A REFLECTIVE ANGLE FOR THE PROPOSITIONAL PROBLEM

Pragmatism as a reflective take on meaning disputes

UM ÂNGULO REFLEXIVO PARA O PROBLEMA DA PROPOSIÇÃO

pragmatismo como abordagem reflexiva das disputas sobre o sentido

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Abstract: This paper has a threefold profile. First off, it is a technical exposition of the recent history of debate on *propositions*, understood as objective entities of knowledge about truth and falsehood. Secondly, we will argue that the pragmatic approach provides a reflective angle for mixing semantic and hermeneutic discussion. By making a version of dynamically generated meaning relations available to the semantic universe, within specific strategies for searching for stable foundations of meaning, pragmatism opens up the problem for hermeneutic reflection. Third, we will argue that there are two main ways to problematize the debates that ignite meaning formation: moral dramatization and technical problematization. Technical formalization of the meaning-practices institutionalizes the collective conditions of acceptance for winning strategies of argumentation, and moral dramatization reifies those winning strategies as the deontological aim of a culture. The article has a reflective purpose. It aims to facilitate dialogue between distant philosophical traditions and to test the potential of analytical philosophy to absorb issues related to the pre-stages of meaning formation.

Key-words: Pragmatism. Hermeneutics. Semantics. Analytical philosophy. Continental philosophy.

Resumo: Este artigo tem um perfil tríplice. Em primeiro lugar, trata-se de uma exposição técnica da história recente do debate sobre as proposições, entendidas como entidades objetivas de conhecimento sobre a verdade e a falsidade. Em segundo lugar, argumentaremos que a abordagem pragmática fornece um ângulo reflexivo para interseccionar discussões semânticas e hermenêuticas. Ao disponibilizar ao universo semântico uma versão de relações de sentido geradas dinamicamente, dentro de estratégias específicas de busca de fundamentos estáveis de sentido, o pragmatismo abre o problema para a reflexão hermenêutica. Em terceiro lugar, argumentaremos que existem duas formas principais de problematizar os debates que contribuem para a formação do significado: a dramatização moral e a problematização técnica. A formalização técnica das práticas de produção de sentido institucionaliza as condições coletivas de aceitação de estratégias de argumentação vitoriosas, e a dramatização moral reifica essas estratégias vitoriosas como objetivo deontológico de uma cultura. O artigo tem um propósito reflexivo.

81

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Visa facilitar o diálogo entre tradições filosóficas distantes e testar o potencial da filosofia analítica para absorver questões relacionadas aos pré-estágios de formação de significado.

Palavras-chaves: Pragmatismo. Hermenêutica. Semântica. Filosofia analítica. Filosofia continental.

INTRODUCTION

Propositions are still invoked by respectable philosophers as those entities which can answer to problems about truth. These authors are in accordance with what A.J. Ayer has said in 1936: "to say that a belief, or a statement, or a judgment, is true, is always an elliptical way of ascribing true to a proposition, which is believed, or stated, or judged" (AYER, 1974, p. 117). In search of being fair to the necessary ideality of the truths known by cognition, the price is that we "shall apparently have to find room in our Platonic Third Realm for, e.g., subsistent Irish bulls" (RYLE, 2009, p. 25). We will follow a definite trend in this paper. It is a pragmatic and non-metaphysical understanding of the concept of *meaning* and of how it has provided an alternative to the discussion about the nature of *propositions*. The argument does not imply, as a matter of fact, that this alternative has replaced the discussion. Our argument is that the discussion about meaning and truth in the pragmatic universe can create a reflective angle on the discussion about propositions. The advantages of this reflective stance can not be measured in terms of better technical devices for eliminating ambiguity or detecting truth in empirical studies. It is a advantage from a reflective standpoint.

Initially, the paper discusses the possibility of reducing the 'propositional talk' to the discussion of strategies for avoiding *defeating conditions* of meaning formation. This shift to pragmatist positions gives room to a reflective perspective about the argumentative scenario and the cognitive events of validation. These events take place in competitive search for truth and for agreement. That shift of perspective will allow us to engage in a hermeneutic discussion. We would discuss how this opens the reflective door to think about narrative dramatization and institutionalization of meaning disputes, inviting the theme of meaning formation and its circularity.

Philosophical hermeneutics is known for bringing together most of the elements of continental philosophy that survived through the twentieth century. Its trademark is the approach to meaning problems as linked to the awareness of its process of historical formation, and the circular nature of the grasp of knowledge about propositional form and categorial justification: "In every case interpretation is grounded in something we see

A REFLECTIVE ANGLE FOR THE

PROPOSITIONAL PROBLEM

in advance-in afore-sight" (HEIDEGGER, 2001, p. 191). This angle of view has a strong link to the Kantian roots of continental philosophy[2]. The dialogue between analytical philosophy, pragmatism and hermeneutics illustrates how different philosophical streams dramatize rationality crises, bringing different skeptical awareness to philosophy.

