EMPIRICAL MEANING AND INCOMPLETE PERSONHOOD

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(ABSTRACT)

Both intensional and extensional explanations of linguistic meaning involve notions -- linguistic roles and referential relations, respectively -- which are not perspicuous and seem to evade satisfactory explanations themselves. Following Sellars, I make a move away from semantic explanation of the designation relation and of linguistic roles toward an explanation which relates to the use of linguistic and perceptual signs (i.e., pragmatics). In doing so, concerns are raised that seem to be more closely associated with epistemology and phenomenology than with the philosophy of language or logic. In particular, experience is taken to be intentional, i.e., to have a propositional content which is irreducible to the causal order. Along with intentionality, certain essentially autobiographical conditions of experience are neglected in typical conceptions of the problem of meaning. They are reintroduced here. Further, I take as a presupposition the pragmatist notion that each of our conceptual schemes emerges from a community of persons, rather than from individuals. What follows from the preceding starting points is a picture of incomplete personhood in which persons are seen as being inclined both toward experiential wholes which have conceptual content and toward establishing and unifying beliefs which resolve doubts. Because of the conditions of experience constitutive of, and peculiar to, personhood and the necessity of the community for individual inquiry, the notion of incomplete personhood has a central position in my pragmatist conception of the problem of meaning. By emphasizing the pragmatistic conditions of experience and the active role of persons in finding objects and in continually reaching toward a final complete picture, the problems related to objectivity are found to be peripheral to a conception of meaning which captures the practice(s) of persons' living object-directed lives. The result is a new way of conceiving of the problem of meaning.
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