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Systematically Misleading Expressions

Author(s): G. Ryle

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*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at 55, Russell Square, London,
W.C.1, on March 21st, 1932, at 8 p.m.*

VIII.—SYSTEMATICALLY MISLEADING EXPRESSIONS.

By G. RYLE.

PHILOSOPHICAL arguments have always largely, if not entirely, consisted in attempts to thrash out "what it means to say so and so." It is observed that men in their ordinary discourse, the discourse, that is, that they employ when they are not philosophizing, use certain expressions, and philosophers fasten on to certain more or less radical types or classes of such expressions and raise their question about all expressions of a certain type and ask what they really mean.

Sometimes philosophers say that they are analysing or clarifying the "concepts" which are embodied in the "judgments" of the plain man or of the scientist, historian, artist or who-not. But this seems to be only a gaseous way of saying that they are trying to discover what is meant by the general terms contained in the sentences which they pronounce or write. For, as we shall see, " x is a concept" and " y is a judgment" are themselves systematically misleading expressions.

But the whole procedure is very odd. For, if the expressions under consideration are intelligently used, their employers must already know what they mean and do not need the aid or admonition of philosophers before they can understand what they are saying. And if their hearers understand what they are being told, they too are in no such perplexity that they need to have this meaning philosophically "analysed" or "clarified" for them. And, at least, the philosopher himself must know what the expressions mean, since otherwise he could not know what it was that he was analysing.

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Certainly it is often the case that expressions are not being intelligently used and to that extent their authors are just gabbling parrot-wise. But then it is obviously fruitless to ask what the expressions really mean. For there is no reason to suppose that they mean anything. It would not be mere gabbling if there was any such reason. And if the philosopher cares to ask what these expressions *would* mean *if* a rational man were using them, the only answer would be that they would mean what they would then mean. Understanding them would be enough, and that could be done by any reasonable listener. Philosophizing could not help him, and, in fact, the philosopher himself would not be able to begin unless he simply understood them in the ordinary way.

It seems, then, that if an expression can be understood, then it is already known in that understanding what the expression means. So there is no darkness present and no illumination required or possible.

And if it is suggested that the non-philosophical author of an expression (be he plain man, scientist, preacher or artist) does know but only knows dimly or foggily or confusedly what his expression means, but that the philosopher at the end of his exploration knows clearly, distinctly and definitely what it means, a two-fold answer seems inevitable. First, that if a speaker only knows confusedly what his expression means, then he is in that respect and to that extent just gabbling. And it is not the rôle—nor the achievement—of the philosopher to provide a medicine against that form of flux. And next, the philosopher is not *ex officio* concerned with ravings and ramblings: he studies expressions for what they mean when intelligently and intelligibly employed, and not as noises emitted by this idiot or that parrot.

Certainly expressions do occur for which better substitutes could be found and should be or should have been employed.

(1) An expression may be a breach of, *e.g.*, English or Latin

grammar. (2) A word may be a foreign word, or a rare word or a technical or trade term for which there exists a familiar synonym. (3) A phrase or sentence may be clumsy or unfamiliar in its structure. (4) A word or phrase may be equivocal and so be an instrument of possible puns. (5) A word or phrase may be ill-chosen as being general where it should be specific, or allusive where the allusion is not known or not obvious. (6) Or a word may be a malapropism or a misnomer. But the search for paraphrases which shall be more swiftly intelligible to a given audience or more idiomatic or stylish or more grammatically or etymologically correct is merely applied lexicography or philology—it is not philosophy.

We ought then to face the question : Is there such a thing as analyzing or clarifying the meaning of the expressions which people use, except in the sense of substituting philologically better expressions for philologically worse ones ? (We might have put the problem in the more misleading terminology of “ concepts ” and asked : How can philosophizing so operate by analysis and clarification, upon the concepts used by the plain man, the scientist or the artist, that after this operation the concepts are illumined where before they were dark ? The same difficulties arise. For there can be no such thing as a confused concept, since either a man is conceiving, *i.e.*, knowing the nature of his subject-matter, or he is failing to do so. If he is succeeding, no clarification is required or possible ; and if he is failing, he must find out more or think more about the subject-matter, the apprehension of the nature of which we call his “ concept.” But this will not be philosophizing about the concept, but exploring further the nature of the thing, and so will be economics, perhaps, or astronomy or history. But as I think that it can be shown that it is not true in any natural sense that “ there are concepts,” I shall adhere to the other method of stating the problem.)

The object of this paper is not to show what philosophy in general is investigating, but to show that there remains an important sense in which philosophers can and must discover and state what is really meant by expressions of this or that radical type, and none the less that these discoveries do not in the least imply that the naïve users of such expressions are in any doubt or confusion about what their expressions mean or in any way need the results of the philosophical analysis for them to continue to use intelligently their ordinary modes of expression or to use them so that they are intelligible to others.

The gist of what I want to establish is this. There are many expressions* which occur in non-philosophical discourse which, though they are perfectly clearly understood by those who use them and those who hear or read them, are nevertheless couched in grammatical or syntactical forms which are in a demonstrable way *improper* to the states of affairs which they record (or the alleged states of affairs which they profess to record). Such expressions can be reformulated and for philosophy but *not* for non-philosophical discourse must be reformulated into expressions

* I use "expression" to cover single words, phrases and sentences. By "statement" I mean a sentence in the indicative. When a statement is true, I say it "records" a fact or state of affairs. False statements do not record. To know that a statement is true is to know that something is the case and that the statement records it. When I barely understand a statement I do not know that it records a fact, nor need I know the fact that it records, if it records one. But I know what state of affairs *would* obtain, if the statement recorded a state of affairs.

