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From the Selected Works of Robert J. Stainton

2005

Grice, Herbert Paul (1913-88)

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GRICE, H. Paul (1913-1988)

In J. Shook (ed.)(2005) *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, pp. 983-988

Herbert Paul Grice was born on 15 March 1913 in Birmingham, England, to Herbert and Mabel Grice. He was educated at Clifton College in Bristol, and then at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He read “Greats” at Oxford, a degree which combined classics with philosophy, graduating with First Class Honors in 1936. His first teaching post was at a Lancashire “public school” – that is to say, what Americans would call a private secondary school. Specifically, he was Assistant Master at Rossall School for one year, specializing in teaching classics. Between 1939 and 1967, Grice was Lecturer, Tutor, Fellow and then University Lecturer at Oxford, always at St. John’s College. His teaching at Oxford was interrupted by the Second World War, with five years in the British Royal Navy, performing active service first in the North Atlantic, and then, from 1942, in Admiralty Intelligence. Following the war, Grice’s fame within philosophy spread both inside the U.K. and outside to the United States. In 1967 he gave the prestigious William James Lectures at Harvard – later published in *Studies in the Way of Words* – and in that same year he took up a faculty position at University of California at Berkeley. He became a Full Professor at Berkeley in 1975, and taught there until 1986, though he officially retired in 1980. Grice also held visiting positions at Harvard, Brandeis, Stanford, Cornell, and the University of Washington at Seattle. Grice married Kathleen Watson during the War. They had two children in the 1940s, a son Tim Grice and a daughter Karen McNicoll. All three survived him at the time of his death from emphysema, in Berkeley, on 28 August 1988.

Grice is perhaps best known for two papers, “Meaning” of 1957 and “Logic and Conversation” of 1975, both reprinted in his *Studies in the Way of Words*. The article “Meaning” drew attention to two quite different senses of the word ‘mean’. On the one hand, there is the evidential relationship between, say, a cause and its effect. An example of this sense is ‘Those spots mean measles’. In this sense of ‘mean’, “*x* means *y*” is related to “*x* shows that *y*”, “*x* is a symptom of *y*” and “*x* lawfully correlates with *y*”; more than that, a particular claim that “*x* means *y*” on this first sense of ‘mean’ can only be true if, when the *x* in question occurred, so did *y*. Thus those spots on little Jimmy *don’t* really mean measles, in this first sense of ‘mean’, if Jimmy doesn’t have measles – even if the spots typically correlate with measles. Grice called this first sense of the word ‘natural meaning’. On the other hand, there is the sense of ‘mean’ that pertains to language and communication. On this second sense, it is words and speakers which mean. To give a couple of examples, take ‘The Spanish word ‘rojo’ means red’ (word meaning) and ‘What he meant by saying he was thirsty was that you should bring more whisky’ (speaker meaning). And on this sense of ‘mean’, “*x* means *y*” is closer to “*x* says/asserts that *y*”, “*x* expresses *y*”, and such. And when “*x* means *y*” is the case, it will usually be true that someone, or some group, means something by *x*. (Compare: the spots on Jimmy don’t express anything, and no one meant anything by them.) What’s more, in this second sense of ‘mean’, it can be true that

“ x means y ” even though x obtains when y isn’t the case. Thus our speaker might indeed have meant that you should bring more whisky, when in reality you should not: his meaning it, in this second sense, doesn’t make it so. In “Meaning”, Grice went on to analyze in more detail this second sense of ‘mean’, which he called ‘non-natural meaning’. Details aside, his fundamental idea was that for a person to mean something, in this non-natural sense, was for her to intend to induce some belief in her hearer. More than that, it was to induce the belief by getting the addressee to recognize the intention to induce a belief: in meaning something, the speaker does not merely cause the hearer to have a belief, she overtly gives him a reason to believe, the reason being that she wants him to believe. To take the ‘I’m thirsty’ example, the idea would be that *the speaker meant in the non-natural sense that you should bring more whiskey amounts to the speaker intended to induce in you the belief that you should bring more whisky, and he intended you to come to have this belief on the basis of recognizing his intention to induce it*. Thus what a person means, in the non-natural sense, comes down to complex mental states of hers, especially intentions. As for what words and sentences in the language mean, Grice thought that this could emerge from what beliefs those expressions were standardly used to induce. Thus if some sentence S is standardly used by speakers to induce the belief that Howard wants ice cream, then S will conventionally mean, in the non-natural sense of ‘mean’, that Howard wants ice cream. In a nutshell, Grice held that linguistic meaning emerged, at bottom, from human psychology.

