BOOK REVIEW : II

Alston, William P. : *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*, 2000, **Ithaca (N.Y.), Cornell University Press, PP. xvi+325 (HB)**

This book is a recent addition to the bewildering variety and diversity in philosophical literature that is available on the subject of linguistic meaning which has been in a way at the centre of the stage during the 20th century. But it deals with the problem of linguistic meaning in a distinctively novel way. What was adumbrated in his around 40 years old but small work viz. *Philosophy of Language* (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1964) has now received a fuller treatment and exposition of a perspective that is analytic and critical. The book is meant exclusively for those who are interested its the philosophical analysis of the problem and not for those who are of intutionistic and mystical peruasions. Taking language as an object of philosophic inquiry and considering seriously the limits and drawbacks of ordinary language and further labouring under some philosophical assumptions, many philosophers have indulged in Reform of Language Programmes or again there have been those influenced by later Wittgenstein or by J.L. Austin who think that ordinary language is quite alright But surely there is one important question that has bothered philosophers all along and which keeps them bothering still is: How does any linguistic expression, whether word or sentence, become meaningful and whether communication, ordinary or on some special purpose, must have some or the other philosophical presuppositions concerning linguistic meaning ? Even before any one asserts truth of any proposition whatsoever, question of its meaningfulness has taken priority in recent philosophical developments and many philosophers have been forced to develop an explicit theory as to what it is for any linguistic expression to have a certain meaning and under what conditions two different expressions can be said to have the same meaning. Many philosophers have indulged in what is called 'Ontology of Meanings'. The major question according to Alston is : 'What are we saying about a linguistic expression when we specify its meaning ?' or 'How is the concept of linguistic meaning to be analysed?' This is a philosophical question and Alston tries to tackle with it through a good deal of conceptual anaysis.

Before we get to Alston's analysis, a few preliminaries will not be out of place. Firstly, it is important to note that when we speak of linguistic meaning we are talking about words, phrases or sentences. The expression 'mean' itself in English language is used to do various things. There are several uses to which that expression is put. In his 1964 book, viz., *Philosophy of Language* (already referred to above) Alston starts with showing at least ten such uses which have nothing to do with liguisitic meaning of that word. He then went on to show how oversimplification and some philosophical (or/and metaphysical) presuppositions have marred the project of presenting a reasonably accurate account of (or analysis of) linguistic meaning as a function of what members of community do with the linguistic expressions. In order to present such an analysis, the promising place to start with would be speaker himself. The three types of theories which have been prominently canvassed by thinkers in the field viz. Referential, Ideational, and Behaviorial- have failed to see this because they have either supposed that the speaker does not do anything more than merely utter the expression, phrase, or sentence or else they have ignored the speaker altogether in the search of locating linguistic meaning elsewhere, i.e. in the referent or idea or some behaviorial criteria. Alston recognizes the insights contained in the three types of the theories but, as it happens with several theories, it's the failre that becomes more eloquent than the mere insights. The theory which Alston puts forth in the book under review exploits the insights of both Wittgenstein and Austin, certainly goes beyond them and comes up with reasonably good account of what linguistic meaning is, until critics come up with its defects and difficulties. The present review is restricted to its presentation.

Alston's analysis begin's with J.L. Austin's famous distinction between 'locutionary speech act', 'illocutionary speech act' and perlocutionary speech act 'made by Austin in his posthumously published small book *How To Do Things with Words*' (Oxford, 1962). The first category includes three levels: phonetic, phatic and rhetic. The phonetic act is the act of merely uttering certain noises. The phatic act is the uttering of certain vocables or words; rhetic act is the performance of an act of using those vocables with a certain more or less definite sense and reference.