Every significant statement is a quasi-record, for it has both the requisite structure and constituents to be a record. But knowing these, we don't yet know that it is a record of a fact. False statements are pseudo-records and are no more records than pseudo-antiquities are antiquities. So the question, What do false statements state? is meaningless if "state" means "record." If it means, What *would* they record if they recorded something being the case? the question contains its own answer.

of which the syntactical form is proper to the facts recorded (or the alleged facts alleged to be recorded).

When an expression is of such a syntactical form that it is improper to the fact recorded, it is systematically misleading in that it naturally suggests to some people—though not to “ordinary” people—that the state of affairs recorded is quite a different sort of state of affairs from that which it in fact is.

I shall try to show what I am driving at by examples. I shall begin by considering a whole class of expressions of one type which occur and occur perfectly satisfactorily in ordinary discourse, but which are, I argue, *systematically misleading*, that is to say, that they are couched in a syntactical form improper to the facts recorded and proper to facts of quite another logical form than the facts recorded. (For simplicity's sake, I shall speak as if all the statements adduced as examples are true. For false statements are not formally different from true ones. Otherwise grammarians could become omniscient. And when I call a statement “systematically misleading” I shall not mean that it is false, and certainly not that it is senseless. By “systematically” I mean that all expressions of that grammatical form would be misleading in the same way and for the same reason.)

I.—*Quasi-ontological statements.*

Since Kant, we have, most of us, paid lip service to the doctrine that “existence is not a quality” and so we have rejected the pseudo-implication of the ontological argument; “God is perfect, being perfect entails being existent, \therefore God exists.” For if existence is not a quality, it is not the sort of thing that can be entailed by a quality.

But until fairly recently it was not noticed that if in “God exists” “exists” is not a predicate (save in grammar), then in the

same statement "God" cannot be (save in grammar) the subject of predication. The realization of this came from examining negative existential propositions like "Satan does not exist" or "unicorns are non-existent." If there is no Satan, then the statement "Satan does not exist" cannot be about Satan in the way in which "I am sleepy" is about me. Despite appearances the word "Satan" cannot be signifying a subject of attributes.

Philosophers have toyed with theories which would enable them to continue to say that "Satan does not exist" is none the less still somehow about Satan, and that "exists" still signifies some sort of attribute or character, although not a quality.

So some argued that the statement was about something described as "the idea of Satan," others that it was about a subsistent but non-actual entity called "Satan." Both theories in effect try to show that something may *be* (whether as being "merely mental" or as being in "the realm of subsistents"), but not be in existence. But as we can say "round squares do not exist," and "real nonentities do not exist," this sort of interpretation of negative existentials is bound to fill either the realm of subsistents or the realm of ideas with walking self-contradictions. So the theories had to be dropped and a new analysis of existential propositions had to begin.

Suppose I assert of (apparently) the general subject "carnivorous cows" that they "do not exist," and my assertion is true, I cannot really be talking about carnivorous cows, for there are none. So it follows that the expression "carnivorous cows" is not really being used, though the grammatical appearances are to the contrary, to denote the thing or things of which the predicate is being asserted. And in the same way as the verb "exists" is not signifying the character asserted, although grammatically it looks as if it was, the real predicate must be looked for elsewhere.

So the clue of the grammar has to be rejected and the analysis has been suggested that "carnivorous cows do not exist" means what is meant by "no cows are carnivorous" or "no carnivorous beasts are cows." But a further improvement seems to be required.

"Unicorns do not exist" seems to mean what is meant by "nothing is *both* a quadruped *and* herbivorous *and* the wearer of one horn" (or whatever the marks of being an unicorn are). And this does not seem to imply that there are some quadrupeds or herbivorous animals.

So "carnivorous cows do not exist" ought to be rendered "nothing is both a cow and carnivorous," which does not as it stands imply that anything is either.

Take now an apparently singular subject as in "God exists" or "Satan does not exist." If the former analysis was right, then here too "God" and "Satan" are in fact, despite grammatical appearance, predicative expressions. That is to say, they are that element in the assertion that something has or lacks a specified character or set of characters, which signifies the character or set of characters by which the subject is being asserted to be characterized. "God exists" must mean what is meant by "Something, and one thing only, is omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely good" (or whatever else are the characters summed in the compound character of being a god and the only god). And "Satan does not exist" must mean what is meant by "nothing is both devilish and alone in being devilish," or perhaps "nothing is both devilish and called 'Satan,'" or even "'Satan' is not the proper name of anything." To put it roughly, "*x* exists" and "*x* does not exist" do not assert or deny that a given subject of attributes *x* has the attribute of existing, but assert or deny the attribute of being *x*-ish or being an *x* of something not named in the statement.

Now I can show my hand. I say that expressions such as "carnivorous cows do not exist" are systematically misleading and that the expressions by which we paraphrased them are not or are not in the same way or to the same extent systematically misleading. But they are not false, nor are they senseless. They are true, and they really do mean what their less systematically misleading paraphrases mean. Nor (save in a special class of cases) is the non-philosophical author of such expressions ignorant or doubtful of the nature of the state of affairs which his expression records. He is not a whit misled. There is a trap, however, in the form of his expression, but a trap which only threatens the man who has begun to generalize about sorts or types of states of affairs and assumes that every statement gives in its syntax a clue to the logical form of the fact that it records. I refer here not merely nor even primarily to the philosopher, but to any man who embarks on abstraction.

But before developing this theme I want to generalize the results of our examination of what we must now describe as "so-called existential statements." It is the more necessary that, while most philosophers are now forewarned by Kant against the systematic misleadingness of "God exists," few of them have observed that the same taint infects a whole host of other expressions.

If "God exists" means what we have said it means, then patently "God is an existent," "God is an entity," "God has being," or "existence" require the same analysis. So ". . . is an existent," ". . . is an entity" are only bogus predicates, and that of which (in grammar) they are asserted are only bogus subjects.

And the same will be true of all the items in the following pair of lists.