Noting the contrast between what speakers mean versus what words and sentences mean, we can see that these will not always coincide. A speaker might mean something that the words she utters don’t mean. The whisky example is a case in point: the speaker meant that you should bring more whisky, but his words conventionally mean only that he, the user of the sentence, is thirsty – a mere point of information, and one which doesn’t even say what one is thirsty for. Grice’s “Logic and Conversation” takes this kind of divergence between speaker meaning and word meaning as its departure point. One of the key lessons of this pioneering work was that there are several kinds of “content” attaching to speech episodes. There is the content that derives from what the sentence used conventionally means in the language, and there is the content that the speaker manages to convey non-conventionally. Most strikingly, Grice explained how the latter could happen – namely, because talk exchanges are a rational, cooperative endeavor. By making use of the audience’s expectation that she will cooperate, i.e., that she will say the most helpful thing she can in the most helpful way, a speaker can get across something more than, or something different from, what she has said.

Grice is most famous for drawing attention to a certain kind of merely conveyed content, which he called conversational implicatures. These come in two flavors. There are implicatures which only attach in very special circumstances, and there are those which *usually* attach to the use of these words. To give examples of each, in saying ‘Jones has beautiful handwriting and his English is grammatical’ one would not normally carry the implication that Jones was a poor student. But this implicature would arise if this sentence were the only thing said in a letter of reference supporting Jones’ application to graduate school! In contrast, one would usually implicate that *ones own* finger was broken in saying ‘I broke a finger’, and one would usually

implicate that one had *exactly* one sister in saying ‘I have one sister’. These are generalized conversational implicatures.

Grice also drew attention to a difference between content that affects whether the person says/asserts something true/false, and content that doesn’t affect the strict and literal truth value. An example of the latter is ‘but’ in ‘She is poor but she is honest’: Grice maintains that a speaker of this sentence would speak truly if the person was merely poor *and* honest; but there is additionally some contrast being drawn attention to, which is part of the content, but not part of *strict* truth-conditions. Grice called conventional cases of such unsaid content ‘conventional implicatures’, in contrast with the conversational kinds noted just above. We may summarize all of this with a table:

	<i>Strict and literal truth conditions</i>	<i>Not part of strict and literal truth conditional</i>
<i>Conventional</i>	What is said	Conventional implicatures
<i>Not conventional</i>		Conversational implicatures (whether general or particular)

In brief, for Grice speaker meaning and word/sentence meaning – both kinds of non-natural meaning, notice – are related in quite complex ways. Words and sentences mean what they do because of how they are standardly used. Yet speakers can employ something with a standard meaning to convey a content which those words themselves do not mean.