One last caveat is necessary. The article contains descriptions of some important polemics in analytic philosophy about the foundations of a theory of meaning and its possibility, using mainly a debate between Quine, Davidson and Dummett. But the real aim of the article is to cross the bridge from the question about the possible theorization of problems of meaning – and questions about the identification of propositions – to questions about the historical formation of meaning. This will inevitably involve a syncretism of philosophical traditions, bringing analytical and continental schools to dialogue. Readers who are uninterested in mixing traditions, or who don't recognize the professional value of these intersections of perspectives, may not find this line of investigation engaging.

1   DEVELOPMENT: THE PROS AND CONS OF THE PROPOSITIONAL TALK

83

Sentences are language-signs that can be designated as correct or incorrect by a variety of standards. However, we do not usually say we understand the rule of that correctness unless *we know the proposition* which the sentence stands for. It is assumed that knowing the proposition, say, that (u) "France won the 2018 World Cup" involves knowing a minimum that the sentence (u) can defend in argumentation. The assumption that what is known goes beyond the sentence and its location in the language system has an intuitive basis. One would supposedly know what (u) is opposed to and what would have to be the case to present a challenge or undermine (u). The ability to classify the problems that the proposition solves and those that it does not, indicates knowledge of its argumentative potential and its possible theorization by proof theory.

We may take this as an indicator that our talk about propositions is deeply rooted in intuitive awareness. It is not unimportant to examine the reasons for this entrenchment. Rooted

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[2] In the words of David Couzens Hoy: "On Heidegger's theory, hermeneutics is not the limited, philological enterprise of defining a method to prevent misunderstandings (...). Rather, it is a fundamental philosophical inquiry into the condition of all understanding" (COUZENS HOY, 1978, p. 162)

Lucas Ribeiro Vollet

in this idea is a knowledge of the sentence's role and argumentative profile. So it is, at first glance, part of an intuitive anti-skeptical position about what we can *know* about our inferential endeavors and truth-assessments. To say we are aware of the proposition is the regular way of saying we are *in control* of what the sentence means. This control is, moreover, theoretical: one knows the proposition if one knows to unify the rule of interpretation of the sentence and correlate it to all models that predict its truth. So one knows the theory of truth for that sentence, and not just that it is true or false. That theory is what two speakers of different languages are supposed to know in common when they utter sentences with the same meaning.

When we explore the theoretical developments of this first notion, we will also come across the fact that resistance to skepticism is among the main traits of the notion of proposition. In the tradition we want to focus on in this first part of the paper, analytical philosophy, the battle against skepticism took place in an arena of divergence against psychologism and undaunted extensionalism. Let's quote Bar-Am to tell this story:

> Traditional extensionalism, to repeat, initiated a revolution in logic. This revolution stayed, although traditional extensionalism was soon refuted by Frege, in his epoch making 1892 paper "On Sense and Reference." (…) .Synthetic identity statements, notes Frege, are impossible under the extensional theory of meaning. Indeed, if meaning is extension and extension alone, and if the two sides of an identity statement have the exact same extension, then, of necessity, all identity statements are tautologies of the form A = A. Such tautologies are a priori true, of course, but they have no empirical content. Empirical discoveries, on the other hand, should be formulated as the contingent, informative sentences that they are. (Even nonempirical synthetic a priori sentences should not be reducible to tautologies of course.) Frege's criticism is overwhelming, then, because it exposes the fact that traditional extensionalism warrants downright invalid inferences, and by its most basic tenet: by allowing the unlimited interchangeability of coextensive terms, it warrants the derivation of contingent sentences for example, "the morning star is the evening star"—from tautologies—for example, "the morning star is the morning star." (BAR-AM, 2010, p. 10)

Frege's conception of truth and meaning was constructed in direct opposition to psychologism and some versions of traditional extensionalism. In spite of this, since alliances between pioneers of this tradition were not necessarily based on similar needs, we will focus on the common aspects of the theory. It was the concept of 'function' that compiled the anti-skeptic arguments.

We could define the classical approach to the propositional problem as the kind of grasp one has when one is able to represent a function. The theory of truth functions was among the leading theories of analytical philosophy. It was accepted by thinkers

A REFLECTIVE ANGLE FOR THE

PROPOSITIONAL PROBLEM

concerned with the reduction of arithmetic to logic (Frege), by philosophers concerned with the simplicity of the relationships of logical dependence (Russell), by those who, following Wittgenstein, were interested in the ability to show the isomorphic character of the structure of facts and the form of propositions. And it was supported by positivists, who kept their attention focused on the need for a theoretical expansion of the extensional theory of truth conditions. The purpose of this expansion of extensionalism is to make theoretical sense of how "experience" can be used to legitimize the truth of statements, or to define the delicate concept of "verification". There is no need to spend too much rhetorical energy on the theory of truth functions. A functional interpretation of the rule of verification for a sentence is offered, along with an interpretation of complex sentences referring only to their component dependencies. Its virtue is simplicity. Its vice is its propensity to ignore anomalies. It was later rejected by the same movement that raised them to the status of official thesis.

