

Words and Meanings

Mortimer Adler

2 of 2

4

The objects apprehended by perception differ in a radical way from the objects apprehended by our memory and our imagination.

The objects of our imagination may or may not exist in reality; they may be objects that do not now exist, yet may come into existence at some future time; they may even be purely fictional objects that do not exist, never have existed, and never will exist in reality.

The objects of our memory—past events that we claim to remember—may not have existed as we remember them.

Our memories can be challenged by others who claim to remember the event differently, or who even deny that what we claim to remember ever really occurred.

In other words, the objects of both our imagination and our memory are objects concerning which a question about their real existence can always be asked. That is not so in the case of perception.

When you or I say that we perceive the table at which we are both sitting, we are also asserting that that table exists in reality. If we are perceiving something, not having a hallucination (which is the very opposite of perceiving), then the object we are perceiving is also something that really exists.

We never should ask whether an object perceived really exists. The only possible question is whether we are in fact perceiving or are suffering a hallucination such as alcoholics suffer when they claim to see pink elephants that are not there.

Except for perceptual apprehension, apprehending an object does not involve the judgment that the object really exists as apprehended, or will exist in the future or did exist in the past. Apprehension and judgment are two distinct and separate acts of the mind, one first, the other second. Apprehensions as such are neither true nor false: they assert nothing. Only judgments make assertions—affirmations or denials—that are either true or false.

What is very special about perception is that, while here apprehension and judgment are distinct, they are also inseparable. To claim that we perceive something is to assert that the perceived object also really exists. If that judgment is false, then what we claim to be a perception is in fact a hallucination.

With these points in mind, we can now ask the question: Can one and the same object of discourse be a perceptual object for one person, a remembered object for another, and an imagined object for a third? Since one of the three persons is referring to a perceptual object (in this case, let us assume that he is perceiving, not hallucinating), the object all three are talking about must also be something that really exists.

The case of a conversation between two persons about an object that one of them is remembering and the other imagining raises no new considerations. The same cautions must be exercised; the same principle applies.

Let us spend a moment more with regard to our using names to signify imaginary objects that are never objects of perception or memory. We often talk to one another about such objects.

We are here concerned with objects that no one can perceive or remember because they are entities that never have existed in reality, do not now so exist, and never will. Let us call such objects “purely imaginary objects” or, as they are sometimes called, “fictions of the imagination.”

Of all the creative arts, literature alone, because language is its medium, produces imaginary objects or fictions of the imagination about which we can communicate descriptively. The poet, novelist, or dramatist describes a fictional character which is the product of his imagination (Captain Ahab, for example, in *Moby Dick*, or for that matter the White Whale itself); or he describes some imaginary entity or place (the stately pleasure dome of Kublai Khan in Xanadu) which his imagination has produced. Depending on their powers of imagination, and the assiduity of their efforts, the readers of his work will be able to produce for themselves the same imaginary objects, or at least to achieve close approximations to them, sufficient for the purposes of conversation.

Such conversations take place in manifold forms and myriad instances whenever human beings talk to one another about books they have read. The fact that Captain Ahab or that the singular White Whale does not really exist, and never will exist, does not prevent persons from talking about these objects as common objects of reference, just as they talk about the incumbent President of the United States, or about Abraham Lincoln, or the white horse that George Washington rode, or the crossing of the Delaware at Valley Forge. If it were thought to be impossible for persons to converse about the imaginary objects initially produced by poets and writers of fiction, one would be forced to the contrafactual conclusion that a teacher of literature and his students could never engage in a discussion of a work that all of them have read. One need only think of the countless hours which have been devoted by students, teachers, literary critics, and others to the discussion of the character and actions of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, to dismiss as preposterous even the faintest suggestion that imaginary objects cannot be common objects of discourse.

The mention of Shakespeare’s Hamlet raises for us one final question about objects in the realm of the imaginary. Some of them, like the fictional characters of mythology (e.g., Cerberus or Charon), bear proper names that do not appear in the pages in history; but some, like Hamlet and Julius Caesar, appear in Shakespeare’s plays and also in writings that are usually not regarded as fictional.

The proper name “Hamlet” can be used to refer not only to the character created by Shakespeare, but also to what may be regarded as his prototype in the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus, a twelfth-century Danish historian; in addition, if the account of Saxo Grammaticus is reliable, “Hamlet” was the proper name of a singular prince of Denmark, who lived at a certain time and was involved in regicide, usurpation, incest, and all the rest of it.