Though of absolutely singular importance to philosophy of language, I believe it is misleading to think of “Meaning” and “Logic and Conversation” as the core of Grice’s larger philosophy. To my mind, the genuine core of Grice’s philosophy is conceptual-linguistic analysis, and the two papers just discussed should be understood not as “what Grice was on about”, but rather as two examples among others of such conceptual-linguistic analysis. Now, there are two facets of conceptual-linguistic analysis, and both were crucial for Grice. First, there is the process of analyzing concepts through careful study of language. This, for Grice, is a philosophical method. Second, there is the product of that process, these being various particular *analyses*. These are the results of applying the philosophical method. A few words are in order about each facet of conceptual-linguistic analysis. The process of analyzing language, the method, did not originate with Grice. He took it over from the “ordinary language” school of his Oxford peers J.L. Austin and P.F. Strawson. His novel contribution was to reform the method, which he called “linguistic botanizing”, to go beyond detailed the study of the nuances of language, as in Austin – paying careful attention to what the nuances do and do not reveal about the standing meaning of the expressions in question. According to Grice, to discover what is genuinely revealed by careful linguistic description requires a general theory of language and communication, not just piecemeal observation. As he puts the point, “Before we rush ahead to exploit the linguistic nuances which we have detected, we should make sure that we are reasonably clear what sort of nuances they are” (1989: 237). His variation on the process/method

of conceptual-linguistic analysis is, in my view, one half of the “core” of his philosophy. The other half consists in the products of conceptual-linguistic analysis, i.e., the particular analyses. Crucially, these products were not mere exercises in lexical semantics, because the aim was to uncover metaphysical *reductive emergences* of various kinds. The reduction of meaning, as we have seen, but also of perception, reason and value. Crucially, the kind of reductive emergence Grice investigated was conceptual: very roughly, in “Meaning”, meaning was claimed to be conceptually related to intentions to induce beliefs and actions; in “The Causal Theory of Perception”, perception was held to be conceptually related to the causation of sensations; in *Aspects of Reason*, reasoning was held to be conceptually related to (good) transitions between goal-directed states; and in *The Conception of Value*, value was said to be conceptually related to an evaluation of whether something carried out its function well. In every case, the philosophically charged kind is shown to emerge *by linguistic-conceptual equivalence*, as it were, from something else – possibly but not inevitably something more basic. What connects these two facets of “the core of Grice’s philosophy” is that one arrives at these conceptual-linguistic analyses not via natural science, but by applying the aforementioned method/process. As a result, “conceptual reductive emergence” contrasts with the kind of physical emergence that scientists discover *a posteriori*, e.g., that getting hotter emerges from greater molecular motion. (I’ll return to this contrast at the end.)

By way of further illustrating these two facets of conceptual-linguistic analysis, let us consider Grice’s 1961 paper “The Causal Theory of Perception” in some detail. (It too is reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words*.) Grice there seeks to provide an analysis of the ordinary notion of perceiving a material object. What he was aiming for was neither a scientific hypothesis about how perception actually occurs, nor a philosophically perspicuous amendment to ordinary talk. To the contrary, he was aiming for an analysis of our existing notion. Simplifying for the purposes of illustration, Grice maintained that:

1. An ordinary claim that a person *X* perceives some material object *M* says that *X* has a sense datum that was caused by *M*.

Thesis (1) could use some clarification. Indeed, this formulation can be misleading, since it suggests two objections which aren’t actually apposite. First, there is a familiar complaint about this kind of appeal to sense-data: we need to say what a sense-datum is; and they seem, at first glance, to be either peculiar philosophical constructs, or postulated entities of the kind scientists introduce. But, continues the objection, for Grice they can be neither, because (1) is meant to be an account of what ordinary people mean, when they say things like ‘Joan saw a green leaf’, and ordinary folks don’t mean to talk about philosophical constructs or postulated entities of psychology. To address this first misleading feature of (1), Grice thinks we should allow that a phrase like “*X* has a red sense datum”, as used in the analysis, is really just shorthand for ordinary locutions like “That looks red to *X*”, or “It feels to *X* as if there is a red thing”. The second non-apposite objection goes like this: it’s not enough for perceiving *M* that *M* be a cause of a sense datum; for, as is obvious, when one has a red sense datum due to a ripe tomato, the retina of the eye also plays a causal role in giving rise to it, as does the sun; but neither of these

things is perceived whenever a ripe tomato is. To address this, Grice notes that what is meant is that the sense datum is caused *in the right way* by *M*, namely in the way that ripe tomatoes cause red sensations. Put more carefully, then, Grice's view is:

2. An ordinary claim that a person *X* perceives some material object *M* says that (a) some present-tense sense-datum statement is true of *X*, (b) this statement reports a state of affairs for which the material object *M* is appropriately causally responsible.