Wittgenstein's second work sparked that reaction movement. If we assume that the *disposition* to assign truth to something is what is meant to follow a function correctly, we may see ourselves in a vicious circle of justification. We do not solve any of the problems by shifting from one to the other. To cite a more recent argument that reports on the reasons for the refusal, Kripke's book (*Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*) is a convenient choice. Discussing the dispositional account of meaning:

> The function someone means is to be read off from his dispositions, It cannot be presupposed in advance which function is meant. (…). Where common sense holds that the subject means the same addition function as everyone else but systematically make computational mistakes, the dispositionalist seems forced to hold that the subject makes no computational mistakes, but means a non-standard function (skaddition) (KRIPKE, 2002, p. 37)

Kripke also understood that feature in Wittgenstein's second work as anti-justificationism: "the fact that the skeptic can maintain the hypothesis that I meant quus [over plus] shows that I have no justification for answering '125' rather than '5'" (KRIPKE, 2002, p. 37). The problem of justification is the direct stream by which skeptical epistemic problems derived from the line-up of Humean thinkers would overflow to semantics. Difficulties about the truth-functional account of propositions quickly reopened the doors for skepticism and led to new attempts to determine what is propositional knowledge. To know if some statement *is true*, and not just correct or incorrect under a language-criteria or arbitrary algorithm, is to work on to solve the propositional problem the statement conveys. If we try to

85

repeat that solution, the knowledge we must come to apply is the one about the *ground that makes the sentence tru*e. This is different from knowing the functional features of the sentence that programs the distinction of it from false formulas in a language. We will see the aspects in which this difference favors pragmatism, in the long run. For now lets just remark that skepticism remains a ghost pressuring the conversation about propositions.

1.1 Truth, justification and meaning from the mere sentence point of view: the highly idealized nature of well-formed-formulas

In the first chapter we told a story of innocent intuition about the nature of propositions. In this one, we intend to start with a skeptical viewpoint. Among the various techniques and mechanisms that we can develop to fix the behavior of sentences in argumentative contexts, in communication and interpretation strategies, there is nothing that infers the necessity of this role or behavior. There are reasons to think that a sentence has certain highly technical roles, but that its role in these contexts is not rewarded with a spirit or a ghost. Propositional knowledge involves the presupposition that the argumentative patterns used in real scientific debates can be extracted from their context and canonized as if there is a soul behind the sentence's use. We can start with this critique as a provisional mark by adding the suggestion that it corresponds to a critique of a *canonizing view* of sentences. The frame just given is fit to the picture portrayed by (the *Philosophical Investigations*) Wittgenstein with irony: "'The proposition, a strange thing.' (...). The tendency to try to purify, sublimate the propositional sign itself" (PI §91).

Anyone surprised by the supernatural scenery created by this image can ask the fair question: we could talk about arguments, rational stances and normative positions, but how is this to be related to real things in an independent platonic realm? When these propositional entities seem to inflate our ontology with sublimated versions of sentences, reifying the states of affairs (truth-makers or falsifiers) that increase our knowledge of their truth, a new reaction is triggered. Eventually, empiricist philosophers shifted away from propositions and toward empirical-semantic knowledge supplied by well-formed sentences. The attempt to focus on sentences reveals a great deal of energy spent on demystifying the propositional canon.

Knowing the meaning of a sentence (the proposition) is a theoretical ability only insofar as one knows how the sentence is affected by the models that predict it. One of its most distinctive qualities is its uniform testability or reaction to all models that

86

predict its falsehood. This means that if the sentence is falsified by one model, It cannot be true under a model compatible with that model. Another way to put it is that the revision of a sentence has a unified value. This would give modest translation abilities to the knowing subject, and this is enough to account for what one calls "meaning". The above picture gives substantial support to positivist reductionism and the premise that extra-theoretical issues should not enter the assessment of truth:

> …a theory, a rule, a definition, or the like is to be called formal when no reference is made in it either to the meaning of symbols (for example, the words) or to the sense of the expressions (e.g. the sentences), but simply and solely to the kinds and order of the symbols from which the expressions are constructed. (CARNAP, 1937, p. 1)

After what we can call the Tarskian-inspired Carnapian semantics, thinkers were able to build a theory for truth based on the property of a set of sentences to be mechanically generated as formulas. In a later advancement, the naturalist party employed that semantic learning to review even the concept of "necessity". As different sciences exploit the resources of language differently to ground their conclusions, even the concept of analyticity – truth in virtue of meaning – is made disposable by this approach. What is striking about this Tarski-Carnapian (and then Quinean) tradition is that it inverted the accusation frame of reference. They changed from the idea that we need propositional knowledge to understand sentences, to the opposite idea: that propositional problems aggravate the difficulty of understanding any pattern of meaning. This is so because the propositional version of meaning complicates the concept of 'pattern of meaning'. *Ideal* patterns of meaning are incapable of being predicted by *actual* truth-conditions: those provided by metalanguistic descriptions. Thus, they are incapable to fit the positivist dogma of meaning as truth conditions. Propositions would add functions to differentiate truth from falsity based not on what is the case (the actual dispositions to assert a sentence in the conditions in which to say that it is false is inconsistent). They would be based instead on what *should be* the case for any translation of the sentence to be truth. Propositions increases the difficulties instead of solving the original ones. D. Davidson summed up the protest against intensionalism entrenched in the principles of this school:

