal justification but rather that the *event-character* of discourse within the holistic configurations of narrative recontextualizes and refigures the sign system of semiotics into a dynamic interplay of traces of meaning and reference. It is only when one moves from phonemes to words and then to sentences and texts, and finally to narratives, that meaning and reference as praxial accomplishments can become an issue. It is important, however, that we not construe this “movement” from semiotic units to narratives as a linear and progressive development that proceeds from an infra-structural base to a superstructural derivative. What is operative here is a transversal envelopment rather than a successive development.

It is only within this dynamic interplay of the events of discourse and narration that the workings of meaning and reference are robustly illustrated, and they are illustrated in such a guise as to engender a vortex of intentionalities that push beyond the language-bound space of discourse, textuality, and narrative itself. This brings us to a crucial juncture in our interpretive analysis—the juncture at which the economy of meaning and reference opens out to a region on the hither side of language itself. Language may indeed go all the way down and all the way back in our quest for meaning, but one needs to stop short of any claims that meaning and reference are nothing more than the offspring of language endeavors and that there is nothing *outside of* or *exterior to* language. The Bakhtinian chronotope with its assimilated historical time and space provides for a disclosure of a wider region of forces at work in our making of sense and our referring. It is within this chronotope that the concrete lifeworld of our amalgamated discourse and action becomes visible, opening a wider region for our explorations of the traces of meaning and reference.

It should be mentioned at this juncture that in the travails of the linguistic turn the Ordinary Language School (sometimes identified as the School of Oxford Analysis) has been more promising than the semiotic approach of structuralist linguistics in beckoning us back to the concrete lifeworld. And in assisting us in this regard its proponents have been helpful in pointing out certain misdirections by the epistemologists of sense and reference from Frege to Russell and beyond. Ordinary language, in the locution of the alleged founder of the Ordinary Language School, Ludwig Wittgenstein, is a “form of