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## Semantics, Logic and Ontology

P. F. STRAWSON/OXFORD

Semantics and ontology have in common a concern with structure. To say this is to say very little. For have not all systematic disciplines a concern with structure? It would be more interesting if we could maintain that semantics and ontology are concerned with a common structure. I shall consider, first, one currently popular line of support for this view; and later offer some hints towards a more satisfactory alternative.

1. Systematic or structural semantics, as we now know it, sets itself a task of explanation: the task of explaining the individual language-speaker's understanding of a potentially limitless range of sentences of his language. Evidently this problem cannot be solved at all without crediting the speaker with implicit mastery of a structure of general rules or principles of combination of linguistic elements — a grasp of a grammar or a syntax — which together with a grasp of a finite vocabulary of elements, individually learned, contains in itself the possibility of this limitless understanding. The specific problem for the theorist of structural semantics is to unearth the principles of combination involved and make clear their semantic force. This is the structural problem. The question of the particular contribution made by individual elements of vocabulary can safely be left to take care of itself.

The universal and schematic language of logic presents itself here in a seductive guise. For suppose we understand the basic combination of predication — that fundamental kind of combination which is schematised in logic in the forms of atomic propositions. Then with the help of a few simple recursive rules relating to generalisation and sentence-composition we can generate an infinite number of sentences (or sentence-forms) the truth-conditions for which are shown by the rules to depend on the truth-conditions for the basic operation of predication. Of course for this structure to have content we must also learn the sense of individual predicates — the difference, for example, between the truth-conditions for predicating 'tiger' and those for predicating 'blue' — and the denotation of individual names. But this will be so for any structural explanation. Since the central consideration in understanding the significance of sentences is a grasp of their

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truth-conditions, the semantics of formal logic presents itself as a model for structural semantics in general.

But then ensues a bolder thought: that the semantics of logic is not only a model, but a key — indeed the key to structural semantics for natural languages in general. Of course adjustments are necessary before the key will turn. On the face of it, in any natural language, there are many structural features, types of syntactic combination, which contribute to generating sentence-meanings out of sentence-elements and which cannot be simply identified with the structures of logical schemata; and these features vary from one language to another. So the theorist who seeks to find in formal logic the key to semantic structure in general must penetrate beneath the surface of natural languages. He must work hard at recasting whole classes of ordinary sentences in such a way that any structural feature which is not immediately covered by the structural rules of logic is replaced by one that is so covered. This he will call revealing the true logical form, or the true semantic structure, of those sentences. And he will regard the task of formulating the systematic semantics of a natural language as complete when he has formulated general rules of transformation which suffice to connect the surface structures of all sentences of the language with their deep or true logical structures.

Now where lies the connexion with ontology? It can be made in two steps. The first step is to accept that familiar doctrine according to which the ontological commitments of a theory or set of beliefs are to just those entities or types of entity which, if the statements of the theory are to be true, must be taken to be among the values of the variables of quantification of those statements when they are written out in the canonical notation of logic. Second, we must hold that the semantic theorist who has carried out the program just sketched really has explained the natural language speaker's mastery of his language. If we take the first step but not the second, then, though we might congratulate the theorist on the accomplishment of a *tour de force*, we shall have no reason for holding that he has revealed the deep ontology of the speakers of the language. But if we take both steps, we may say just that. For to take the second step is to hold that the 'true logical forms' of the natural language speaker's sentences display perspicuously what their surface forms do not display perceptibly, namely the structures which, in some sense yet to be clarified, the speaker actually understands the sentences as having. (Doubtless it is to be added that the explanation is not complete until the sense in which the speaker actually understands the sentences as having these structures is indeed clarified; but this is a task which our philosophical linguist may think proper to hand over to someone else.)

Thus suppose, according to our approved semantic theory, the structure of sentences containing action-verbs subject to adverbial modification is revealed by recasting them as sentences in which variables of quantification range over actions and the adverbial modifiers are replaced by predicates attached to these action-variables.<sup>1</sup> Then, if we take the two steps just mentioned, we shall say that a deep ontological commitment to actions, as well as to agents, is revealed. In general the operation of disclosing the true logical forms (semantic structures) of typical sentences of a natural language is at the same time the operation of disclosing the general ontological commitments of speakers of that language.