> Philosophers eventually speak as if ... they were free to introduce non-verifunctional operators as 'assuming that's the case' or 'should be the case'. But in fact that decision is crucial. When we distance ourselves from languages that can be accommodated in a

Lucas Ribeiro Vollet

definition of truth, we relapse (or create) a language for which we do not have a coherent semantic conception. (DAVIDSON, 2001, p. 32)

We know the rules of extensional correspondence are valid for contextually restricted conditions of meaning. Those contexts will be deemed as the "language" in which the meaning acquire its functionality. We do not discuss this question further, asking whether these conditions are highly idealized and not found in real languages. But we know that, by all indications, there is a general reasoning involved in the strategic construction of assertions. And in this reasoning the key principle is this: to find a point in the linguistic structure that is relatively safe so that the interpretation of the sentence receives only one value and is corrected by just one rule. This will isolate and unify the language for each successful assertion strategy (even if that language is not "English" or "Portuguese"), as we strategically seek to technically isolate what we say so that it is not understood inversely.

We do not need to go far to see the limits of that solution. It pretends to get rid of the "sublimated" aspect of propositions, but it insists situating the whole challenging part of the issue in the obscure notion of a "well-formed" language or in obscure concept of "understading or learning a language", or the even more complicated problem of finding charitable conditions for communicational strategies and losses of translation. What is a well-formed extensional language but the sublimated or even platonic version of a language? What is, moreover, the condition for a successful communication strategy, if not an idealized political condition? And for all that matters, one could also ask: can extensionalists be as platonic as intensionalists? Wouldn't their actual conditions for truth be mixed with ideal conditions, based on how they imagine the simplicity of the correspondence line that links sentences to truth-value assignments?

1.1.1 The challenge of determining meaning is theoretically more complex than the challenge of determining truth-conditions

The challenge of determining something like the "meaning" – the part of meaning irreducible to the algorithm that unlocks the unified span of the message – is different from the challenge involved in designing the rule that is consistent with that message. Something else is added when we want, more than a rule, also the meaning. Quine in *Word and Object* uses this challenge to spread a skeptic and relativism challenge: "From the point of view of a theory of translational meaning the most notable thing about the analytical

hypotheses is that they exceed anything implicit in any native's dispositions to speech behavior" (1960, p 70). Donald Davidson think of this as a encouragement for the elimination of the idea of Sense: "anything essential to the idea of meaning that remained to be captured [once we have] a characterization of the predicate 'is true' that led to the invariable pairing of truths with truths and falsehoods with falsehoods" (1967, p. 312). Saul Kripke, in his book on Wittgenstein, explored another dimension of challenges arising from this problem. For him, the mere rule used to compute message possibilities is not enough to determine what the intended meaning is; the part of the rule that unlocks a message or set of supported options is like an arbitrary password, which can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Other authors have used the same conclusion to support the claim that there is no alternative question about "meaning", but two questions about the Reference, which W. Greenberg's called extensionalism 1 and 2. What causes the paradox is the attempt to merge the two problems, which proves impossible except in idealized conditions:

> Whether a singular term's Reference is its Meaning, and whether the Meaning of a sentence remains constant when one singular term is replaced by another with the same Meaning, are separate questions — as are whether "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" mean Hesperus and Phosphorus, and whether the Meaning of "Hesperus = Hesperus" is the same as that of "Hesperus = Phosphorus". (GREENBERG, 1996, p. 210)

The key to the paradox lies in the conflation of the two problems. One tries to merge the problem of Sense into the problem of Reference. Using that strategy, one is allowed to ensure that there is an idealized condition, semantic or epistemic, in which the question about the identity of these stars is already solved. Like Greenberg, we believe there is an irreducibility from question 2 to question 1. But unlike Greenberg, we believe this is evidence of the irreducibility of Intension to extension. In other words, we believe that the paradox will not be dissolved just by dividing the issues and avoiding to beg the question. For us, the paradox is the symptomatic condition expressed in a *category conflict* that has roots in the stage of truth investigation. It means that in some stages of our scientific knowledge, it was not easy to codify the identity between those stars without an unsustainable presure on our avaiable conceptual categories. Science had to mature their categorial knowledge in order for that identity be coded. We come to the paradox because we cannot extensively encode some identities before approaching a second problem: a super-extensional (or Intensional) one.