These are not distinct acts on the same level but are nested inside each other. Let us say they consitute successive strata of a complete locutionary act. The phatic level is identified by Austin as sentential act- the act of uttering roughly what we call sentence. An illocutionary act, for Austin, is the act of issuing a locution with a certain force, e.g. force of a question, or a warning or a promise. To perform a perlocutionary act is to produce certain effects on audience by one's utterance. The three types of speech acts form strata- the perlocutionary presupposes illocutionary which in turn presupposes locutionary but not vice versa. On the basis of this trichotomy of Austin, Alston develops his own trichotomy of speech-acts: sentential acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. These three are three different types of speech acts. I shall not go into the details of these three but concentrate on Illocutionary speech acts which are crucial for Alston in his analysis of linguistic meaning. Alston's trichotomy, like that of Austin, is also stratified : perlocutionary presupposes illocutionary which in turn presupposes sentential act. Illocutionary acts presuppose sentential acts but not vice versa. Perlocutionary acts presuppose sentential acts but not vice versa. Perlocutionary acts may be based on illocutionary acts but not vice versa. Thus the relations between the three types of speech acts are asymmetrical. In bringing out the centrality of illocutionary speech act, Alston first works out illocutionary act concept - a concept the application of which to a person makes explicit the content of his utterance. It is a concept the application of which to a person constitutes an oratio obliqua report. Taking into account what endows an utterance with a certain content, Alston contemplates five distinct types or categories of illocutionary speech acts. These constitute what he calls total illocutionary act field. The five categories and the variety of acts performed under each of them are as follows:

1. Assertives : allege, report, insist, claim, maintain, answer, agree, concede, remark, mention announce, testify, remind, admit, disclose, deny, complain, predict, state...

2. Directives: ask, request, beseach, implore, tell, command, enjoin, order, forbid, advise, recommend, suggest, propose...

3. Commissives : Promise, bet, guarantee, invite, offer, pledge, swear...

4.   Expressives: thank, apolize, commiserate, compliment, congratulate, express: enthusiasm, contempt, interest, relief, desire, willingness, intention, opinion, opposition, agreement, determination, unhappiness, delight, hatred, pleasure, pain...

5.   Exercitives : adjourn, postpone, appoint, parden, name, nominate, bequeath, sentence, hire, fire, approve..

This is just a small sample of what falls under each category. Assertives are ways of putting forward a proposition, its truthclaim- asserting a proposition. Directives are concerned with guiding the behaviour of others. Commissives commit the speaker to a certain line of action. Expressives express some psychological state of the speaker. Exercitives are verbal exercises of authority, verbal ways of altering the "social status" of something-an act that is made possible by one's social or institutional role or status.

While sentential acts must be performed in order to perform illocutionary speech acts, the latter cannot be reduced to doing something with an intention to produce effects on hearers, i.e. on audience. Stephen R. Schiffer, in his *Meaning* (Oxford, 1972) had taken perlocutionary speech acts- concentrating on hearer effects- had indulged in reducing illocutionary acts to perlocutionary ones. Alston argues at length to show why such reduction cannot be effected. He also rejects Grice's account of meaning, which makes speaker's utterance- i.e. its meaning a function of what kind of effect the speaker intended to produce on his audience. As against this Alston claims that to perform an illocutionary act of certain type is to give one's utterance (sentential act) a certain normative status. Alston puts this initially puts this initially in terms of *taking responsibility* for certain conditions to hold while making utterance of sentence. e.g. To ask someone to open a certain door is to issue utterance, taking responsibility for its being the case that the door in question is closed and that the speaker is interested in getting it opened. The relevant notion of *taking responsibility* for satisfaction of certain conditions is initially explored in terms of rendering oneself liable to correction, blame, reproach, or sanctions in case the conditions in question are not satisfied. Alston argues that such liability presupposes *rules* in the background. It is when one's utterance is subject

to rules that require satisfaction of certain conditions for correct utterance that one is liable to negative reactions in case the conditions are not satisfied. All this discussion is prompted and studded with insights drawn from Searle's analysis of 'making a promise'. We have here an analysis- though tentative, yet reasobable- which touches on the normative aspects involved in semantic enterprise of our day-to-day language world. Every now and then we take responsibility for the satisfaction of condition , 'C' in terms of uttering a sentence as subject to a rule that requires 'C' as a condition for correct utterance. In a fairly unified pattern of analysis for illocutionary act types in all categories, Alston tries to show how in all categories except assertives, to perform an illocutionary act of a particular type is simply to perform a sentential act, taking responsibility for the holding of certain conditions. Different particular types are distinguished by the detailed content of those conditions, while the major categories are distinguished by the general pattern of the conditions for which one takes responsibility. Thus an exercitive involves taking responsibility for one's having a certain kind of authority, while a commissive involves one's having a certain intention. As for assertives though there too what one takes responsibility for is heart of the matter, it is also required that one's sentential vehicle, if one is not speaking elliptically, presents the propositional content in a fully explicit fashion. All this constitutes part I of his work.