Now, thesis (2) illustrates the product of conceptual-linguistic analysis, i.e., reductive emergence. But "The Causal Theory of Perception" also illustrates the process of analysis chez Grice, i.e., the method of careful inspection not only of linguistic nuances, but of what they derive from. In particular, we discover that perception emerges from causation and statements about "looks", "appears", and "seems" by looking below the surface of ordinary talk, to see what is responsible for the nuances we find. To understand this refinement of the "ordinary language" methodology, consider two objections to (2). Both are based on careful attention to how ordinary people actually talk, but mistake the source of their so speaking. First, when someone remarks 'It looks red to me', there is generally some question about whether the thing really is red. Specifically, as Grice notes, there tends to be a disjunctive implication: either it's implied that the speaker *doubts* that the object is red, or it's implied that it has been *denied* that it's red (or something along those lines). More generally, there is something odd, or even absurd, about employing a "It looks so-and-so to me" construction when it's perfectly plain to all concerned that the thing really is so-and-so. Second, it is quite unnatural to talk about the cause of something looking red to me, unless the situation is abnormal: to raise the issue of the cause of something is *ipso facto* to suggest that its occurrence was surprising. In light of these reflections, one might say that, when there's nothing remarkable about the effect and no doubt or denial of the rose's redness, a statement like *This rose bud caused it to be the case that something looked red to me* is nonsense, a misuse of language. But if that's right, it seems that there will be perceptions of a red rose, where the statement about the causing of "looking"-effects won't be true – because the latter will be nonsense. In short, it seems there would be many situations in which employment of 'cause' and 'looks to me' will be out of order, but perception will have occurred. And each such case would falsify Grice's thesis (2). It is Grice's reply to these objections which highlights his attention not only to linguistic nuances, as per the ordinary language school, but to what sort of nuances they are.

Grice insists that when I utter 'It looks to me __', what I strictly and literally *say* can very well be true, even if both doubt and denial are absent. To speak this way may be odd, when there's no doubt-or-denial, but only because it is misleading: it somehow *suggests*, incorrectly, that there is doubt-or-denial. More precisely, to employ the term introduced above, there is a generalized conversational implicature of doubt-or-denial that attaches to 'It looks to me __' claims. But to conversationally implicate something misleading is not to assert what is false, let alone to speak nonsense. Grice backs up this view on the truth of what is said using 'It looks to me __' with general considerations, specifically:

- The implication that there is doubt-or-denial can be cancelled – by context or by an explicit addendum. To take an example of the first kind of cancellation, when having one's eyes tested, the statement 'It looks red to me' does not suggest that one is unsure, or is facing up to a denial. As for the second kind of cancellation one can, without contradiction, just come out and say 'It looks red to me. By the way, I don't mean to suggest that there is any doubt, or that anyone has claimed otherwise'. Says Grice: since this is precisely what occurs with conversational implicature generally, we may conclude that the doubt-or-denial condition isn't part of the standing meaning of the words 'It looks...', and hence isn't part of what is strictly and literally said in uses of these words; doubt-or-denial is merely conveyed.
- The presence of the implication of doubt-or-denial would be expected, even on the assumption that there is no conventional semantic link between 'It looks...' and doubt-or-denial. That's because, as noted above, speakers, qua rational agents, are expected to be as cooperative as possible in their talk exchanges, and making the weak 'It looks...' claim will typically be less helpful than making the strong 'It is...' claim. So, hearers will naturally reason that if the weaker claim is put forward, it is because the stronger one cannot be – which gives rise to the conversational implicature that the stronger one is false, or contentious, or doubtful, or otherwise problematic. Thus the felt oddity is explained without making the claim nonsense or false.