2. Here, then, is one way of connecting semantics and ontology by way of formal logic. We need not suppose it is the only way. Before looking for alternatives, it will be worth while to set on one side for a time the semantic problem and consider the other two members of the trinity by themselves. For, of course, the general thought of a connexion between logic and ontology is no new thought. It has run like a thread, one of many threads, through the history of philosophy, from Aristotle to the present, by way of many great names, notably those of Leibniz, Kant, Russell and Wittgenstein. To follow the thread, we must indeed construe the ontological question in a less limited style than Quine's doctrine of ontological commitment would have us do: rather as an enquiry into the most general, irreducible concepts and categories in terms of which we think about the world. Then we can see Kant as making the connexion in a singularly direct way: asking what concepts or categories must have application in the world in order for objectively true judgments about it to be framed in the forms distinguished by logic. Wittgenstein, again, in the *Tractatus*, makes the connexion in a very direct way, drawing the starting conclusion that the ultimate constituents of our world, whatever they may be, must be such that the simplest propositions about them (of which all other propositions are truth-functions) are all completely independent of each other, so that no conclusion about the truth or falsity of any one of them could be directly drawn from the truth or falsity of any other. Less startling, and notably closer to the semantic programme just discussed, is the analytic reductionism which looked bright in the earlier half of the present century and shared with that programme the assumption that all structural features of the sentences of final analysis would be adequately represented by their

<sup>1</sup> See Davidson's 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences', in: *The Logic of Decision and Action*, ed. N. Rescher, Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1967.

being framed in the symbolism of *Principia Mathematica*. Both the doctrine of the *Tractatus* and the empiricist reductionist programme could be seen as concerned with the meanings, because with the analysis, of ordinary sentences; but neither was presented as having a bearing on the problem of structural semantics.

Finally, let us remind ourselves of what is currently the most influential of all views about the connexion between logic and ontology, viz. Quine's doctrine of ontological commitment and the use to which he intends that it be put. Here, while a reductionist tendency is manifest, the detachment from the problem of the structural semantics of natural languages is complete. Quine is not in the least concerned to explain the natural language speaker's mastery of his language. His concern with our understanding of our ordinary sentences extends no further than to recommend that we study how to submit them to a procedure of critical *replacement* by sentences in canonical notation, guided throughout by the maxim that we keep our ontology to the minimum which is theoretically adequate for our 'theory' of the world. The cost in practical convenience of always working with these theoretically possible paraphrases would doubtless be intolerably high; but that is an irrelevance. The kinds of items which are such that if we are to have even a merely theoretical capacity to articulate our beliefs about the world, then we really cannot: but think of items of these kinds as subjects of predications, as within the range of values of our variables of reference, — these, and these alone, are the kinds of items to believe in the existence of which we have a deep theoretical commitment. The apparent ontological excess which goes with the proliferation of nouns and noun-phrases in our ordinary talk we can then charge to the account of mere practical convenience and brevity of discourse; we need not suppose we are seriously committed to belief in the actual existence of any such items as these phrases may seem to stand for.

3. Now let us see if these themes can be reworked in other ways. I first sketched a programme according to which ontological conclusions are seen as following from the solution of the semantic problem within the framework of formal logic. Then there followed a reminder of other traditions or doctrines in which the link between ontology and logic was equally strong, though there was no promise of a solution to the semantic problem and indeed, in the case of Quine, an open disregard of it. In more than one of these approaches there was manifest a strong tendency to ontological reductionism. In none of them was there any questioning of the peculiar authority of formal logic — the standard logic of the day — as providing the framework to which

ontological questions, the question of the general irreducible categories of our thought about the world, must, in one way or another, be referred. Obviously the modes of such reference are different. Kant's way is not Quine's. But the peculiar authority of the framework is unquestioned in both.