With this foundational work on illocutionary speech acts, Alston proceeds to build up his analysis of linguistic meaning. He takes sentential meaning to be primary. Firstly he reiterates his observation that the word 'mean' and its cognates spread over a considerable stretch of semantic territory but a lot of that is excluded by the fact that our isue concerns the meanings of linguistic expressions. A linguistic expression is a constituent of a language; hence it is something of an abstract order; something that can have many realizations of different sorts. Expression in this context is thus a *type* and not a *token*. Alston also makes it clear that by utterance of a linguistic expression he covers any employment of language., i.e. speech, writing or any other means. He avoids any suggestion that each expression has only one meaning. Nor does he assume that all linguistic meanings are completely precise or determinate.

Alston's main thesis is that *sentence meaning is a matter of*

illocutionary act potential. In order to defend the thesis, in part II of the book, he has to make several theoretical moves. His objective is to show that for a sentence to mean so and-so is for it to be usable (standardly) to perform illocutionary acts of a certain type and that this is the basic way in which the semantic aspect of language as an abstract system is a function of what speakers of language do in their communicative use of it. It should be noted here that since Alston's lodestar for semantics is the idea that the meaning of a linguistic unit is a function of what it is used by speakers to do (The Use Principle), the appropriate entry point for the elucidation of the nature of meaning has to do with the units that can be used to perform complete speech acts and these are sentences or lesser units doing duty as ellipticals for sentences. (These are referred to as sentence surrogates). Alston argues for the priority of sentence meaning to the concept of word meaning and considers it to be quite compatible with the priority of words to sentences in the description of the semantic structure of any language. For developing his thesis, Alston sets up the following axioms whose truth is not, and cannot be, a matter of debate .

A.1   A fluent speaker of a language *ipso facto* knows the meanings of many of the expresssions of that language.

A.2.   The fact that an expression has a certain meaning is what it enables to play a distinctive role in communication.

A.3.   Knowledge of the meaning of the sentence uttered is the linguistic knowledge hearer needs in order to understand what is being said.

A 4 .   The meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of its constituents plus relevant facts about its structure.

A 5.   Reference is, usually, only partly determined by meaning.

A 6.   The truth conditions of a statement are at least partly determined by the meaning(s) of the sentence used to make that statement.

I shall not go into details of their justification but will remark that they provide a sort of theoretical setting for the genuine comprehension of Alston's theory. It is on this setting that one has to decipher what Alston is

looking for in a theory of meaning. He highlights the point that the kind of theory which he has developed is ontological in character. He is seeking to understand what it is for a sentence to have a certain meaning. His sole concern is with the ontological status of semantic facts- what kind of fact is the fact that a sentence or any other kind of linguistic unit means what it does. His quest is not method for discovering the meaning of linguistic expressions, much less a method for discovering the semantics of a language. His is not a reductionist analysis. He is not looking for a criterion or a discovery procedure that will enable us to determine the meaning of a given expression . His enterprise is a sort of quest for an adequate theoretical characterization of a certain "phenomenon" or a fruitful account of the kind of fact that constitues an expression's meaning something or other. For accomplishing this, Alston has of course to qualify his Illocutionary act potential account in a significant way. This he has to do in order to prevent a possible implication that for every difference in IA potential there is difference in meaning. It is obvious that a sentence can be used with one and the same meaning to perform illocutionary acts of many different types; e.g. the sentence 'The door is open ' can be used with one and the same meaning to perform illocutionary acts of the following types and many many more :

1.   Asserting of a certain door that it is open.

2.   Asserting that the only kitchen door of speaker's residential flat is open.

3.   Admitting that the door which the speaker was supposed to close was left open by him.

4.   Expressing surprise that the door is open when speaker himself had closed it a short while ago.

..................and so on and so forth.