Mr. Baldwin—

is a being.

is real, or a reality.

is a genuine entity.

is a substance.

is an actual object or entity.

is objective.

is a concrete reality.

is an object.

is.

Mr. Pickwick—

is a nonentity.

is unreal or an unreality, or an
appearance.

is a bogus or sham entity.

is not a substance.

is an unreal object or entity.

is not objective or is subjective.

is a fiction or figment.

is an imaginary object.

is not.

is a mere idea.

is an abstraction.

is a logical construction.

None of these statements is really about Mr. Pickwick. For if they are true, there is no such person for them to be about. Nor is any of them about Mr. Baldwin. For if they were false, there would be no one for them to be about. Nor in any of them is the grammatical predicate that element in the statement which signifies the character that is being asserted to be characterizing or not to be characterizing something.

I formulate the conclusion in this rather clumsy way. There is a class of statements of which the grammatical predicate *appears* to signify not the having of a specified character but the having (or not having) of a specified *status*. But in all such statements the appearance is a purely grammatical one, and what the statements really record can be stated in statements embodying no such quasi-ontological predicates.

And, again, in all such quasi-ontological statements the grammatical subject-word or phrase *appears* to denote or refer to something as that of which the quasi-ontological predicate is being predicated; but in fact the apparent subject term is a concealed predicative expression, and what is really recorded in

such statements can be re-stated in statements no part of which even appears to refer to any such subject.

In a word, all quasi-ontological statements are systematically misleading. (If I am right in this, then the conclusion follows, which I accept, that those metaphysical philosophers are the greatest sinners, who, as if they were saying something of importance, make "Reality" or "Being" the subject of their propositions, or "real" the predicate. For at best what they say is systematically misleading, which is the one thing which a philosopher's propositions have no right to be; and at worst it is meaningless.)

I must give warning again, that the naïve employer of such quasi-ontological expressions is not necessarily and not even probably misled. He has said what he wanted to say, and anyone who knew English would understand what he was saying. Moreover, I would add, in the cases that I have listed, the statements are not merely significant but true. Each of them records a real state of affairs. Nor *need* they mislead the philosopher. We, for instance, I hope are not misled. But the point is that anyone, the philosopher included, who abstracts and generalizes and so tries to consider what different facts of the same type (*i.e.*, facts of the same type about different things) have in common, is compelled to use the common grammatical form of the statements of those facts as handles with which to grasp the common logical form of the facts themselves. For (what we shall see later) as the way in which a fact *ought* to be recorded in expressions *would* be a clue to the form of that fact, we jump to the assumption that the way in which a fact *is* recorded *is* such a clue. And very often the clue is misleading and suggests that the fact is of a different form from what really is its form. "Satan is not a reality" from its grammatical form looks as if it recorded the same sort of fact as "Capone is not a philosopher," and so was just as much denying a character of a

somebody called "Satan" as the latter does deny a character of a somebody called "Capone." But it turns out that the suggestion is a fraud; for the fact recorded would have been properly or less improperly recorded in the statement "'Satan' is not a proper name" or "No one is called 'Satan'" or "No one is both called 'Satan' and is infinitely malevolent, etc.," or perhaps "Some people believe that someone is both called 'Satan' and infinitely malevolent, but their belief is false." And none of these statements even pretend to be "about Satan." Instead, they are and are patently about the noise "Satan" or else about people who misuse it.

In the same way, while it is significant, true and directly intelligible to say "Mr. Pickwick is a fiction," it is a systematically misleading expression (*i.e.*, an expression misleading in virtue of a formal property which it does or might share with other expressions); for it does not really record, as it appears to record, a fact of the same sort as is recorded in "Mr. Baldwin is a statesman." The world does not contain fictions in the way in which it contains statesmen. There is no subject of attributes of which we can say "*there* is a fiction." What we can do is to say of Dickens "*there* is a story-teller," or of Pickwick Papers "*there* is a pack of lies"; or of a sentence in that novel, which contains the pseudo-name "Mr. Pickwick" "*there* is a fable." And when we say things of this sort we are recording just what we recorded when we said "Mr. Pickwick is a fiction," only our new expressions do not suggest what our old one did that some subject of attributes has the two attributes of being called "Mr. Pickwick" and of being a fiction, but instead that some subject of attributes has the attributes of being called Dickens and being a coiner of false propositions and pseudo-proper names, or, on the other analysis, of being a book or a sentence which could only be true or false *if* someone was called "Mr. Pickwick." The proposition "Mr. Pickwick is a fiction" is really, despite its

prima facies, about Dickens or else about *Pickwick Papers*. But the fact that it is so is concealed and not exhibited by the form of the expression in which it is said.

It must be noted that the sense in which such quasi-ontological statements are misleading is not that they are false and not even that any word in them is equivocal or vague, but only that they are formally improper to the facts of the logical form which they are employed to record and proper to facts of quite another logical form. What the implications are of these notions of formal propriety or formal impropriety we shall see later on.

II.—*Statements seemingly about Universals, or quasi-Platonic statements.*

We often and with great convenience use expressions such as "Unpunctuality is reprehensible" and "Virtue is its own reward." And at first sight these seem to be on all fours with "Jones merits reproof" and "Smith has given himself the prize." So philosophers, taking it that what is meant by such statements as the former is precisely analogous to what is meant by such statements as the latter, have accepted the consequence that the world contains at least two sorts of objects, namely, particular like Jones and Smith, and "universals" like Unpunctuality and Virtue.

But absurdities soon crop up. It is obviously silly to speak of an universal meriting reproof. You can no more praise or blame an "universal" than you can make holes in the Equator.

Nor when we say "unpunctuality is reprehensible" do we really suppose that unpunctuality ought to be ashamed of itself.