So, too, “Julius Caesar,” as a proper name, refers to at least three different singular objects: (i) the leading character in a play by Shakespeare, (ii) a historical figure described in one of Plutarch’s *Lives*, and (iii) the Roman general who lived at a certain time, who conquered Gaul, wrote a history of his battles in that province, crossed the Rubicon, and so on.

If we wish to talk about the character and actions of Julius Caesar as portrayed in the play of that title by Shakespeare, we must identify the imaginary object of our discourse by a definite description of it as “the character of that name in a play by Shakespeare, with the title *Julius Caesar*, first produced on such a date, etc.” It would be confusion, indeed, if one of two persons who are engaged in a conversation about Julius Caesar used that proper name to refer to Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and the other used it to refer to Plutarch’s Julius Caesar. They might get to the point of making contradictory statements about the apparently common object of their discourse, only to find that they did not have a common object, but were in fact talking about different objects—objects which resembled one another in certain respects, but which differed in others.

That Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar is an imaginary object of discourse no one will question. The fact that there are certain resemblances between Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and Plutarch’s and also between Plutarch’s Julius Caesar and Rome’s Julius Caesar, who was general, first consul, and dictator in the years 59-44 B.C., does not change the status of Shakespeare’s invention. His Julius Caesar is a fiction of the imagination no less than Cerberus and Charon. Are we, by the force of this argument, led to the same conclusion about Plutarch’s Julius Caesar and, therefore, about all of the historical personages described by historians and biographers?

5

Let us turn now from objects of perception, memory, and imagination, which are objects we name when we use words to refer to them, to objects of conceptual thought. We face at once the same problem that we faced before with regard to objects of memory and imagination. Here as there the apprehension of the object is not only distinct from, but also separate from, any judgment we may make about whether the object we are apprehending really exists.

To be more precise, the judgment should not be about whether the apprehended object of conceptual thought really exists, but rather whether one or more particular perceptible, or otherwise detectable, instances of it exist in reality. The reason for this is that the words which name the apprehended objects of conceptual thought are always common names. These are names that signify a kind or class of objects, not a unique singular object that is signified by a proper name.

The only way to ask about the existential reality of a kind or class is to ask whether it is a null class (a class having no existent members at all) or a filled class (a class having one or more particular instances that really exist). In other words, kinds or classes, or what are sometimes called universals, do not really exist as such. All the constituents of reality are particular individuals. If the universals, or kinds of classes, have any reality at all, it lies in some property or attribute that is common to a number of particular instances that are all instances of the same kind or members of the same class.

What has just been said, by the way, explains how the perceptual object that the growing child names by calling it “doggie” can later be named by the educated adult using such words as “canine,” “mammal,” “quadruped,” “vertebrate,” “living organism.” These other names signify one and the same perceptual object, but one that is conceptually understood in a variety of ways. As Aquinas pointed out, “we can give a name to an object only insofar as we understand it and according to the way we understand it.” Since one and the same perceptual object can be conceptually understood in a variety of ways (i.e., can be understood as a particular instance of a variety of different kinds of classes), a whole set of common names can be used to refer to it.

With regard to many of the apprehended objects of conceptual thought that we use common names to signify, we seldom pause to

ask the judgmental question about their real existence: Does one or more perceptible or detectable particular instances of the kind or class named really exist?

We would not think to ask it about white swans, but we certainly would if we happened to think about black swans. We would not ask it about dogs and cats, or trees and cows, but we do ask it or have asked it about black holes, quarks, mesons, and other objects of contemporary theoretical physics, and also about angels, spirits, and other totally nonperceptible objects, yet objects we are able to think about by means of concepts that we form.

The foregoing account of the way we use words to name and refer to objects of conceptual thought brings us face to face once again with another serious philosophical mistake, widely prevalent in modern thought, though not exclusively modern in origin.

It is the error known as nominalism. It consists in the denial of what are sometimes called “abstract ideas,” sometimes “general concepts,” but which, however named, are ideas that enable us to understand kinds or classes without any reference to particular perceptual instances that may or may not exist.

These are the ideas through the functioning of which the common names in our vocabulary signify and refer to the kinds or classes that they enable us to apprehend as objects of thought. The nominalist’s denial that we have such ideas compels him to try to offer another explanation of the meaning or significance of common names or what are sometimes called general terms. I have shown that all his efforts to do so are self-defeating.

6

Another mistake about language that follows as a consequence of the failure to distinguish the human intellect from the senses is, strictly speaking, not a philosophical mistake. It is one of which animal psychologists and behavioral scientists are for the most part guilty, though many contemporary philosophers associate themselves with the position taken by students of animal behavior.