89

What this chapter concludes, therefore, is that the appeal to sentences and well-formed formulas does not eliminate the challenge involved in determining optimal assertion strategies. The challenge remains just as difficult as the challenge of finding the proposition or the "ghost" behind the sentence. We need to idealize the conditions where being true, for a sentence, excludes as much as possible its chances of being false, and this idealization requires reasoning about the characteristics of language and its structure, as well as the competence of this language to serve as a sensitive instrument to the speaker community. We might give this idealizing activity less "ideal" names, to sound more empiricist. But the challenge was not made easy.

1.1.1.1 Pragmatism as a shift of angle for the propositional problem

We have reached a point on the discussion where we cannot use the traditional objection that propositional builders are advocates of old Philosophical myths. We can still say that the "problem" of proposition resists. The message is that we can't ignore that problem, since we are not able to reach real knowledge of our sentence meanings without some or other of those options: fixing rigid references, assuming the existence of transworld entities, judging the counterfactual content of the sentence, or even taking part on some metalogical work of classifying theoretical constructions into those that prove a sentence and those who don't. These problems have different claims of being more empiricist or less, more essentialist or less, but none of them avoids the highly idealized character of the result. All of this justify our hopes of grasping something as the identity between arguments of the same truth-content (verified by the same *truthmakers*), and therefore, it would justify our hopes of having a grasp of the *justificatory nature* of the relation between arguments.

But it is undeniable that some old myths have become demoralized. What is left of the old Platonism is just the idea that certain assertion strategies would not be strategic if they could not be based on a priority rule, which fixes the truth claim of the assertion in a programming sphere that excludes the possibilities in which the sentence would be false. That rule must have priority over others in a semantic reasoning. Since these strategies can always be described mathematically, some subterranean Platonism remains, but it no longer has the dogmatic force it once had. For even the strategies described mathematically are revisable rules. We may replace truth sentences as we replace axioms. The degree to which this rule's fixation is sound will depend on the role the concept of truth plays in rewarding assertions

90

compatible with the states of the world it registers, and this will change along with practical decisions about what is most rewardable in a classification system of true sentences. To speak like Dummett:

> It has become a common place to say that there cannot be a criterion of truth. (...). In the same sense there could not be a criterion for what constitutes the winning of a game, since learning what constitutes winning it is an essential part of learning what the game is. (DUMMETT, 1959, p. 7)

The question a pragmatist must ask is: is this interpretative option strategic? Is it worth in *cash-value terms*? Richard Rorty, in the context of the exegesis of philosophical arguments, have said that: "the cash-value of a philosophical conclusion is the pattern of argument around it" (RORTY, 1981, p. 584). This is a very enlightening way of describing how the pattern or standard used to identify the value of the conclusion, and to classify it with similar conclusions, is not detached from practical interest. The concept of a pattern that universalizes the meaning, or the Sense, or the Thought and Proposition, are dynamic strategies that can hold some ground of argumentation and interpretation, depending on the cash-vallue - i.e, depending on how rewarding that strategy is to maximize the projection of truth consistently. In our argumentative dispute practices, the reflexive ability to distinguish the pressures that favor from those that defeat a decision or conclusion is an important part of what usually characterizes the classification of truth and falsehood. This is the dynamic approach to find logical structures of compatibility which most idealistic philosophers will later call a 'proposition' – or a stable possible-truth-content.

As we learn to ground our sentence meaning predictions, we do not arrive in immune and eternal models for meanings; but we can still strengthen our competence to set a margin of loss for a sentence interpretation. This is not to be confused with a *science of propositions*, or a complete science of winning strategies of meaning. It is just the learning of setting margins for prediction and prevention of defeating conditions for meaning prediction. It sets margins of error for our models (our signs and symbolical strategies); and it makes failure tolerable (although not *predictable*). This is the pragmatic *rationale* of translators when they need to *lose minimum* in translation. So, it is the rationale behind propositional search: this is but the attempt to devise tracking instruments to search for and to fix the sentence assertoric ground of validation.

The pragmatic take is naturally inclined to accept reflection of the circular behavior of meaning structures. Like Peirce in his semioticist pragmatism, signs are

91

seeing as perpetually sensitive to new interpretations, like *interpretants* of other signs, in a circular journey inside the circle of signification[3]. The degree of understanding of the relation of sign to the object, or the *semantic knowledge*, is not given by a static rule. It is dynamic. And it is constructed inside the *intensional circularity*.

It is necessary here to say a word to justify our decision not to take the difference between pragmatists and platonists as decisive for the development of the discussion. In our view, pragmatism only helps to shift the angle of the discussion to a more reflective scenario, but this is just an option – which not all pragmatists took. Pragmatists like Robert Brandom believe that everything would be resolved through a scoring-system model of reward capable of generating parameters of meaning that are no longer "psychological" and become conceptual when they can be used to judge correct justificational moves in a game of asking for and giving reasons:

> What is implicit in that sort of practical doing becomes explicit in the application of the concept red when that responsive capacity or skill is put into a larger context that includes treating the responses as inferentially significant: as providing reasons for making other moves in the language game, and as themselves potentially standing in need of reasons that could be provided by making still other moves. (BRANDOM, 2000, p. 17).