What we do mean is what is also meant but better expressed by "Whoever is unpunctual deserves that other people should reprove him for being unpunctual." For it is unpunctual men

and not unpunctuality who can and should be blamed, since they are, what it is not, moral agents. Now in the new expression "whoever is unpunctual merits reproof" the word "unpunctuality" has vanished in favour of the predicative expression "... is unpunctual." So that while in the original expression "unpunctuality" seemed to denote the subject of which an attribute was being asserted, it now turns out to signify the having of an attribute. And we are really saying that anyone who has that attribute, has the other.

Again, it is not literally true that Virtue is a recipient of rewards. What is true is that anyone who is virtuous is benefited thereby. Whoever is good, gains something by being good. So the original statement was not "about Virtue" but about good men, and the grammatical subject-word "Virtue" meant what is meant by "... is virtuous" and so was, what it pretended not to be, a predicative expression.

I need not amplify this much. It is not literally true that "honesty compels me to state so and so," for "honesty" is not the name of a coercive agency. What is true is more properly put "because I am honest, or wish to be honest, I am bound to state so and so." "Colour involves extension" means what is meant by "Whatever is coloured is extended"; "hope deferred maketh the heart sick" means what is meant by "whoever for a long time hopes for something without getting it becomes sick at heart."

It is my own view that all statements which seem to be "about universals" are analysable in the same way, and consequently that general terms are never really the names of subjects of attributes. So "universals" are not objects in the way in which Mt. Everest is one, and therefore the age-old question what *sort* of objects they are is a bogus question. For general nouns, adjectives, etc., are not proper names, so we cannot speak of "the objects called 'equality,' 'justice,' and 'progress.'"

Platonic and anti-Platonic assertions, such as that "equality is, or is not, a real entity," are, accordingly, alike misleading, and misleading in two ways at once; for they are both quasi-ontological statements and quasi-Platonic ones.

However, I do not wish to defend this general position here, but only to show that in *some* cases statements which from their grammatical form seem to be saying that "honesty does so and so" or "equality is such and such," are really saying in a formally improper way (though one which is readily understandable and idiomatically correct) "anything which is equal to x is such and such" or "whoever is honest, is so and so." These statements state overtly what the others stated covertly that something's having one attribute necessitates its having the other.

Of course, the plain man who uses such quasi-Platonic expressions is not making a philosophical mistake. He is not philosophizing at all. He is not misled by and does not even notice the fraudulent pretence contained in such propositions that they are "about Honesty" or "about Progress." He knows what he means and will, very likely, accept our more formally proper restatement of what he means as a fair paraphrase, but he will not have any motive for desiring the more proper form of expression, nor even any grounds for holding that it is more proper. For he is not attending to the form of the fact in abstraction from the special subject matter that the fact is about. So for him the best way of expressing something is the way which is the most brief, the most elegant, or the most emphatic, whereas those who, like philosophers, must generalize about the *sorts* of statements that have to be made of *sorts* of facts about *sorts* of topics, cannot help treating as clues to the logical structures for which they are looking the grammatical forms of the common types of expressions in which these structures are recorded. And these clues are often misleading.

III.—*Descriptive expressions and quasi-descriptions.*

We all constantly use expressions of the form “the so and so” as “the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University.” Very often we refer by means of such expressions to some one uniquely described individual. The phrases “the present Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University” and “the highest mountain in the world” have such a reference in such propositions as “the present Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University is a tall man” and “I have not seen the highest mountain in the world.”

There is nothing intrinsically misleading in the use of “the”-phrases as unique descriptions, though there is a sense in which they are highly condensed or abbreviated. And philosophers can and do make mistakes in the accounts they give of what such descriptive phrases mean. What are misleading are, as we shall see, “the”-phrases which behave grammatically as if they were unique descriptions referring to individuals, when in fact they are not referential phrases at all. But this class of systematically misleading expressions cannot be examined until we have considered how genuine unique descriptions do refer.

A descriptive phrase is not a proper name, and the way in which the subject of attributes which it denotes is denoted by it is not in that subject's being *called* “the so and so,” but in its possessing and being *ipso facto* the sole possessor of the idiosyncratic attribute which is what the descriptive phrase signifies. If Tommy is the eldest son of Jones, then “the eldest son of Jones” denotes Tommy, not because someone or other *calls* him “the eldest son of Jones,” but because he is and no one else can be both a son of Jones and older than all the other sons of Jones. The descriptive phrase, that is, is not a proper name but a predicative expression signifying the joint characters of being a son of Jones and older than the other sons of Jones. And it refers to Tommy only in the sense that Tommy and Tommy alone has those characters.

The phrase does not in any sense *mean* Tommy. Such a view would be, as we shall see, nonsensical. It means what is meant by the predicative expression, "... is both a son of Jones and older than his other sons," and so it is itself only a predicative expression. By a "predicative expression" I mean that fragment of a statement in virtue of which the having of a certain character or characters is expressed. And the having a certain character is not a subject of attributes but, so to speak, the tail end of the facts that some subject of attributes has it and some others lack it. By itself it neither names the subject which has the characters nor records the fact that any subject has it. It cannot indeed occur by itself, but only as an element, namely, a predicative element in a full statement.

So the full statement "the eldest son of Jones was married to-day" means what is meant by "someone (namely, Tommy) (1) is a son of Jones, (2) is older than the other sons of Jones [this could be unpacked further] and (3) was married to-day.

The whole statement could not be true unless the three or more component statements were true. But *that* there is someone of whom both (1) and (2) are true is not guaranteed by their being stated. (No statement can guarantee its own truth.) Consequently the characterizing expression "... is the eldest son of Jones" does not *mean* Tommy either in the sense of being his proper name or in the sense of being an expression the understanding of which involves the knowledge that Tommy has this idiosyncratic character. It only *refers* to Tommy in the sense that well-informed listeners will know already, that Tommy and Tommy only has in fact this idiosyncratic character. But this knowledge is not part of what must be known in order to understand the statement, "Jones' eldest son was married to-day." For we could know what it meant without knowing that Tommy was that eldest son or was married to-day. All

we must know is that someone or other must be so characterized for the whole statement to be true.