In their study of the evidence of animal communication, they seldom if ever note the difference between signs that function merely as signals and signs that function as designators—as names that refer to objects.

Almost all of the cries, sounds, gestures, that animals in the wild, and domesticated animals as well, use to express their emotions and desires, serve as signals, not as designators. It is only in the laboratory and under experimental conditions, often with very ingeniously contrived special apparatus, that such higher mammals as chimpanzees and bottle-nosed dolphins appear to be communicating by using words as if they were names, and even to be making sentences by putting them together with some vestige of syntax.

The appearance is then misinterpreted by the scientists as a basis for asserting that the only difference between animal and human language is one of degree, not of kind—a difference in the number of name words in an animal's vocabulary and a difference in the complexity of the utterances that are taken to be sentences.

This misinterpretation arises from the neglect or ignorance, on the part of the scientists, of the difference between perceptual and conceptual thought. That, in turn, stems from their failure to acknowledge the difference between the senses and the intellect or their denial that the difference exists.

That these differences should not be ignored and cannot be denied would have to be conceded by anyone who looked at the evidence with an unprejudiced eye—by anyone who did not start out with the firm intention of showing that humans and brutes differ only in degree. While there is evidence that chimpanzees under experimental conditions do use artificially contrived signs to designate or name things, the things they name are all perceptual objects. There is not a single piece of evidence showing their ability to use signs to designate what is not perceived through their senses or what lies totally beyond the sensible realm and is intrinsically imperceptible.

Therein lies the difference between the animal's power of perceptual thought and the human power of conceptual thought. There is no doubt that the animal's power of perceptual thought enables it to perform acts of abstraction and generalization that have a certain similitude to human abstraction and generalization.

The animal's behavior manifests different reactions to objects that are different in kind. But the kinds of things that animals appear to differentiate are all kinds of which there are perceptual instances in the animal's experience. Humans differentiate kinds or classes of which there either are no perceptual instances in their experience or of which there cannot be any. This is the distinguishing charac-

teristic of conceptual thought and the irrefutable evidence of the presence of intellect in man and of its absence in brutes.

One further observation, if it were made by the animal psychologists, might open their eyes to the difference in kind, not degree, between human language and the acquirement by animals of signs that appear to function as designative names. It involves the distinction, already made, between a word acquiring its designative meaning through direct perceptual acquaintance with the object named and the acquirement of meaning by means of a verbal description, as when a child learns the meaning of the word “kindergarten” by being told that it is a place where children get together to play and learn.

In all the experimental work done on animals, there is no instance where a sign that an animal uses gets its meaning from a collocation of other signs that purport to express its meaning. In every case, a new sign that is introduced into the animal’s vocabulary becomes meaningful through being attached to a perceptual object with which the animal has direct acquaintance.

If the students of animal behavior had engaged in their observations and experiments with a recognition of the difference between perceptual and conceptual thought, and with an acknowledgment that humans have intellect as well as senses, whereas animals lack intellects, they would not be so prone to ignore or deny the difference in kind between the human and animal use of signs as names or designators.

7

Finally, we come to one more philosophical mistake that has had very serious consequences for the contemporary philosophy of language. Unlike all the errors noted in the preceding sections of this chapter, it is not a mistake that stems from errors discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

This mistake is introduced into modern thought by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651), Chapter 4 of which is concerned with speech. In the centuries before Hobbes, the term *meaningless* had a purely descriptive significance. It signified that a sound or mark simply lacked meaning; that it was like the nonsense syllables “glub” and “trish.”

Hobbes introduced a dyslogistic use of the term *meaningless*. For him a word like “angel” or its equivalent phrase “incorporeal sub-

stance” is a meaningless expression because of his espousal of materialism as a metaphysical doctrine, according to which only bodies or material things exist in reality. Since angels or incorporeal substances according to this doctrine do not exist, the words “angel” or “incorporeal substance” must be meaningless. They designate nothing; they refer to nothing.

Hobbes compounds the error he is here making by maintaining that such an expression as “incorporeal substance” is a contradiction in terms and cannot exist. Even if one were to grant him the truth of his materialistic premise that nothing exists except bodies or corporeal substances, it would still not cogently follow that incorporeal substances, or angels, *cannot possibly* exist. The only conclusion to be drawn from that premise is that angels do not exist, not that they are impossible, because self-contradictory in the same way that the phrase “round square” is self-contradictory.