92

Brandom's normative pragmatism has the merit of demystifying idealism. According to it, we idealize game conditions to give a fair character to rational disputes and improve communication structures. He offers a precious alternative to neo-Kantians who intend to defend themselves against semantic skepticism, without falling into Platonism, through "a non-Humean way of thinking about practical reasoning" (BRANDOM, 2000, p. 79). But here we fall into a trap again. Because this idealization of a judging panel that discourages paradox – same way a game always discourages defeat – is just the technical side of a more fundamental political dramatization. Sociologists may know that a communication strategy was defeatist during the negotiations that led to the first world war; but they are unlikely to conclude that the problem was the scoring-system that controlled rewards for propositional strategies. In our view, their skepticism would be justified. The fundamental question is political, that is, about the conditions of communicational stability that were broken to start the conflict. To say, therefore, that it is enough to appeal to the rules of the game is to mischaracterize the solution to the problem.

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[3] See Peirce, 1958, Vol. 8. 315 (1909).

We will took for granted that the conversion of the problem of proposition (the content of intentional moves) to the problem of the assertoric content (the winning objective of the intentional move towards true) do not lost any of the richness of the first question. But there is an won advantage: in interrogating the position for assertoric success, we may be able to assess the problem more precisely, shifting angles.

Social and historical needs for collective rationality pressures the conceptualization of the problems to fit some categorical ground. We mean by a categorical ground the conceptual framework that distributes the priority of the inferential rules. Then the challenge of knowing propositions turn to the ability to distinguish a categorial stable interpretation from a violent and dogmatic parameter of judgment. To establish knowledge of propositions is to find the best ground for a stable game strategy. This will turn into an argument about the options of philosophical narrative of disputes about meaning and propositions. Two philosophical narratives can be already recognized: 1. a moral dramatization of *deserved wins (rational strategies of communication and interpretation)*, or 2. a stable institutionalization of winning strategies, in the form of categories or semantic structure. In that picture, the propositional talk correspond to the last phase of that (either) dramatization or institutionalization: when we are entitled to reify the strategies of assertoric validation as reified creatures of cognition.

1.1.1.1.1 Deep problems in meaning validation, or propositional skepticism in its most dramatic stage: how to bring conceptual awareness to indetermination of meaning.

Unsuccessful strategies of communication or agreement will not always be reflected in losses in interpretation or translation. For the sake of the hypothesis, however, we can assume that losses in translation indicate what that lack of success means in semantic terms. It is a failed semantic theorization. Indeterminacy and inscrutability can be seeing as philosophical awareness of those failures. Quine in *Word and Object* uses this challenge to spread a skeptic and relativism challenge:

> From the point of view of a theory of translational meaning the most notable thing about the analytical hypotheses is that they exceed anything implicit in any native's dispositions to speech behavior (QUINE, 1960, p 70).

Lucas Ribeiro Vollet

This quotation displays Quine's awareness of the problems of theorizing meaning. The American logician explains the circular nature of the intensional foundation (Sense) of meaning in relation to the meaning theory problem. In declaring that a sentence is analytical, the meaning of that sentence depends on the definition of the terms; but this is the same as saying that knowing an analytical sentence amounts to knowing the inferences or relationships of compatibility and incompatibility of that sentence, which is their inferential role. We are drawn into a circle, and we can only justify it holistically. Some languages will sustain that circle of idealization organically, others dogmatically. Saying that there is a difference between languages that support their inferences organically, and others dogmatically, helps us little, for the accusation that the other's interpretation is dogmatic, but not mine, is the clearest symptom that the dispute no longer has empirical ballast and has entered the land of the incommensurable, areas not open to dialogue. For a theory of meaning this can be fatal, because it robs the theorist of what would make him a professional: being able to correct mistakes of meaning without incurring in a circle of criteria and rules. As the relation of signifier to signified is exchanged for a circular relation of signifier to signifier, we are led into a condition of absence of reference.

94

Let us recall that for Davidson, absent of reference is not so dramatic; we can still test the ability of the language to produce consistent Tarskian bi-conditionals. In *Reality without Reference*, the author says that "I suggest that what is invariant as between different acceptable theories of truth is meaning. The meaning (interpretation) of a sentence is given by assigning the sentence a semantic location in the pattern of sentences that comprise the language" (Davidson, 2001, p. 225). We may of course do it, but we will generate problems that are not empirical in the proper sense. Tarskian bi-conditionals can be generated at will, arbitrarily. All that is needed is to find the point at the metalanguage scale where the sentence can be asserted safely (with minimal danger of exhanging true for falsehood). How can this be used to select the intended meaning of the consistent bi-conditionals? Davidson thinks that:

> we compensate for the paucity of evidence concerning the meanings of individual sentences not by trying to produce evidence for the meanings of words but by considering the evidence for a theory of language to which the sentences belong. (DAVIDSON, 2001, p. 225)