For understanding a statement or apprehending what a statement means is not knowing that this statement records this fact, but knowing what *would* be the case if the statement *were* a record of fact.

There is no understanding or apprehending the meaning of an isolated proper name or of an isolated unique description. For *either* we know that someone in particular is called by that name by certain persons or else has the idiosyncratic characters signified by the descriptive phrase, which require that we are acquainted both with the name or description and with the person named or described. *Or* we do not know these things, in which case we don't know that the quasi-name is a name at all or that the quasi-unique description describes anyone. But we can understand statements in which quasi-names or quasi-unique descriptions occur; for we can know what would be the case if someone were so called or so describable, and also had the other characters predicated in the predicates of the statements.

We see then that descriptive phrases are condensed predicative expressions and so that their function is to be that element or (more often) one of those elements in statements (which as a whole record that something has a certain character or characters) in which the having of this or that character is expressed.

And this can easily be seen by another approach.

Take any "the"-phrase which is naturally used referentially as the grammatical subject of a sentence, as "The Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University" in "The Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University is busy." We can now take the descriptive phrase, lock, stock and barrel, and use it non-referentially as the grammatical predicate in a series of statements and expressions, "Who is the present Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University?" "Mr. So-and-So is the present Vice-Chancellor

of Oxford University," "Georges Carpentier is not the present Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University," "Mr. Such-and-Such is either the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University or Senior Proctor," "Whoever is Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University is overworked," etc. It is clear anyhow in the cases of the negative, hypothetical and disjunctive statements containing this common predicative expression that it is not implied or even suggested that anyone does hold the office of Vice-Chancellor. So the "the"-phrase is here quite non-referential, and does not even pretend to denote someone. It signifies an idiosyncratic character, but does not involve that anyone has it. This leads us back to our original conclusion that a descriptive phrase does not in any sense *mean* this person or that thing; or, to put it in another way, that we can understand a statement containing a descriptive phrase and still not know of this subject of attributes or of that one that the description fits it. (Indeed, we hardly need to argue the position. For no one with a respect for sense would dream of pointing to someone or something and saying "that is the meaning of such and such an expression" or "the meaning of yonder phrase is suffering from influenza." "Socrates is a meaning" is a nonsensical sentence. The whole pother about denoting seems to arise from the supposition that we could significantly describe an object as "the meaning of the expression 'x'" or "what the expression 'x' means." Certainly a descriptive phrase can be said to *refer* to or *fit* this man or that mountain, and this man or that mountain can be described as that to which the expression "x" refers. But this is only to say that this man or that mountain has and is alone in having the characters the having of which is expressed in the predicative sentence-fragment "... is the so-and-so.")

All this is only leading up to another class of systematically misleading expressions. But the "the"-phrases which we have been studying, whether occurring as grammatical subjects

or as predicates in statements, were not formally fraudulent. There was nothing in the grammatical form of the sentences adduced to suggest that the facts recorded were of a different logical form from that which they really had.

The previous argument was intended to be critical of certain actual or possible philosophical errors, but they were errors about descriptive expressions and not errors *due* to a trickiness in descriptive expressions as such. Roughly, the errors that I have been trying to dispel are the views (1) that descriptive phrases are proper names and (2) that the thing which a description describes is what the description means. I want now to come to my long-delayed muttons and discuss a further class of systematically misleading expressions.

Systematically misleading quasi-referential "the"-phrases.

1. There frequently occur in ordinary discourse expressions which, though "the"-phrases, are not unique descriptions at all, although from their grammatical form they look as if they are. The man who does not go in for abstraction and generalization uses them without peril or perplexity and knows quite well what he means by the sentences containing them. But the philosopher has to re-state them in a different and formally more proper arrangement of words if he is not to be trapped.

When a descriptive phrase is used as the grammatical subject of a sentence in a formally non-misleading way, as in "the King went shooting to-day," we know that if the statement as a whole is true (or even false) then there must be in the world someone in particular to whom the description "the King" refers or applies. And we could significantly ask "Who is the King?" and "Are the father of the Prince of Wales and the King one and the same person?"

But we shall see that there are in common use quasi-descriptive phrases of the form "the so-and-so," in the cases of which

there is in the world no one and nothing that could be described as that to which the phrase refers or applies, and thus that there is nothing and nobody about which or whom we could even ask "Is it the so-and-so?" or "Are he and the so-and-so one and the same person?"

It can happen in several ways. Take first the statement, which is true and clearly intelligible, "Poincaré is not the King of France." This at first sight looks formally analogous to "Tommy Jones is not (*i.e.*, is not identical with) the King of England." But the difference soon shows itself. For whereas if the latter is true then its converse "the King of England is not Tommy Jones" is true, it is neither true nor false to say "The King of France is not Poincaré." For there is no King of France and the phrase "the King of France" does not fit anybody—nor did the plain man who said "Poincaré is not the King of France" suppose the contrary. So "the King of France" in this statement is not analogous to "the King of England" in the others. It is not really being used referentially or as a unique description of somebody at all.

We can now redraft the contrasted propositions in forms of words which shall advertize the difference which the original propositions concealed between the forms of the facts recorded.

"Tommy Jones is not the same person as the King of England" means what is meant by (1) "Somebody and—of an unspecified circle—one person only is called Tommy Jones; (2) Somebody, and one person only has royal power in England; and (3) No one both is called Tommy Jones and is King of England." The original statement could not be true unless (1) and (2) were true.

Take now "Poincaré is not the King of France." This means what is meant by (1) Someone is called "Poincaré" and (2) Poincaré has not got the rank, being King of France. And this does not imply that anyone has that rank.

