

MEANING, ASSERTION AND PROPOSAL

Sir,

I am glad that the questions of Dr. Dewey afford me the opportunity of giving more detailed explanation of two points in my paper "*On the Character of Philosophic Problems.*"

1. I have to confess that what I said about *the formal and the material* (inhaltlich) *modes of speech* could not give a clear idea of the matter. The exact definition of the two modes could be given neither in that paper, nor here, because concepts which are too technical are necessary. The exact definition is given in my book "*Logische Syntax der Sprache*" (Wien 1934). But I will try to explain the difference a little more explicitly.

I distinguish three sorts of sentences:

(a) *Real object-sentences*. [They deal not only seemingly but actually with extra-lingual objects.] Example: "The rose is red."

(b) *Pseudo-object-sentences* or sentences of the *material mode of speech*. [They deal seemingly with extra-lingual objects, e.g. the rose, but actually with the lingual signs of those objects, e.g. with the word 'rose:] Example: "The rose is a thing."

(c) *Syntactical sentences* or sentences of the *formal mode of speech*.

[They deal with lingual expressions.] Example: "The word 'rose' is a thing-sign."

The explanations in square brackets are somewhat inexact. A little more exactly formulated the definition is as follows: a sentence ascribing a certain quality Q_1 to an object belongs to the *material mode* of speech, if there is another, namely a syntactical quality Q_2 , which is parallel to Q_1 . By a *syntactical quality* Q_2 being parallel to Q_1 , is meant that when and only when an object possesses the quality Q_1 , a sign of this object possesses the quality Q_2 . In the examples given above "being a thing-sign" is a parallel syntactical quality to the quality of "being a thing," because when and only when something is a thing, its sign is a thing-sign. Therefore the sentence "the rose is a thing" belongs to the material mode of speech. This sentence can be translated into the parallel sentence "'rose' is a thing-sign," belonging to the *formal mode* of speech. On the other hand there is no syntactical quality which is parallel to the quality of "being red," i.e. no syntactical quality possessed by the signs of all things that are red and only those; because we cannot decide the question whether a certain thing is red or not by observing only the sign of that thing. Therefore the sentence "the rose is red" does not belong to the material mode of speech, but is a real object-sentence.

Thus the distinguishing of the formal and the material modes of speech concerns only those sentences which deal with language, whether this fact is manifest (in the formal mode) or veiled (in the material mode).

As to the question raised, the relation between empirical matter and the material mode of speech is the following:—empirical matter is dealt with in real object-sentences while sentences of the so-called material mode of speech do not concern empirical matter, they only seem to do so, they could therefore be called more clearly pseudo-material.

2. *Difference between assertion and proposal.* Example of a syntactical *proposal*: “ ‘ $p \supset (p \vee q)$ ’ is to be an axiom of the language L.” This proposal is a part of the definition of ‘L’ (the name of the proposed language). Example of a syntactical *assertion*: “In the language L the sentence ‘ $p \equiv (p \vee q)$ ’ is demonstrable.” This assertion only has sense if the name ‘L’ has been previously defined (by introducing the axioms and rules of inference). The answer to the question whether a given syntactical sentence S_1 is a proposal or an assertion depends upon whether the language-name which occurs in S_1 has been previously defined or not. (This latter remark is valid only for sentences of such simple form as the examples mentioned here.) Consequently I should think that a sentence S_2 which says that a given syntactical sentence S_1 is a proposal (or that it is an assertion) can be determined objectively either to be true or to be false; provided of course that the sentence S_1 as well as the whole connection to which it belongs is given in a perfectly correct and complete form. It seems to me therefore that the sentences S_2 is not itself a proposal but an assertion.

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