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WORDS AND THE WORLD

A Study in Seventeenth-Century Theories of Meaning

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Australian National University.
This thesis is my own work.

[Signature]
More than ordinary thanks are due to my supervisor, Professor J.A. Passmore, for his unfailing interest, his accessibility, and for his criticism - both philosophical and stylistic.

D.B.H.
Empiricist philosophers have always been interested in questions surrounding the notion of 'meaning'. Seventeenth-century English empiricists were largely concerned with the criticism of 'scholasticism'; their criticism was directed primarily against scholastic controversy, and against the apparent inability of the schoolmen to adapt themselves to the growth of the new scientific knowledge. In effect, this criticism amounted to a questioning of the meaningfulness of certain terms employed in traditional philosophy. The seventeenth-century empiricists suggested, therefore, that the absurdity of much earlier theorizing would be made clear if an attempt were made to develop a more accurate account of the way our language functions.

Basically, seventeenth-century theories of meaning were 'naming' theories; also, this is the type of theory normally attributed to English philosophers from Bacon to Locke. Such accounts, however, are partial in two main ways: (1) they overlook the complexity of the theories; (2) they overlook the general seventeenth-century awareness that naming-theories,
if they are to apply at all, can only apply to a very restricted area of human discourse.

On these questions, any proper interpretation of seventeenth-century empiricism needs to take account of the general intellectual background of the time; attention should be paid to the anti-scholasticism of the period, as well as to the distrust of language, the request for a 'plain style', the growth of the 'new' knowledge, and the growing interest in the things in the world. Such an investigation reveals the close connexion that existed between the naming theories of meaning commonly attributed to the empiricists and the seventeenth-century interest in linguistic reform.

Language was to be reformed to conform to the naming-model in the interests of science, but this was not meant to imply that language was to have no other use. On the contrary, the seventeenth-century philosophers devoted considerable thought to developing meaning theory at levels other than the scientific. This development has been insufficiently emphasized in traditional interpretations. This tendency to develop two distinct theories of meaning - one for the language of science, and one adequate outside this sphere - may be seen in the work of many philosophers of the century.
Here, as in so much else, Locke is at one with his contemporaries.

Such a re-assessment of the explanations of meaning offered in the seventeenth century reveals interesting resemblances between their theorizing and two important movements in the twentieth century, viz., the philosophy of logical atomism and the later work of Wittgenstein. It is misleading to say either, (1), that the seventeenth century had nothing to offer in the way of an explanation of meaning, or (2), that they offered simple, naive, 'naming' theories of meaning. In many ways they grappled with, and partially gave a satisfactory answer to, problems which have been to the fore in twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon philosophy.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an essay in the history of ideas. The current interest of philosophers in the theory of meaning and related questions, together with the revolutionary advances made in this sphere in our time, suggest that it might now prove both interesting and profitable to study the history of philosophy in England to see how far, if at all, earlier philosophers were vexed by these same general problems - and to see what sort of answers they were prepared to give to the questions with which they were concerned. The theory of meaning was particularly important in the seventeenth century - the century which made a permanent break with scholasticism and which philosophized in the atmosphere surrounding the growth of the 'new' science.

I attempt to show that current interpretations of seventeenth-century English philosophy have placed insufficient emphasis upon the pre-occupation of the English empiricists with questions concerning the nature of language: in particular, I hold that the philosophers of this century put forward theories of meaning, and that these theories were not as naive as they are commonly thought to be. On the contrary, I shall maintain not only
that the naming-type theories of meaning officially recognized as being advanced by these philosophers were not as simple as they are often taken to be, but also that their reflections upon the nature of language led them near to a more fruitful view on these questions than had appeared in Western philosophy before their time. In fact valuable hints in their writings were overlooked to the detriment of the development of this area of philosophy for more than two hundred years. That a large part of the twentieth-century revolution in philosophy turns upon the recent development of meaning-theory is well-known; I shall try to show the connexions between this development and the earlier work in the seventeenth century in what follows.

As it is one of my contentions that John Locke drew together, and made his own, common contemporary views on these questions in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding he will be taken as being of first importance in this, as in any, assessment of seventeenth-century English philosophy. Others who helped form the climate of opinion within which his thought matured will also appear. Some of these - like Hobbes - would in any evaluation of English thought be reckoned among the great figures; others would normally not be heard of. It will
be contended, however, that it is often among the minor figures of the century that we find the germ of much that Locke had to say, and consequently reference will be made to men who, though they achieved prominence in their lifetime, have not for the most part established any widespread enduring reputation.

In part my purpose is to show that some modern philosophers have been quite wrong in saying that no one prior to J.S. Mill produced a 'theory' of meaning at all. Questions of meaning have always been to the fore in English philosophy; as well as this these discussions have often had sufficient coherence and explanatory power to entitle us to call them theories of meaning.

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