This solution is consistent with the thesis that the quantification apparatus and identity rules we use to do the work of "referring" are implemented within the language using criteria not directly linked to sensibility and empirical data. This is consistent with Quine's thesis, as the author confesses: "this conception of how to do a theory of meaning is

essentially Quine's" (DAVIDSON, 2001, p. 225). Interestingly, though, the author doesn't want to follow Quine into the more skeptical consequences of this line of thinking. In our view, however, he's trying to dodge the inevitable. Testing the consistency of a theory of interpretation for a language can help to determine interpretation inside a language, but it will not help answer translation problems. We can, in fact, always ask: how can two semantically incommensurable languages improvise common test parameters? The same holds trues true for scientific paradigms. Those who don't need the concept of force or will to predict physical phenomena can accuse those who rely on it of being dogmatists. How can they avoid the accusation coming back against them? In any case, the Davidsionian test doesn't seem to be able to solve the real challenges. It can test the extensional compatibility of the predicate "is true" for a language, but it cannot test the intended "meaning" unlocked by these rules – since, as disclosed by Quine, the range of possible meanings for the same extensions is wide. What has not been overcome is the fact that a semantic theory adds layers to the problem of interpretive choice. To speak like Dummett:

95

> suppose there are two languages which resemble each other in every respect save that in one the meaning of a sentence containing a name is such that a utterance of it is false if the name proves to lack a bearer, and in the other it is such that, in the same case, the sentence is neither true nor false. The difference in meaning must, then, come out in some difference in employment of such sentences in the two languages: a difference that cannot consist merely in a difference in the application to them of the word corresponding, in those languages, to our word 'false'. (DUMMETT, 1993, p. 21)

What can we legitimately learn from this? Dummett shows a case where the same distribution of possible states – the same world states – calls for different reactions of sentential behavior. We have learned that the extensional conditions under which a sentence can be asserted are too general and inefficient to determine differences in meaning between paraphrases or translations of the same proposition that are not assertable under the same conditions, as in assertions that have varying inferential strengths. As different languages map their references differently, they also differently exploit the falsification or truth-making potential of different "confirming evidence". This difference in assertive weight cannot be modeled extensionally. The philosophical takeaway from this lesson, then, is that a theory of meaning makes more restrictive or superstructural selections than a mere compositional theory of extension.

This problem invokes what can be called the translator's misery: "there is a special *myseria* of translation, a melancholy after babel" (STEINER, 1975, p. 269). According to the interpretation of Quine made by George Steiner, the *intensional circularity* is the symptom of something more about the behavior of signs and symbols:

> The epistemological and formal grounds for the treatment of 'meaning' as dissociable from and augmentative of 'word' are shaky at best. The underpinning argument is not analytic but circular or, in the precise sense, circumlocutionary. (STEINER, 1975, p. 277)

It is this inflationary tendency of meaning that we should reflect upon. The moments when interpretation needs to recreate codes, navigating from signifier to signifier – without a ballast meaning – are the most dangerous. These moments are the least susceptible to empirical tests and the most favorable to creating private and restricted pockets of interpretation. Rather than being merely a technicality, meaning failure affects our ability to communicate and interpret on a deeper, philosophical level.

Propositional defenders hide losing strategies in order to preserve the mystique behind propositional things. Losing-strategies of assertion are usually treated as pseudo-propositions or paradoxes. This is not a pressing issue according to a strategic-pragmatic viewpoint. A pragmatic line of thought is inserted in another line of thought: a reflective one. We learn to reflect on our acquisition of conceptual frameworks. There is no mystique or dramatic universe to hold onto. Losing-strategies that cannot be represented by regular contradictions are possible antinomies or *meaning/ideal contradictions, i.e., possible contradictions (routes of conceptual collision);* and one has only to make risky decisions about what part of the conceptual system to reform in order to escape cycles of argumentative defeat. The pragmatic stance is set forth to provide a non-formal nor abstract representation of solving practices of scientific paradigmatic crisis and communication disputes.

2 FINAL THOUGHTS AND THE QUESTIONS INVITED BY THIS APPROACH: TECHNICAL AND MORAL-DEONTOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO MEANING FORMATION

Our article aims to contribute to the contemporary project of bringing a problem, traditionally relegated to a tradition of thought, to the philosophical

A REFLECTIVE ANGLE FOR THE

PROPOSITIONAL PROBLEM

awareness of another tradition of thought. This is not a blind mission. The purpose of this mixture of perspectives is to help understand the technical problem of "proposition" and "meaning" (the problem of function or analysis) in terms of the philosophical ways in which it becomes a reflection of deep crises of social norms of an historical phase. It is a transportation of the approach of what is conventionally called 'continental philosophy' to the problems usually dealt with by analytical philosophy and American pragmatism. The continental problem is that of *meaning formation*. It refers to the entire set of questions associated with the condition in which meaning passes through the pre-stage of theoretical awareness and becomes mature in its propositional expression. The culmination of this tradition can be discussed. However, it is beyond negotiation that *philosophical hermeneutics* is among the most respected expressions of the continental tradition in the twentieth century.