Sometimes this twofold use, namely the referential and the non-referential use of "the"-phrases troubles us in the mere practice of ordinary discourse. "Smith is not the only man who has ever climbed Mont Blanc" might easily be taken by some people to mean what is meant by "One man and one man only has climbed Mont Blanc, but Smith is not he," and by others, "Smith has climbed Mont Blanc but at least one other man has done so too." But I am not interested in the occasional ambiguity of such expressions, but in the fact that an expression of this sort which is really being used in the non-referential way is apt to be construed as if it *must* be referentially used, or as if any "the"-phrase was referentially used. Philosophers and others who have to abstract and generalize tend to be misled by the verbal similarity of "the"-phrases of the one sort with "the"-phrases of the other into "coining entities" in order to be able to show to what a given "the"-phrase refers.

Let us first consider the phrase "the top of that tree" or "the centre of that bush" as they occur in such statements as "an owl is perched on the top of that tree," "my arrow flew through the centre of the bush." These statements are quite unambiguous and convey clearly and correctly what they are intended to convey.

But as they are in syntax analogous to "a man is sitting next to the Vice-Chancellor" and "my arrow flew through the curtain," and as further an indefinite list could be drawn up of different statements having in common the "the-phrases" "the top of that tree" and "the centre of that bush," it is hard for people who generalize to escape the temptation of supposing or even believing that these "the"-phrases refer to objects in the way in which "the Vice-Chancellor" and "the curtain" refer to objects. And this is to suppose or believe that the top of that tree is a genuine subject of attributes in just the same way as the Vice-Chancellor is.

But (save in the case where the expression is being misused for the expression "the topmost branch" or "the topmost leaf of the tree") "the top of the tree" at once turns out not to be referring to any object. There is nothing in the world of which it is true (or even false) to say "that is the top of such and such a tree." It does not, for instance, refer to a bit of the tree, or it could be cut down and burned or put in a vase. "The top of the tree" does not refer to anything, but it signifies an attribute, namely, the having of a relative position, when it occurs in statements of the form " x is at or near or above or below the top of the tree." To put it crudely, it does not refer to a thing but signifies a thing's being in a certain place, or else signifies not a thing but the site or locus of a thing such as of the bough or leaf which is higher than any of the other boughs or leaves on the tree. Accordingly it makes sense to say that now one bough and now another is at the top of the tree. But "at the top of the tree" means no more than what is meant by "higher than any other part of the tree," which latter phrase no one could take for a referential phrase like "the present Vice-Chancellor."

The place of a thing, or the whereabouts of a thing is not a thing but the tail end of the fact that something is there. "Where the bee sucks, there suck I," but it is the clover flower that is there which holds the honey and not the whereabouts of the flower. All that this amounts to is that though we can use quasi-descriptive phrases to enable us to state where something is, that the thing is there is a relational character of the thing and not itself a subject of characters.

I suspect that a lot of Cartesian and perhaps Newtonian blunders about Space and Time originate from the systematically misleading character of the "the"-phrases which we use to date and locate things, such as "the region occupied by x ," "the path followed by y ," "the moment or date at which

z happened.” It was not seen that these are but hamstrung predicative expressions and are not and are not even ordinarily taken to be referentially used descriptive expressions, any more than “the King of France” in “Poincaré is not the King of France” is ordinarily treated as if it was a referentially used “the”-phrase.

Take another case. “Jones hates the thought of going to hospital,” “the idea of having a holiday has just occurred to me.” These quasi-descriptive phrases suggest that there is one object in the world which is what is referred to by the phrase “the thought of going to hospital” and another which is what is referred to by “the idea of having a holiday.” And anyhow partly through accepting the grammatical *prima facies* of such expressions, philosophers have believed as devoutly in the existence of “ideas,” “conceptions” and “thoughts” or “judgments” as their predecessors did (from similar causes) in that of substantial forms or as children do (from similar causes) in that of the Equator, the sky and the North Pole.

But if we re-state them, the expressions turn out to be no evidence whatsoever in favour of the Lockean demonology. For “Jones hates the thought of going to hospital” only means what is meant by “Jones feels distressed when he thinks of what he will undergo if he goes to hospital.” The phrase “the thought of . . .” is transmuted into “whenever he thinks of . . .,” which does not even seem to contain a reference to any other entity than Jones and, perhaps, the hospital. For it to be true, the world must contain a Jones who is sometimes thinking and sometimes, say, sleeping; but it need no more contain both Jones and “the thought or idea of so and so” than it need contain both someone called “Jones” and something called “Sleep.”

Similarly, the statement “the idea of taking a holiday has just occurred to me” seems grammatically to be analogous to

"that dog has just bitten me." And as, if the latter is true, the world must contain both me and the dog, so it would seem, if the former is true, the world must contain both me and the idea of taking a holiday. But the appearance is a delusion. For while I could not re-state my complaint against the dog in any sentence not containing a descriptive phrase referring to it, I can easily do so with the statement about "the idea of taking a holiday," *e.g.*, in the statement "I have just been thinking that I might take a holiday."

A host of errors of the same sort has been generated in logic itself and epistemology by the omission to analyse the quasi-descriptive phrase "the meaning of the expression 'x'" I suspect that all the mistaken doctrines of concepts, ideas, terms, judgments, objective propositions, contents, objectives and the like derive from the same fallacy, namely, that there must be *something* referred to by such expressions as "the meaning of the word (phrase or sentence) 'x'," on all fours with the policeman who really is referred to by the descriptive phrase in "our village policeman is fond of football." And the way out of the confusion is to see that some "the"-phrases are only similar in grammar and not similar in function to referentially-used descriptive phrases, *e.g.*, in the case in point, "the meaning of 'x'" is like "the King of France" in "Poincaré is not the King of France," a predicative expression used non-referentially.