Grice makes similar points about 'cause'. It may be that speakers conversationally implicate that the situation is unusual, when they describe the cause. But one doesn't *say* that the situation is unusual. One's description of the cause of the sense-datum thus isn't false, but at most peculiar and misleading, if the perception is perfectly normal. Thus is (2) defended from objections based on nuances of talk: the nuances are real, but they aren't of the sort that the objector supposed.

Let me end with a possible objection to conceptual-linguistic analysis, both to the process/method, and to the metaphysical reductive emergences that it supposedly gives rise to. W.V.O. Quine famously argued, in "Two dogmas of Empiricism", that every attempt to clarify the analytic-synthetic distinction appealed to something just as much in need of clarification as 'analytic' and 'synthetic' themselves. On these grounds, he ended up rejecting the distinction. Now, such a rejection can easily seem to threaten both Grice's (reformed) ordinary language methodology and its products. Grice's approach, I have stressed, is to proceed by analysis of meaning, setting aside as irrelevant "factual knowledge" that clouds our intuitions about meaning – which amounts, in effect, to seeking out analytic truths. And the metaphysical emergences he purports to uncover – of meaning, perception, reason and value – are meant to be different from what I called above 'physical emergence' (e.g., that lightning involves a massive flow of electrons), because only the latter involves finding synthetic truths by means of scientific investigation. But how can this approach even make sense, or its products be correct, if there is no analytic-synthetic distinction?

Grice, recognizing the threat, responded to Quine in an underappreciated article called “In Defense of a Dogma”, co-authored with his student Peter Strawson. (It too is reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words*). The defense can be boiled down to a two-premise argument. Grice and Strawson read Quine as complaining that one cannot give a definition of ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ except by appeal to expressions that belong in the same family-circle: e.g., ‘necessary’, ‘logical truth’, ‘synonymous’. In light of this, the first premise of their reply is that *if there is independent reason for thinking that the analytic-synthetic distinction is real, then it is not a problem if one cannot give non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for its application*. Grice and Strawson defend this first premise by highlighting an absurd consequence if one rejects it. They note, first, that if this premise were false of the analytic-synthetic distinction, it would have to be false when generalized: the analytic-synthetic distinction couldn’t be the only one which is threatened if it “cannot be clarified”. Thus if we deny Grice and Strawson’s first premise, then for any distinction there would be a serious problem if one couldn’t give non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for its application – and the distinction would have to be abandoned, even if there was independent reason to accept that distinction. To cite one example, the only way adequately to explain the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ is to invoke other words in their family-circle – words like ‘correct’, ‘statement’, ‘entails’ and so forth. So if the analytic-synthetic distinction is suspect on these sort of grounds, so too is the true-false distinction. But, note Grice and Strawson, one can hardly ever provide such an exhaustive non-circular definition. Given this, if their first premise were false, very few distinctions would be safe. But this is absurd. So, since the denial of their first premise leads to absurdity, their premise must be accepted. The second premise is that *there is independent reason for thinking that the analytic-synthetic distinction is real*. In support of this, Grice and Strawson note that one can give an informal explanation of the distinction without difficulty. Indeed, precisely because this is possible, philosophers have traditionally used these words without any problem, applying ‘analytic’ to roughly the same cases and ‘synthetic’ to roughly the same cases. More than that, a lay person can easily be trained to make the distinction, and to apply ‘analytic’ versus ‘synthetic’ to new cases. Nor is it just that these technical terms can be informally explained, and have a use within philosophy. Rather, these technical words are, as Quine also notes, connected to ordinary ones like ‘means the same as’. Thus there is a pattern of *ordinary* usage at play, which equally supports the presumption that the distinction is real. The conclusion of the two-premise argument, obviously, is that it simply isn’t a problem that the distinction hasn’t been “adequately clarified”.