We may consider the possibility of modifying — even of reversing — some of these tendencies of thought. Thus, *first*, instead of seeking the answer to the ontological question in the solution of the semantic problem, we might consider whether the clue to the latter is not to be sought in the answer to the former. I have spoken of the ontological question as a question about the most general, irreducible concepts and categories involved in our thought about the world. Quine speaks of a 'quest for ultimate categories'.<sup>2</sup> In any such quest the appeal of reductionism is obvious. What is basic or fundamental is what everything else can be reduced to, eliminated by analysis or critical re-*placement*. But, *second*, we might consider whether reductionism is really a necessary concomitant of the search for the basic. Would not a notion of ontological *ordering* serve just as well? We might establish an order of conceptual priorities, see some ranges of concepts as secondary or derivative, others as basic or ultimate, see some, in a word, as presupposing others, without thinking that the former can be *reduced* to the latter. *Third*, and finally, we might modify our view of the position of formal logic in these enquiries. Certainly it will never be far from our minds, for certainly it presents, with unique clarity and perspicuousness, some central structural features of our thought. But we need not accord it exclusive authority in this respect; nor need we suppose that we can have an adequate grasp of the 'pure forms of thought' without reference to the character of what we most fundamentally think about. So might we modify our conception of the link between logic and ontology without severing that link.

Let us begin with some reflexions on this link, taking as our starting-point that combination of brilliant insight and disastrous misunderstanding which is Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. In one sense, Wittgenstein saw more clearly than anyone has seen what the nature of logic is. He saw that logic as we have it is implicit in the bare conception of the proposition as a representation of a fact or possible fact, as the expression of a thought about how things are in the world. In the first place, any 'This is how things are' which carries the possibility of being informative must run the risk of being misinformative. The notion of the proposition as the bearer of one of the two mutually

<sup>2</sup> *Word and Object*, p. 161.

exclusive truth-values, Truth and Falsity, is given with the notion of the proposition itself; and with this in its turn is given the possibility of the forms of truth-functional composition. Now these very considerations in themselves ought to have acted as a warning against supposing that any ontological conclusions at all could be drawn from the existence of relations of truth-functional dependence among propositions. But an over-fascination with logic as revealing the general essence of thought led Wittgenstein into the enormous error of supposing that all relations of truth-value-dependence among propositions must be unobviously truth-functional and thence into the mysterious ontology of atomic facts in which the objects hang in one another like the links in a chain.

Further reflexion on the original insight, however, strengthened by Kantian memories, might have blocked this disastrous movement and pointed the way in a more promising, if more pedestrian, direction. *Thought* about the world requires general concepts; and thought about the world requires their application in particular instances. This is reflected in the internal structure of the forms of uncompound and ungeneralised proposition: in the distinction between individual variables and predicate letters, the 'x's and 'y's on the one hand, the 'F's and 'G's on the other, of our notation. The fundamental form of proposition is that of a proposition to the effect that a certain general concept has application in some particular case. (In the ambiguity of this description — ambiguous as between 'some specified particular case' and 'some particular case or other' — we may see reason for saying that the notion of quantification also is implicit in the general idea of the proposition.)

Here, then, is the right point at which to make the connexion between logic and the ontological question. We are to ask what we are to understand by the notion of a *particular case* in which a *general concept* applies. But we are not to interpret this question in a quite abstract and general way. Remember the project of conceptual ordering. We are concerned, to begin with, with relatively unsophisticated judgments about the world, in which mastery of the concepts involved does not presuppose mastery of other and more basic concepts. We are concerned with judgments of common and comparatively unadorned experience.

Now a general concept is general in this sense: it is capable in principle of being exemplified in any number of different particular instances. Our grasp of a concept must include the grasp of this possibility. But again our grasp of a basic empirical concept cannot be separated from the notion of a possible application of that concept in experience. So it must be possible in principle for us — if we are

to have any use of concepts at all — to encounter in experience different particular cases and distinguish them as different while recognizing them as alike in being all cases apt for the application of the same concept.