And, of course, the ordinary man does not pretend to himself or anyone else that when he makes statements containing such expressions as "the meaning of 'x'," he is referring to a queer new object: it does not cross his mind that his phrase might be misconstrued as a referentially used descriptive phrase. So he is not guilty of philosophical error or clumsiness. None the less his form of words is systematically misleading. For an important difference of logical form is disguised by the complete similarity of grammatical form between "the village policeman

is reliable ” and “ the meaning of ‘ x ’ is doubtful ” or again between “ I have just met the village policeman ” and “ I have just grasped the meaning of ‘ x ’ .”

(Consequently, as there is no object describable as that which is referred to by the expression “ the meaning of ‘ x ’ ,” questions about the status of such objects are meaningless. It is as pointless to discuss whether word-meanings (*i.e.*, “ concepts ” or “ universals ”) are subjective or objective, or whether sentence-meanings (*i.e.*, “ judgments ” or “ objectives ”) are subjective or objective, as it would be to discuss whether the Equator or the sky is subjective or objective. For the questions themselves are not about anything.)

All this does not of course in the least prevent us from using intelligently and intelligibly sentences containing the expression “ the meaning of ‘ x ’ ” where this can be re-drafted as “ what ‘ x ’ means.” For here the “ the ”-phrase is being predicatively used and not as an unique description. “ The meaning of ‘ x ’ is the same as the meaning of ‘ y ’ ” is equivalent to “ ‘ x ’ means what ‘ y ’ means,” and that can be understood without any temptation to multiply entities.

But this argument is, after all, only about a very special case of the systematic misleadingness of quasi-descriptions.

2. There is another class of uses of “ the ”-phrases which is also liable to engender philosophical misconstructions, though I am not sure that I can recall any good instances of actual mistakes which have occurred from this source.

Suppose, I say, “ the defeat of the Labour Party has surprised me,” what I say could be correctly paraphrased by “ the fact that the Labour Party was defeated, was a surprise to me ” or “ the Labour Party has been defeated and I am surprised that it has been defeated.” Here the “ the ”-phrase does not refer to a thing but is a condensed record of something’s being the case. And this is a common and handy idiom. We can always

say instead of "because A is B, therefore C is D" "the D-ness of C is due to the B-ness of A." "The severity of the winter is responsible for the high price of cabbages" means what is meant by "Cabbages are expensive because the winter was severe."

But if I say "the defeat of the Labour Party occurred in 1931," my "the"-phrase is referentially used to describe an event and not as a condensed record of a fact. For events have dates, but facts do not. So the facts recorded in the grammatically similar statements "the defeat of the Labour Party has surprised me" and "the defeat of the Labour Party occurred in 1931" are in logical form quite different. And both sorts of facts are formally quite different from this third fact which is recorded in "the victory of the Labour Party would have surprised me." For this neither refers to an event, nor records the fact that the Labour Party was victorious, but says "if the Labour Party had won, I should have been surprised." So here the "the"-phrase is a protasis. And, once more, all these three uses of "the"-phrases are different in their sort of significance from "the defeat of the Conservative Party at the next election is probable," or "possible," or "impossible." For these mean "the available relevant data are in favour of" or "not incompatible with" or "incompatible with the Conservative Party being defeated at the next election."

So there are at least these four different types of facts which can be and, in ordinary discourse, are conveniently and intelligibly recorded in statements containing grammatically indistinguishable "the"-phrases. But they can be restated in forms of words which do exhibit in virtue of their special grammatical forms the several logical structures of the different sorts of facts recorded.

3. Lastly, I must just mention one further class of systematically misleading "the"-phrases. "The whale is not a fish but a mammal" and "the true Englishman detests foul play"

record facts, we may take it. But they are not about this whale or that Englishman, and they might be true even if there were no whales or no true Englishmen. These are, probably, disguised hypothetical statements. But all I wish to point out is that they are obviously disguised.

I have chosen these three main types of systematically misleading expressions because all alike are misleading in a certain direction. They all suggest the existence of new sorts of objects or, to put it in another way, they are all temptations to us to "multiply entities." In each of them, the quasi-ontological, the quasi-Platonic and the quasi-descriptive expressions an expression is misconstrued as a denoting expression which in fact does not denote, but only looks grammatically like expressions which are used to denote. Occam's prescription was, therefore, in my view, "do not treat all expressions which are grammatically like proper names or referentially used "the"-phrases, as if they were therefore proper names or referentially used "the"-phrases."

But there are other types of systematically misleading expressions, of which I shall just mention a few that occur to me.

"Jones is an alleged murderer," or "a suspected murderer," "Smith is a possible or probable Lord Mayor," "Robinson is an ostensible, or seeming or mock or sham or bogus hero," "Brown is a future or a past Member of Parliament," etc. These suggest what they do not mean, that the subjects named are of a special kind of murderer, or Lord Mayor, or hero, or Member of Parliament. But being an alleged murderer does not entail being a murderer, nor does being a likely Lord Mayor entail being a Lord Mayor.

"Jones is popular" suggests that being popular is like being wise, a quality; but in fact it is a relational character, and one

which does not directly characterize Jones, but the people who are fond of Jones, and so "Jones is popular" means what is meant by "Many people like Jones, and many more like him than either dislike him or are indifferent to him," or something of the sort.

But I have, I think, given enough instances to show in what sense expressions may seem to mean something quite different from what they are in fact used to mean ; and therefore I have shown in what sense some expressions are systematically misleading.

So I am taking it as established (1) that what is expressed in one expression can often be expressed in expressions of quite different grammatical forms, and (2) that of two expressions, each meaning what the other means, which are of different grammatical forms, one is often more systematically misleading than the other.

And this means that while a fact or state of affairs *can* be recorded in an indefinite number of statements of widely differing grammatical forms, it is stated better in some than in others. The ideal, which may never be realized, is that it should be stated in a completely non-misleading form of words.