It’s worth pausing to note the theoretical motivation for the two premises, since it relates to Grice’s larger philosophy. As pointed out above, Grice takes words to mean what they do because of how they are standardly used. But then any expression which has a standard use among a population must equally have a meaning. Now, ‘analytic’ and ‘means the same as’ have reliable uses, projecting even to novel cases. So, say Grice and Strawson, they surely have a meaning. What’s more, insofar as the relevant community contrasts the use of ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’, there is a *contrasting* meaning. Thus there is good reason to think the distinction real.

One might reply to this two-premise argument as follows: “Surely Quine is right that there is some problem with the distinction, if we can’t explain it except by appeal to words which are themselves in need of clarification.” Actually, however, Grice and Strawson are happy to agree. That’s because, simplifying for present purposes, they contrast three different criticisms that one might level at a distinction:

- a) It is not sharp or exhaustive;
- b) It is not useful for such-and-such purpose;
- c) It is altogether illusory.

Roughly speaking, they grant that Quine’s writings about the analytic-synthetic divide may support criticisms of kind (a) and (b). The boundary between them may occasionally be blurry, and there may be cases which are hard to classify. More importantly, it may be that the distinction cannot bear all of the weight that certain philosophers have tried to hoist upon it, if it cannot be clarified in the way Quine sought. Crucially, however, Grice’s larger project doesn’t require that ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ be immune to criticisms of kind (a)-(b). All it requires is that it not be subject to (c), i.e., that there *be* a distinction.

The real threat to Grice’s project, then, must come from (c). To address (c), we need to consider both what it might mean, and whether it’s correct. Regarding what it might mean, two ideas come immediately to mind. First, it might be that the analytic-synthetic divide is supposed to be “a distinction without a difference”, comparable to the “distinction” between suns and stars, or between the brontosaurus and the apatosaurus. In such cases, one has two different terms, but they actually pick out the very same thing. Second, the idea might be that we really have a pseudo-distinction here, with expressions that end up not having any genuine sense at all, comparable to the “distinction” between people with healthy auras versus people with auras afflicted by the evil eye. But, assuming (c) should be read in one of these ways, has Quine given us good reason to assimilate ‘analytic’ either to ‘sun’/‘star’ or to ‘healthy aura’/‘afflicted aura’? It seems not. First, to grant criticisms of kind (a)-(b) is not to endorse (c), on either construal. To the contrary, one who says of a distinction that it isn’t sharp/exhaustive, and that it cannot be used for purpose such-and-such, must surely believe that the distinction is perfectly real and sensible. (One wouldn’t urge that the “distinction” between brontosaurs and apatosaurus was unclear, or of limited use!) Second, (c), read in either way, simply isn’t supported by the points Quine makes about how hard it is, while eschewing concepts within their family-circle, to give necessary and sufficient conditions for being analytic versus synthetic. For, as noted when supporting the first premise of Grice and Strawson’s argument – i.e., that where there’s independent reason to take the distinction seriously, it doesn’t matter whether a non-circular definition can be given – providing such a definition is something we can hardly ever do.

I close with one last remark. It’s worth stressing that in deploying the first premise of the reply to Quine, Grice is making an important point about his larger project. He is, in effect, conceding that complete reductive analyses, i.e., ones that specify all necessary and sufficient conditions while breaking us out of a circle of related concepts, are simply not in the offing. Hence if the product of conceptual-linguistic analysis was supposed to be reductive analyses of

that sort, Grice would be in trouble. But, crucially, that was never intended to be the product. Conceptual-linguistic analysis involves careful reflection upon the nuances of language use, in light of a theoretical understanding of the contribution of standing meaning to such nuances; and its product is a statement of relationships between concepts. Given this, despite Quine's famous attack upon the analytic-synthetic distinction, the two part "core" of Grice's philosophy, as I have painted it, remains intact.

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Word count: 4822