This is the point, as Kant, in opposition to Leibniz, so clearly recognized, at which the two great notions of Space and Time interlock decisively and fundamentally with that of an individual instance of a general concept and hence with the bare logical notion of an individual subject of predication. The basic individuals are those which we distinguish spatio-temporally while able to recognize different individuals so distinguished as exemplifying the same general concept. (Of course two particular instances of the same general concept will normally differ in other respects besides the spatio-temporal; but there would not be two such individuals thus to differ unless they were spatio-temporally distinguishable.) We can be yet more specific. It is not mere spatio-temporality that is in question. Our basic 'theory', as Quine would call it, is of a unified, objective world consubstantiated fundamentally of space-occupying and relatively enduring things of which the identity can be traced through time and which both supply, and fill, the framework of our knowledge of the unfolding history of that world. Substantial spatio-temporal particulars are the basic individuals. (Here is another Kantian echo: we might say that the concept of the substantial particular is the schema of the concept of the individual logical subject in general.)

Now to turn from individuals to concepts, from subjects to predicates. If the basic individuals are substantial particulars, then the basic general concepts are those under which such particulars (or pairs or trios of them) fall. These concepts differ widely from each other: there are concepts of sorts or kinds; of qualities or properties; of relations; of types of doing or undergoing. It would be in the highest degree rash to suppose that such wide differences will be without bearing on the systematic semantics of any language in which we articulate our knowledge of the world. Yet, with the exception of the distinction between one-place and many-place predicates, no account is directly taken of these differences in the schemata of logic. The point is one to which I shall return.

Meanwhile there is another point to be made. The concepts under which substantial particulars (or pairs or trios of them) lastingly or temporarily fall have, and not accidentally, relations of a logical kind among themselves. Because they are principles of assimilation, they are also principles of distinction; and they may be more or less specific principles. Thus concepts come in groups between the members of which there are relations of mutual incompatibility or exclusiveness

and of super- or sub-ordination. Nothing can be both a typical element and a typical tiger: the classifications are mutually exclusive. But anything which is either must be an animal: the two classifications are subordinate to a third. The grasp of this kind of relatedness between concepts is something quite fundamental in conceptual understanding; and with it goes a capacity for grasp of logical relatedness between propositions, a capacity which does *not* require that such relations should be formally exhibitible in the schemata of logic in order for its possession to be explained — and indeed they often could not be so exhibited. Here is another point of importance for the semantic problem, as we shall see. (We may note as well, and incidentally, the relevance of this point to the profound unacceptability of the ontological doctrine of the *Tractatus*. The doctrine that atomic propositions are logically independent of each other is as deeply disturbing as it is because it runs flatly against any conception of the basic position which could make sense to us.)

So we begin. We begin by associating with the logician's abstract grammatical categories of name and predicate the notion of substantial individuals, on the one hand, and that of the concepts of their general qualities and relations, and of the general types of doing and undergoing they are capable of, on the other. We know how logic — standard logic — flows from the bare, abstract root idea of predication through the two operations of sentence-composition and generalisation — one mode of generalisation only, or two, one reducible to the other. But we keep our eye fixed for the moment on our ontologically basic singular predications, propositions in framing which we represent named, designated or somehow definitely identified, substantial individuals as exemplifying appropriate concepts. Even within these narrow limits we note that definite identification — identifying reference to an individual substance — is an operation which we are not constrained to perform only by the use of names, narrowly conceived. So *that* function may have its own complexity. And of course our conception of substance-involving facts is not confined within these narrow limits. We observe or guess, and report or conjecture, substance-involving facts without definite identification of individual substances involved; and this sometimes with, and sometimes without, definite identification of a plurality or group of substances involved. So we pluralise and generalise; not in one mode only, or in two reducible to one, but in *many* modes. Yet throughout we preserve our sense of the distinction between two broad, complementary operations or functions: that of specifying (with or without individual identification) what, or what kind of, or what-like, substances are involved, and that of completing the specification of the state of affairs present-

ted by our proposition as a whole.

Much variety enters into the second of these broad functions, as into the first. I mention two aspects of variety, each connected with an already mentioned feature of our concepts. I remarked that concepts which join with definite or indefinite substance-specification to yield the specification of facts or possible facts are of different sorts; and they conspicuously include concepts of temporary states or relations, of action, change, movement and undergoing. Our world-picture is not limited to the here and now; it is a more or less definite picture of a history and a geography. So, in drawing it, in setting the facts in the single frame, we include more or less definite specifications of place and time.