To accommodate this obvious possibility Alston introduces the concept of a *matching illocutionary act* for a given sentence meaning and purports to claim that an illocutionary act type matches a given sentence meaning if and only if a hearer thereby knows that the speaker intended to perform an illocutionary act of that type. Thus the matching illocutionary type for the normal meaning of 'the door is open ' is one above but it will

be three above if the act is of admission. IA potential thesis thus says that for a sentence to have a certain meaning is for it to perform illocutionary acts of matching type. The distinction between illocutionary force and the content of the spech act helps us to identify the matching type to which the illocutionary act belongs.

To talk of illocutionary acts the way Alston does- the content, the force, illocgutionary act types and IA potential- all grounded in the Use Principle of Wittgenstein one should not be disposed to think that there is no rule-governance to which the semantic territory is subject. Quite the contrary. Alston does admit that there are illocutionary rules (I-Rules) which regulate sematic enterprise. To perform an illocutionary act of a certain type is to utter a sentence (or sentence surrogate) as subject to a rule that requires the satisfaction of certain conditions for permissible utterance. What gives sentence a potential for being used or usable to perform illocutionary act of a certain type is its being governed by a certain I-rule. Alston puts in a considerable effort to investigate in detail such I-rules and finds that a number of thorny issues have got to be resolved before we have a satisfactory schema for the formulation of such rules. This mission can never be complete by its very nature since living language is an open system replacing old uses and bringing in ever-fresh new ones. Semantic investigations and dictionaries of words and phrases require revisions again and again. Living languages reflect forms of life just for this reason. It would be also interesting to see whether the I-Rules are 'regulative' rules or constitutive principles. Philosophers are familiar with this distinction since Kant's times but with regard to speech acts it was John Searle who had introduced this distinction in his work *Speech Acts* (1969) and had opined that constitutive rules bulk large in the semantics of any natural language. Alston does not deny the constitutive role played by illocutionary rules but at the same time argues that these two are not disjoint classes of rules. The same rule can be termed correctly- regulative or constitutive-depending on what we think of it as governing. Alston's I-rules regulate sentential acts but are constitutive as well of illocutionary acts. They give conditions of the permissible utterance of sentences and by uttering a sentence as subject to such regulative rule, the utterance is *thereby* constituted as an illocutionary act of a certain type. But what is, it

may be asked, the mode of reality these rules have? Since these are not formulated anywhere in clear cut fashion,what is it for such rules to be in force in the society which uses the language for communication ? Can they be considered as mere conventions? These matters also receive attention at the hands of Alston. He brings out 'the rule vs. convention' debate in recent philosophical literature and prefers to speak of rules since they are the base of his analysis. Conventions are there but they supervene on meaning. As such they can be regulative but not constitutive. I have mentioned that for Alston rules are regulative as also constitutive depending on what they are taken by us to govern. Hence appeal to conventions rather than to rules is not a live option open to Alston. I shall not stay long on this point. There are deeper differences between Alston's analysis of linguistic meaning and the accounts of linguistic meaning given by those who rely more on conventions.

Finally Alston defends his view of linguistic meaning as superior to its rivals. The view that sentence meaning is illocutionary act potential may be objected to on a few grounds. The objections are stated by Alston and they are ably answered. Alston makes it clear that his perspective concentrates on what speakers of the language do, not on what effects the illocutionary acts have on hearers. He is careful enough to make a fine distinction between speaker's meaning and linguistic meaning. His approach is not that of a linguist. Special attention is given to referential theories of varying degrees of sophistication and to truth condition theories. Alston argues ably that all these rivals suffer from disabilities from which his IA potential theory of sentence meaning is free. But to cover all this in a small review like this would be too strenuous job. Alston's theory may be named as 'Philosophical Naturalism in the field of Semantics' or on Quine's lines as'Semantics Naturalised'.

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