

Indian Philosophy—Reading group 4

In this chapter, Perrett turns to Indian philosophy of language—which includes, but is not limited to, “reference and existence, the relation between word-meaning and sentence-meaning, literal and metaphorical meaning, common nouns and universals, ineffability and the nature of the signification relation, and identity statements” (p. 111). He discusses some but not all of these in the chapter.

Meaning

Indian philosophers were almost all ‘direct referentialists’ about meaning: “they all thought of meanings as entities (*artha*) and identified the meaning of a linguistic expression with the external object denoted by that expression” (p. 112). That said, there were differing views regarding what the objects of this direct reference *are*: particulars, universals, or something else?

This direct referentialist conception of meaning faced two familiar problems: (a) the problem of empty terms (i.e., the problem of the apparent meaningfulness of terms about non-existent entities), and (b) the problem of informative identity statements (i.e., the problem of the apparently different meanings of coextensive terms). Perrett discusses these further later in the chapter.

Word-meaning and sentence-meaning

Different Indian philosophers had different views on the relationship between word-meaning and sentence-meaning. As Perrett writes,

Some theorists (including Nyaya-Vaisesika and Bhatta Mimamsa) held word-meaning to be more fundamental in that the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of the words in that sentence. Prabhakara Mimamsa, in contrast, held that the individual words do not express any meaning until they are united in a sentence. (Perrett p. 113)

In the first camp: Samkhya maintained that the meanings of all words are particulars. But this

does not seem hugely compelling when one considers general nouns (e.g. 'cow'). The Bhatta Mimamsa view, by contrast, "is that the meaning of a word is [a] universal property".¹

Question: Isn't some middle ground between these views more plausible? I.e., the meaning of a word is sometimes a particular, and other times a universal?

Here's another, less familiar option from the first camp:

In contrast the Buddhist logicians, who did not accept the reality of universals and who held that particulars are all momentary, developed a very different account of word-meaning. Their theory, known as the 'exclusion theory' (apohavada), maintains that to say of a particular that it is a cow is just to say that it does not belong to the class of things that are non-cows. (Perrett p. 114)

We'll see more about this later in the chapter.

The problem of sentential unity

Related to the question of whether word-meaning or sentence-meaning is more fundamental is the matter of the relationship between the meaning of a word and the meaning of its constituent sentences. Perrett (p. 116, following Siderits 1991) articulates four options here:

1. *Only sentences, not words, have meanings and the meanings of sentences themselves are indivisible wholes.*
2. *All words have complete meanings and the meanings of words in a sentence are fused into a whole by some syncategorematic device.*²
3. *Some terms are semantically complete (or 'saturated') while others are not, and unified sentential meaning is provided by the concatenation of saturated and unsaturated expressions.*

¹In the discussion, we were agreed that, just like much of the Western canon, these views on meaning seem unduly narrow, and insufficiently attentive to the richness and diversity of uses to which language is put. It would be nice to know whether there is some parallel of the later Wittgenstein in Indian philosophy.

²In logic and linguistics, an expression is *syncategorematic* just in case it lacks a denotation but can nonetheless affect the denotation of a larger expression which contains it.

4. *All words are semantically incomplete and sentential unity is provided through a process of mutual assistance between all the words of a sentence.*

Let's go through these systematically:

Position 1 is that of (in the Western canon) Quine and (in the Indian canon) Bhartrhari. "According to this kind of sentence holism, sentences are wholes and they are the unanalysable units of meaningful discourse" (p. 116). *Problem*: "sentences are innumerable, but the word lexicon is finite" (p. 118).

Position 2 is that of (in the Western canon) Aristotle and (in the Indian canon) Nyaya and Bhatta Mimamsa. According to this view, "words are semantically complete and sentential unity is achieved through syncategorematic devices like the copula which provide the 'glue' that holds the word-meanings of a sentence together" (p. 117). *Problem*: "It fails to do justice to a central feature of sentence-meaning, namely the fact that the meaning of a sentence is a unified relational complex" (p. 118).

Position 3 is the Fregean theory, "according to which some terms (names) are semantically complete or 'saturated' and others (predicates) are incomplete or 'unsaturated'." *Concern*: the idea of an asymmetry between sentences and names (which are semantically complete) and predicates (which are semantically complete) is disputable (see e.g. Ramsey).