Now, when we call one form of expression better than another, we do not mean that it is more elegant or brief or familiar or more swiftly intelligible to the ordinary listener, but that in virtue of its grammatical form it exhibits, in a way in which the others fail to exhibit, the logical form of the state of affairs or fact that is being recorded. But this interest in the best way of exhibiting the logical form of facts is not for every man, but only for the philosopher.

I wish now to raise, but not to solve, some consequential problems which arise.

1. Given that an expression of a certain grammatical form is proper (or anyhow approximates to being proper) to facts of

a certain logical form and to those facts only, is this relation of propriety of grammatical to logical form *natural* or *conventional*?

I cannot myself credit what seems to be the doctrine of Wittgenstein and the school of logical grammarians who owe allegiance to him, that what makes an expression formally proper to a fact is some real and non-conventional one-one picturing relation between the composition of the expression and that of the fact. For I do not see how, save in a small class of specially-chosen cases, a fact or state of affairs can be deemed like or even unlike in structure a sentence, gesture or diagram. For a fact is not a collection—even an arranged collection—of bits in the way in which a sentence is an arranged collection of noises or a map an arranged collection of scratches. A fact is not a thing and so is not even an arranged thing. Certainly a map may be like a country or a railway system, and in a more general, or looser, sense a sentence, as an ordered series of noises might be a similar sort of series to a series of vehicles in a stream of traffic or the series of days in the week.

But in Socrates being angry or in the fact that either Socrates was wise or Plato was dishonest I can see no concatenation of bits such that a concatenation of parts of speech could be held to be of the same general architectural plan as it. But this difficulty may be just denseness on my part.

On the other hand, it is not easy to accept what seems to be the alternative that it is just by convention that a given grammatical form is specially dedicated to facts of a given logical form. For, in fact, customary usage is perfectly tolerant of systematically misleading expressions. And, moreover, it is hard to explain how in the genesis of languages our presumably non-philosophical forbears could have decided on or happened on the dedication of a given grammatical form to facts of a given logical form. For presumably the study of abstract logical

form is later than the entry into common use of syntactical idioms.

It is, however, my present view that the propriety of grammatical to logical forms is more nearly conventional than natural: though I do not suppose it to be the effect of whim or of deliberate plan.

2. The next question is : How are we to discover in particular cases whether an expression is systematically misleading or not ? I suspect that the answer to this will be of this sort. We meet with and understand and even believe a certain expression such as " Mr. Pickwick is a fictitious person " and " the Equator encircles the globe." And we know that if these expressions are saying what they seem to be saying, certain other propositions will follow. But it turns out that the naturally consequential propositions " Mr. Pickwick was born in such and such a year " and " the Equator is of such and such a thickness " are not merely false but, on analysis, in contradiction with something in that from which they seemed to be logical consequences. The only solution is to see that being a fictitious person is not to be a person of a certain sort, and that the sense in which the Equator girdles the earth is not that of being any sort of a ring or ribbon enveloping the earth. And this is to see that the original propositions were not saying what they seemed on first analysis to be saying. Paralogisms and antinomies are the evidence that an expression is systematically misleading.

None the less, the systematically misleading expressions as intended and as understood contain no contradictions. People do not really talk philosophical nonsense—unless they are philosophizing or, what is quite a different thing, unless they are being sententious. What they do is to use expressions which, from whatever cause—generally the desire for brevity and simplicity of discourse—disguise instead of exhibiting the forms of the facts recorded. And it is to reveal these forms that we

abstract and generalize. These processes of abstraction and generalization occur before philosophical analysis begins. It seems indeed that their results are the subject matter of philosophy. Pre-philosophical abstract thinking is always misled by systematically misleading expressions, and even philosophical abstract thinking, the proper function of which is to cure this disease, is actually one of its worst victims.

3. I do not know any way of classifying or giving an exhaustive list of the possible types of systematically misleading expressions. I fancy that the number is in principle unlimited, but that the number of prevalent and obsessing types is fairly small.

4. I do not know any way of proving that an expression contains no systematic misleadingness at all. The fact that antinomies have not yet been shown to arise is no proof that they never will arise. We can know that of two expressions "x" and "y" which record the same fact, "x" is less misleading than "y"; but not that "x" cannot itself be improved upon.

5. Philosophy must then involve the exercise of systematic restatement. But this does not mean that it is a department of philology or literary criticism.

Its restatement is not the substitution of one noun for another or one verb for another. That is what lexicographers and translators excel in. Its restatements are transmutations of syntax, and transmutations of syntax controlled not by desire for elegance or stylistic correctness but by desire to exhibit the forms of the facts into which philosophy is the enquiry.

I conclude, then, that there is, after all, a sense in which we can properly enquire and even say "what it really means to say so and so." For we can ask what is the real form of the fact recorded when this is concealed or disguised and not duly

exhibited by the expression in question. And we can often succeed in stating this fact in a new form of words which does exhibit what the other failed to exhibit. And I am for the present inclined to believe that this is what philosophical analysis is, and that this is the sole and whole function of philosophy. But I do not want to argue this point now.

But, as confession is good for the soul, I must admit that I do not very much relish the conclusions towards which these conclusions point. I would rather allot to philosophy a sublimer task than the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories. But that it is at least this I cannot feel any serious doubt.

[In this paper I have deliberately refrained from describing expressions as "incomplete symbols" or quasi-things as "logical constructions." Partly I have abstained because I am fairly ignorant of the doctrines in which these are technical terms, though in so far as I do understand them, I think that I could re-state them in words which I like better without modifying the doctrines. But partly, also, I think that the terms themselves are rather ill-chosen and are apt to cause unnecessary perplexities. But I do think that I have been talking about what is talked about by those who use these terms, when they use them.]