That, however, is not the main point to be considered. The main point is that Hobbes reduced the designative reference of name words to the one mode of reference which involves a reference to some really existent thing or to a class of things of which there are really existent instances.

If we merely ask the question whether angels do or do not exist, and certainly if we affirm or deny that they do, the word “angel” must have some meaning. If it were totally meaningless, as Hobbes declares, we could not ask the question, or make the affirmation or denial, any more than we could ask whether glub exists or deny that trish does.

The only truly meaningless notations are either nonsense syllables, such as “glub” and “trish,” or a contradiction in terms, such as “round square.” A round square is simply inconceivable or unthinkable. That being so, there can be no idea of it, and no object of thought which we can apprehend. Hence the phrase designates or refers to nothing.

“If a man should speak to me about *immaterial substances*, or about a *free subject*, a *free will*,” Hobbes writes, “I should not say he were in error, but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, absurd.” He goes on to say that statements about things that never have been, “nor can be incident to sense,” are absurd speeches, “taken upon credit, *without any signification at all*.”

The focal point of Hobbes’ error is the elimination of all designative references that are not also existentially denotative (i.e., refer-

ences to the really existent). As we observed earlier, except for special proper names and the common names for objects perceived, not hallucinated, all other common names have designative references that are not also existentially denotative. About almost all the objects of memory and imagination that we can name, certainly about all the objects of conceptual thought that we can name, the question whether what is named has existence in reality should be asked.

If such objects, about which that question should be asked, cannot be named by signs that have referential significance, then questions that should be asked simply cannot be asked. The elimination of referential significance that is not also existentially denotative would make it impossible to ask such questions.

The twentieth-century followers of Hobbes, even those who do know that they are elaborating extensively on a point that he mentioned briefly and then dismissed as not worthy of further comment, try to avoid the impossibility just mentioned by distinguishing between what they call “sense” and “reference.”

For them, the only referential significance that name words can have involves existential denotation—reference to the really existent. A relatively small number of special proper names, or their equivalents in phrases that are definite descriptions, such as “the first President of the United States,” have such referential significance.

All the rest of the words in our vocabulary have only sense, but not reference. That sense consists in their connotation, which can be expressed in a set of other words. But they refer to nothing at all.

How do these modern linguistic philosophers reach such an absurd conclusion? What is its root or origin? The only explanation, in my judgment, is that it lies in their ignorance of the distinction between formal and instrumental signs and in their consequent failure to understand that the words which become names through direct acquaintance with the objects named refer to whatever objects are signified by the ideas in our mind functioning as formal signs of those objects.

Accordingly, all the words that name the objects of thought, about which we should ask the existential question, do have referential significance. Their designative meaning consists in their reference to such objects, whether or not any instances of them can be perceived because they actually exist in reality. Such words have


more than sense, or merely connotative meaning. They have as much referential significance as any correctly used proper name or definite description.

This reductionist error, which consists in reducing referential significance to the one mode of significance that involves a reference to something really existent, lies at the heart of Bertrand Russell's famous theory of descriptions. And what lies at the heart of that error is the mistake of supposing that naming is asserting—that we cannot name something without also asserting that the thing named really exists.

Naming is not asserting, any more than apprehending an object of thought is identical with making the judgment that the object has existence in reality. Apprehending an object and making the judgment that it really exists are inseparable only in the case of veridical perceptions. In every other case, the acts of apprehension and judgment are not only distinct but also quite separate. One act can occur without the other occurring. Hence we can use words to refer to apprehended objects about the existence of which we suspend judgment or ask questions.

As a result of these errors, originating with Hobbes, linguistic philosophy in the twentieth century has abandoned the effort to explain the referential significance of most words in our daily vocabulary—all words that do not have the one mode of referential significance that denotes something really existent (according to whatever metaphysical doctrine may be held about the components of reality).

This has led to the fatuous injunction “Don't look for the meaning; look for the use,” as if it were possible to discover the use of a word without first ascertaining its meaning as used, a meaning that it must have had before it was used in order to be used in one certain way rather than another. Language does not control thought, as contemporary linguistic philosophers appear to believe. It is the other way around.

Another possible explanation of the abandonment by contemporary linguistic philosophers of any attempt to account for the lexical meanings of most of the words in our daily vocabularies is their awareness of the embarrassments that Locke's attempt to do so could not avoid. Unable to avoid the mistakes made by Locke and unable to give a correct account of the matter because they were ignorant of the insights and distinctions required to do so, they gave the whole thing up as a bad job. 

Excerpted from his book, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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