Position 4 is that of (in the Western canon) James and Ramsey and (in the Indian canon) the Prabhakara Mimamsa school. According to this view, "words do ... have meanings and ... the meaning of a sentence is determined by the *related* meanings of its component words".³ (The Prabhakara philosophers defended this view: see pp. 119ff.)

How are meanings established?

On this question, Perrett writes,

The main issue here for Indian philosophers was a dispute about the role of conventions

³JR: Potentially, another case here is that of the 'relational semantics' of Fine (*Semantic Relationism*, 2009): according to which there is no semantic difference between variables such as x , y , as illustrated by the fact that one's choice of variable in formulae such as $x > 0$ or $y > 0$ is purely conventional; however, there *is* a semantic difference between pairs of variables—as illustrated by the fact that (x, x) is not semantically equivalent to (x, y) , for $x > x$ may (after quantification) express a distinct proposition from $x > y$.

in establishing a relation between words and the objects meant by them. Thus on the one hand, we find Nyaya-Vaisesika and the Buddhists holding that meaning relations are conventional; on the other hand, we find Mimamsa and Advaita Vedanta holding that meanings are eternal and inherent in the very nature of words. (Perrett p. 120)

Question: Is the relevant analogous debate in the Western canon that between semantic internalism and externalism? (One might hesitate here, because Perrett writes that the non-conventionalist approach “is likely to seem a very odd theory to the modern reader”—but, by contrast, semantic externalism (following authors such as Putnam) is mainstream...)⁴

According to the latter of these views (i.e., the non-conventionalist view), “the relation of word and meaning is not merely already established in the sense that current language users did not create it but merely received it from their elders, but truly eternal in the sense that no one ever established it: it is natural (*autpattika*) and authorless (*apauruseya*)” (p. 121). In defence of this view, “Kumarila argues that, when we examine the notion of a linguistic convention more closely, we can see that it is attended by all kinds of difficulties. In brief, his leading idea is that any convention that might be purported to establish meaning relations would in fact have to be established *within* language, not *prior to* language in the way that conventionalist theory requires” (p. 121).⁵ Here’s Perrett’s final take on the view:

A modern reader will probably still be unconvinced by Mimamsa anti-conventionalism. After all, are there not developed modern game-theoretical and evolutionary accounts of conventions (including linguistic conventions) emerging in a way that does not presuppose any explicit or tacit agreement (see, for instance, Lewis 1969 and Skyrms 1996)? Perhaps. But if such accounts of the emergence of conventions require that there be at least pre-existing thought, and thought requires language (as the Mimamsakas and many others have believed), then it may be that semantic anti-conventionalism has not yet been laid to rest. (Perrett pp. 122-123)

⁴We discussed this a fair bit in the session, and arrived at the following conclusions. There’s no obvious analogue in the Western tradition of the Advaita Vedanta view (maybe some version of Platonism is the closest). Semantic internalism and externalism are both best construed as being situated *within* something like the Nyaya-Vaisesika position: the question is whether meanings are functions (i) only of conventions, or (ii) of conventions and intentions. Note also that it’s helpful to distinguish conventions fixed by an individual from conventions fixed by a wider community.

⁵We were sceptical of Kumarila here. The fixing of conventions can take place within the context of some antecedently-given language; there doesn’t have to be a first one. One might also question whether it’s indeed true that conventions must be established within language (Catherine gave the example of saying ‘rock’ every time I see a rock). Perhaps it’s better to speak of Wittgensteinian ‘forms of life’ here.

Empty subject terms

Let's now return to the problem of empty subject terms, which was identified as an issue for the Indian philosophers' direct reference theory of meaning.

In the Western canon, as is well-known, the problem of empty subject terms was evaded by appeal to paraphrases into Russellian definite descriptions. In the Indian canon, Nyaya-Vaisesika adopted a similar strategy of paraphrase: "Sentences like 'The rabbit horn does not exist', which apparently refer to non-existence entities, are translated into sentences like 'There is no relation between the rabbit and a horn', which refer only to entities (including relations) that are reals [*sic*] according to Nyaya metaphysics" (p. 126).

Question: How does the Nyaya-Vaisesika approach compare to that of Russell?