What philosophical hermeneutics brings without prejudice to possible inter-tradition dialogue is that the construction of meaning is not done in neutral a-historical conditions, and that there is a hermeneutic circle involved in the ability to know cognitive units as propositions. According to Heidegger: "In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself" (HEIDEGGER, 2001, p. 188). This indicates that the derivations of meaning that might be derived from the dynamics of interpretation practice clarify the circular force that solidifies the interpretative stable line and its future possible readings. When semantics arrive, the formation has already been completed. The circle is the statement that no propositional knowledge can escape a circularity in its justification, and that its justification is the self-discovery made by means of the acts of its interpretation throughout the mediation of human literary and scientific history. The dangers and threats associated with the lack of awareness of this circularity (self-deception, bad-faith, mysticism, silence, etc) are deeper themes of this tradition, which lead to its more isolated identity. The last identity profile is situated a bit farther away from analytical philosophy, and focuses on themes like psychoanalytical and sociological theories (meaning formation in power dynamics, etc), and how to strengthen or weaken an argument's circular justification.

We didn't delve deep into these issues in this article for the sake of taking it slowly. Instead, we chose to make the clues available for further investigating the psychological behavior of philosophical skeptical dramatizations of meaning disputes. Moral narratives and technical narratives are the two main ways of avoiding hermeneutic awareness of the processes of meaning formation. In other words, reflective discussion of the historical process of reading traditions and formation of strategically rewarding positions of truth is

97

always blocked when we approach this discussion by asking questions like the following: what is the nature of the mathematical or syntactic rules that generate interpretations compatible with the sentence? What is the nature of normative behavior that favors successful communication? The first question is technical. The second is moral, deontological, constructed from a dramatization of the conditions of human conflict.

As it stands, the proposition is an entity that combines a technical and moral-deontological identity. The closer it resembles the first, the more it is considered as a well-formed formula or sentence within a system or language. The more it approximates the second, the more it is considered a metaphysical projection of possible worlds, i.e., a circular fusion of what is imagined to be "right" (good, according to God's will) and the possibilities of truth. The technical and moral approaches are coordinated in a single objective: by transforming the failure to mean into a mere technical deficiency or deviation from normativity, they idealize "meaning" as natural or social success, which is how factual conditions are translated to work for meaning tests. Both approaches tend to use short-sighted pragmatism. They consider irreflectively the characteristics of assertive success that coincide with what was expected. Regrettably, the conditions of propositional formation are not addressed. We sympathize, here, with the lament of Ananta Kumar Giri, in the foreword of *Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society*:

> The only yardstick accepted by devotees of pragmatism is hard-nosed compliance with factual conditions, a compliance which alone can insure success of one's chosen aims. What is bypassed by this stance is the plethora of possibilities which can be pursued in response to prevailing conditions. (GIRI, 2021, p. vii)

The thesis that is postulated by our article is that both the technical and the deontological-moral approaches describe the propositional problem in the abstract, as if they were a-historical super-problems, sold as if they were natural challenges, whether evolutionary or socio-cultural, born of a human need for consensus and coordination. Both these approaches overlook the possibilities of the human imagination to expand the normative limits of the meaningful, beyond the prevailing conditions. The 'proposition' is the reification of social institutions for collective validation of meaning-disputes. Our philosophical argument assumes that talking about concepts such as propositions reifies the categories of winning strategies of arguing and inferring. This is a version of the consolidation of the "narrative of the winner" in semantic study. One of the costs of this institutional reification of argumentative wins is, first, that failures in endeavors of meaning are stigmatized as pseudopropositions.

A REFLECTIVE ANGLE FOR THE PROPOSITIONAL PROBLEM

In addition, risky grounding strategies for meaning are unfairly excluded from the philosophical universe. Once excluded, their reflective options for expression are also trapped in the marginal parts of discursive practices. This is to be taken as a sign of the controlling behavior of the hermeneutic field of validation. So, we are presenting an argument in favor of a pragmatic-hermeneutic position about meaning, together with clues for a critique of the consequences of the illusions behind the premise that there are stable meaning strategies for success, like *a priori* categories for true judgments. This first argument evolves to subsequent reflective alternatives. Our argument develops to create reflective room to think the aspects of the dispute about meaning involved with the social conditions of its acceptance and the dramatic-narrative representations of its crises. This puts formal semantics as one of the categorical abstractions that was systematically opted to institutionalize and stabilize the terrain of rational disputes. For last, it invites the question about the ways in which those conflicts on meaning are dramatized by moral narratives of secrecy and conspiracy, along with other philosophical skepticism positions linked to indeterminacy (or systematic axiomatic inconsistencies).

99

Lucas Ribeiro Vollet

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100

A REFLECTIVE ANGLE FOR THE

PROPOSITIONAL PROBLEM