Again, as also remarked, the general concepts which group and distinguish our substantial particulars, or apply to them at different times in their histories, form a vast and complex network of the mutually exclusive, of the superordinate and the subordinate. In particular, we discriminate within discriminations, subdivide within our divisions. The modes of subdivision within division are too various to be considered here. But it is important to remark that we frequently operate with some unitary or common principle of subdivision the force of which is essentially relative to that of the concept to which it is for the nonce applied: a single principle of modification which yet takes a different value, depending on what is modified. (Roughly speaking, nothing is absolutely slow or tall or good; but 'slow' and 'tall' and 'good' are not ambiguous.) In some standard mode, then, we indicate the application of such a unitary modifier to what it modifies, yielding thereby a concept subordinate to the modified concept, and an instance of that logical relatedness the general capacity for grasping which is inseparable from conceptual understanding in general; but an instance, now, with a claim to recognition in structural semantics.

So much, and more, variety of function, so much, and more, structural variety, we can find without departing from our basic ontological level. If we were content, at this level, to limit our reports about particular, specified individuals to the attribution of permanent or standing properties and relations to name-bearers; to generalise only in one mode, or in two reducible to one; to use no other structural device of concept-modification but that of forming logical products of independently attributable properties; then the framework of standard logic would be at least more nearly adequate for the direct exhibition of all those semantic features of this level of discourse which deserve to be counted as structural. But we are not. Of course some progress can be made towards forcing other general features into that framework. Time-indication can be accommodated, perhaps, by de-

signating and quantifying over times and making use of certain relational predicates; some other kinds of 'adverbial' modification as well can be accommodated by quantifying over, say, events and construing some modifiers as predicates of events. But obstacles abound. The programme limps. Its execution remains obstinately incomplete.

What has to be recognized is that nothing of the kind is necessary. The aim is to explain our understanding of certain formal arrangements found in natural languages as having a certain semantic force, as yielding certain semantic outcomes. The formal arrangements may vary from language to language. But if we can discern the community of function which underlies the formal variations; if we can pick out the categories of combinable elements, discern the general roles they can play in significant combinations and explicitly relate combination and role to the actual formal arrangements of a natural language, then this is enough. We explain the natural language speaker's mastery — insofar as it is in us to explain it — by describing just what he has mastered: a set of particular ways of doing some general things. Careful description is necessary where I have given nothing but hints. But it is not necessary to reform, or deform, the structures of natural language in such a way as to force everything inside the frame of the limited grammatical categories of standard logic.

So our three themes come together: ontological reflexion, with an eye, but not a fascinated eye, on standard logic, guides us towards the solution of the semantic problem.<sup>3</sup> So, at least, our themes come together at our present level. For we are still at the ontologically basic level, where all the structural variety discerned in our thought centres round the notion of substantial individuals, and where the articulation of those thoughts allows for that broad functional division between two complementary roles: one that of specifying, more or less definitely, what or what-like substances are involved, the other that of completing the specification of a propositionally presented state of affairs. But our thought does not stay at this level. It is the most striking of all facts about human thought that the basic combination of predication bursts the bounds of its original home and takes with it all that associated structural variety I have spoken of, and more. So our individuals proliferate, and with them new styles of predication; but not in a disorderly mass, or mess. Connexions can be established, the movement of thought followed, order and dependence discerned. Just as it is an over-hasty reaction on the part of regimentalists to suppose that order can be discerned only by being imposed in accordance with

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, the great originator here as elsewhere, took a first step towards systematic semantics in writing the *Categories*.

some predetermined pattern, so it is an over-anxious reaction on the part of reductionists to suppose that there is something essentially obscurantist about ontological liberalism. Ontological liberalism can be quite clear-eyed; and can bring with it no small simplification of the semantic problem.