Two types of negation

Buddhist philosophers drew a distinction between 'implicative negation' (e.g. "the glass is not-red", which implies that the glass is some other colour) from 'non-implicative negation' (e.g. "the glass is not red"), which does not imply that the glass is any colour.

This distinction will be important when it comes to the Buddhist philosophers' approach to the problem of universals, as we'll see below.

Identity statements

In response to the problems of identity statements (recall e.g. the morning star and evening star), Frege famously distinguished *sense* from *reference*. With regards to these problems and the Indian canon, Perrett writes,

This kind of solution to the problem was not available to the Indian philosophers of language because, as already mentioned, the Indian semanticists were unanimously direct referentialists about meaning: in other words, they all thought of meanings as entities (artha) and identified the meaning of a linguistic expression with the external object denoted by the expression. Generically speaking, then, they did not posit sense as a component of

the meaning of an expression in addition to its reference—even if it may be arguable (see Siderits 1991, Ganeri 2006) that certain sense-like elements nevertheless crept into the tradition. (Perrett pp. 129-130)

Perrett discusses some of the Indian philosophers' responses to this problem on pp. 130-132.

The problem of universals

Perrett now turns to the metaphysical issue of the problem of universals. Just as in the Western canon, Indian philosophers divide into *realists* and *nominalists* in their responses to this problem.

Realist responses

Mimamsa and Nyaya-Vaisesika were realists about universals. However, there is a difference between the two views: "Nyaya (together with Prabhakara Mimamsa) holds that a universal is different from a particular and yet not apprehended separately because a universal inheres in its various particulars. Bhatta Mimamsa, however, rejects this relation of inherence (*samavaya*)" (p. 132).

Question: How does this track the *in re* ('in the thing')/*ante rem* ('before the thing') distinction?

Answer: (From later in the chapter.) Ultimately not well—see the quote below regarding Kumarila's position: the issue in the Indian canon seems to not be so much as where universals 'live', but rather whether universals are distinct from the particulars which instantiate them.

(Aside on Nyaya-Vaisesika realism: "Not every general word, however, can correspond to a universal: this would violate the principle of *laghava* (literally 'lightness'), the Indian equivalent of Ockham's razor. We are only entitled to posit the minimum number of entities needed for our explanations of the phenomena" (pp. 133-134).)

Kumarila Bhatta is critical of the idea that universals inhere in their particulars, because "inherence requires another relation to be related to them, and so on *ad infinitum*. (JR: cf. Bradley's regress). The Naiyayika response is that "inherence does not need another inherence relation

to link the first inherence relation to its relata". (Is this an argument? And cf. Armstrong.) Kumarila's positive position is this:

A universal, according to Kumarila, is not entirely distinct from the particular it characterises; it is not a separate entity that inheres in the latter. Instead universal and individual comprise a single entity that is both universal and particular in nature. (Perrett p. 135)

Nominalist responses

In contrast to all these realists, Buddhist philosophers found the idea of realism about universals bizarre. Pandita Asoka, in his *Samanyadusana*, writes "One can clearly see five fingers in one's own hand. One who commits himself to a sixth general entity fingerhood, side by side with the five fingers, might as well postulate horns on the top of his head" (p. 136).

The positive Buddhist account of universals is to be found in their *apoha* theory:

According to the ontology of the Buddhist logicians, the world consists of nothing but momentary particulars (svalaksana) and the universals (samanyalaksana) known by the mind are but conceptual constructions. Such conceptual constructions are explained in terms of apoha theory, which claims that a concept that has no real referent is established through the exclusion of other concepts. (Perrett p. 136)

The central idea behind their *apoha* theory, as already indicated above, is that "any kind term ... refers to the exclusion of its exclusion class" (p. 137).

One charge against this, raised by Kumarila, is that "in order to form the exclusion class 'non-cows', we already have to know what a cow is, and hence we have to have an idea that some particulars are cows" (p. 137).

In response to this, Buddhist logicians appealed to the above-described distinction between implicative and non-implicative negation, claiming that the kind of negation they had in mind in the foregoing was the latter, thereby allowing "for a term like 'unnkind' to be the negation of 'kind' without it being the case that someone has to be either kind or unkind" (p. 137). Thus, "not non- p is not the same as p and does not require the existence of universals".⁶

⁶JR: Possibly there is some loose connection with the 'philosophy of difference' of Deleuze here (see e.g. *Differ-*