So the connexion between our three themes carries over from the basic level to more sophisticated levels of thought and discourse. The scope of ontological reflexion is wider, indeed, than I have indicated in any detail; and so is the range of categories we must take account of. And of course we do not pursue the aim of describing the structural semantic functions to be discharged by forms of language, the requirements to be met, in one way or another, by actual linguistic arrangements, with our eyes closed to the arrangements we are familiar with in languages we know. Why should we? Our aim is to describe, in this area, by relating form and function, what the native language speaker is doing; and in such a way as to make it intelligible that he can do it. What I have been suggesting is that we can best understand, and make intelligible, the working of the structure as a whole, not by seeing it as something which is given all at once, but as something which exhibits an order of development, orders of priority and dependence. Thus we start with certain basic categories of man's thought about his world, finding these reflected in certain basic types of semantic element and combination — whatever the actual formal arrangements may be for representing these combinations. The drive of reason towards second-order reflexion and towards generalisation, systematic connexion and explanation then impels us towards more and more sophisticated styles of thought, in which we can find structural analogies with the basic styles. So — to mention only these — the formal concepts of individual, property, relation and identity can be seen as emerging in their unlimited generality as a result of progressive analogically extended applications of certain features of the structure of utterances at the basic level, of the sentences in which we directly handle the basic types of subject-matter.<sup>4</sup>

4. All I have said, it may seem, is exposed to a profound objection. We are to explain the language speaker's understanding of structural features of his language by showing them as ways of representing independently describable combinations of elements, or of combinations of elements, of the language. In describing these modes of combination we refer freely to ontological categories, broadly understood, and to

<sup>4</sup> Some of the thoughts I have sketched in this section are more fully developed in *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar*, to be published by Methuen in 1974.

general characteristics of conceptual thinking.<sup>6</sup> In a word, we represent the structural features of language as particular ways of realising various functions of thought about various types of subject-matter. But is not this whole approach infected with what has been called a 'pernicious mentalism'? Does it not imply that we, as theorists, are unable to see through the forms of language to the forms and categories of thought itself? For are we not claiming that, by relating the former to the latter, we are making explicit the principles of which, as non-theoretical language-users, we have an implicit grasp or mastery? But the whole conception of such a language-independent structure of thought — extraneous to all actual linguistic forms — is absurd, a monstrous, mentalistic abortion.

I have put the objection as strongly as possible, so that the answer to it will be the clearer. I am not suggesting that we mentally structure our world, our experience and our thoughts quite independently of the forms of language — the latter being no more than the structural frame of the verbal covering our thoughts put on when they appear in public. Quite the contrary: it is implicit in what I say that more sophisticated styles of thought presuppose the existence of linguistic structures. But I am asserting that we mentally structure our world and our experience, and that our words would be meaningless — there would be no words — unless we did; I am insisting on the platitude that we not only utter words, but understand what we say and hear others say; and I am maintaining that the task of the philosopher concerned with semantic structure is nothing other than to describe some of the most general and pervasive features of that understanding, to discern and describe the functions of the forms. His task differs in scope and generality, but not in general character from that of the analytical philosopher, concerned to elucidate some common concept, who seeks to bring into the light the principles which govern the employment of some item or items of common vocabulary. We handle our structural frames with unreflective expertise just as we handle the items of vocabulary which fill them with unreflective expertise. But reflection can disclose principles of handling which the more reflective handlers can recognize and acknowledge. In thus explaining how frames and items are understood, we explain — as far as in us lies — how it is that we understand them, the fact that we do so. But there is no suggestion that we could, at every level, think in

<sup>6</sup> Also — but this is another part of the story — to the communication function of language. See the author's 'Meaning and Truth' in *Logic-Linguistic Papers*, London, 1971, translated under the title *Bedeutung und Wahrheit* in *Logik und Linguistik*, München, 1974.

terms of the categories and modes of combination which figure in our explanations without benefit of any linguistic structures at all.

Is the charge of 'pernicious mentalism' answered? To some it will hardly seem so. The appeal to the notion of 'how we understand' our linguistic forms will still seem suspect. Here we stand on the edge of a great area of philosophical controversy which I cannot enter now. I will simply refer once more to that other and more restricted type of philosophical enterprise: the attempt to elucidate some common concept by bringing to the light the principles which govern the employment of some common word or words. It will hardly be denied that some success has been achieved, some progress made, in these endeavours. The method employed does not involve checking theory by external observation; it is a method of self-conscious reflection on our own actual and hypothetical practice and its rationale — a procedure which does not exclude co-operation, the offering and acceptance of correction. There is no reason to suppose that a methodological gulf divides philosophical investigations of this kind from those that we undertake in the interests of understanding our understanding of semantically significant structural features of language.