

THE PROBLEM OF MEANING AND K. C. BHATTACHARYYA*

The problem of meaning is one of the most important philosophical issues in the contemporary thought. Although K. C. Bhattacharyya has not discussed this problem directly but has discussed other issues related to this problem (i. e. grades of speakability, meanability, communication of words referring to subjectivity and so on) while distinguishing between subject and object in his book — *The Subject as Freedom*. In the present paper an attempt has been made to explicate the implications in K. C. Bhattacharyya's thoughts bearing on the problem of meaning. This enables us to understand K. C. Bhattacharyya's views *vis a vis* modern analytical thinkers.

Subjectivity, in the beginning can only be understood in reference to object, i. e. to begin with it is the consciousness of the object. For consciousness *prime facie* stands for what can roughly be called the subject or what can only negatively characterized as being different from the object in the epistemic situation. The pure-consciousness has a definite import as compared to the metaphysical notion of self.¹ In other words, for K. C. Bhattacharyya subject or consciousness as such is no object at all. But the consciousness as such should be defined in terms of the consciousness of subjective which is the consciousness of belief in the way of rejection or reaffirmation. It may also be thought as the pre-suppositional ground in the subjectively oriented interpretation of experience which is taken as meant.

The object is a meant entity and is different from subject. The awareness of the subject is 'other than the meaning awareness'.² Though subject is not a meant entity and is a different kind of awareness, still it can't be regarded as a meaningless word. It is a significant speakable and has no necessary reference to sense perception. The speakable is wider than the meanable according to K. C. Bhattacharyya. "This point", says Prof. Daya Krishna, "is neglected by most philosophers concerned with meaning now a

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days.”³ There are contents which are not meant. A word is regarded as performing the meaning function when the speaker and hearer share its meaning. For example I say ‘please bring the chair.’ For understanding this utterance and performing the intended action the hearer must know the meaning of the word *chair*. If the hearer brings the chair and not something else, then it may be said that the word ‘Chair’ communicated the meaning which the speaker wanted to communicate. Thus, a word is said to mean an entity or produce a meaning awareness when the speaker of the word and its hearer could use that word to understand the ‘self-same identity’. The word ‘*this*’ may be used by the speaker and hearer in the same sense for the same object. Such identity of general meaning is possible only when it applies to the same individual thing. On the other hand, the word ‘*I*’ which represents the subject cannot be so used. It cannot be said to mean any thing as it can never be used by any two persons to refer to the same object. The hearer does understand something but not through the meaning of the word. This understanding is produced through the spoken word itself without reference to its lexical meaning. What is understood by the word ‘*I*’ is the self as speaking or expressing itself. Thus, the word ‘*I*’ has a unique singular reference which varies for the speaker and hearer in an essential manner, while the terms which mean an objective content have the same reference to both the hearer and the speaker.

Communication of object consciousness and subject consciousness differs from each other in the sense that the communication of object consciousness is concerned with the object, which is understood as meant, while on the other hand, the communication of subject consciousness is concerned with the ‘communicating act’ of the speaker and this cannot be the part of the meaning of a word in itself conveyed by the word ‘*I*’. The speaker’s awareness of his own self which is expressed by him by the word ‘*I*’ is *felt* by him. While, on the contrary “when his self-consciousness is communicated it is not his self only but the self as speaking, communicating or expressing itself that is understood”⁴

On the basis of above discussion it may be said that the object is not only the meant, it is also what is referred to by different persons or subjects at one and the same time. The terms referring to objects are general terms. The generality of the terms largely

accounts for our efficient communication. The word *this* or *that* as pointing to an object or what is meant, may be used by hearer for one or other object.

This shows that the subject is in sharp contrast to object of sense perception and all contents that are based on perception. The subject is not meant by any word. It is not meant by the term 'I'. It is only intended by the word. The personal pro-noun *I* 'stands for' the unique speaker of *I*. Thus, we see that the term 'standing for' and 'referring to' an object must be distinguished.

Here, one may raise a question : 'does the speaker of *I* consciously distinguish between the word i. e. *I* and himself' (that is for which the word *I* stands for)? In answering this question it may be said that the speaker when performing the function of the hearer understands himself through the word but not through the meaning of the word. In this sense the speaker is not independent of the word *I*. "His self consciousness may in this sense be said to be not merely expressed but incarnated in the word *I*"⁵; on the other hand, the object that is meant by a word is independent of that word.

Similar issue has also been discussed by analytical philosophers such as Russell, Strawson and others. It will be instructive if we compare K. C. Bhattacharyya's position with the position of these philosophers.

P. F. Strawson in his classic paper; 'On Referring'⁶ has analysed and isolated the confusions on which Russell's theory of Description' is based. Strawson finds it necessary to make a distinction between a sentence, a use of a sentence and an utterance of a sentence on the one hand and between an expression (expression capable of being used for unique reference), a use of such an expression and an utterance of such an expression, on the other.

Sentences are neither true nor false. It is only an utterance of sentences that can be used to make true or false statements. A statement is always *about* some entity and ascribes to it some attribute or other.

The entity that the statement is about is referred to by the speaker with the help of an utterance of an expression. Expressions as such have no reference. They may have ascriptive meanings (i. e. Connotative signs). Meaning for Strawson is a function of the sentence or expression. It is only an utterance of an expression such as 'the whole' or 'the ship' that can be used by a speaker to

refer to a specific 'whole' and a specific 'ship' that probably was struck by 'the whole' (Mentioning and referring and truth or falsity are functions of the use of the sentence or expression).

Successful unique reference depends on the context of utterance as much as it may depend on the ascriptive meaning of the expression. In Strawson's own word "the requirement for the correct application of an expression in its ascriptive use to a certain thing is simply that the thing should be of a certain kind, have certain characteristics. The requirement for the correct application of an expression in its referring use to a certain thing is something over and above any requirement derived from such ascriptive meaning as the expression may have, it is, namely, the requirement that the thing should be in a certain relation to the speaker and to the context of utterance. Strawson calls it contextual requirement. Thus, for example, in the limiting case of the word '*I*' the contextual requirement is that the thing should be identical with the speaker; but in the case of most expressions which have a referring use this requirement can't be precisely specified."⁷

Thus, for Strawson the utterance of the first person singular pronomial expressions is used for achieving unique reference as much as any other expressions, such as 'the whole' or 'the ship'. The contextual requirement for successful unique reference are of course different. The expressions for temporal pronouns such as '*now*', '*today*', '*yesterday*' and '*tomorrow*' and spatial pronouns such as '*here*' and '*there*' are used to achieve unique reference in a fashion quite similar to personal pronouns.

It seems to us that there is a significant difference between the position of Professor Strawson and Professor K. C. Bhattacharyya on the referential status of personal pronoun '*I*'. For Strawson, utterances of expression '*I*' can and do have unique references. Unique reference is determined by the relation of identity with the speaker in the context just as the unique reference of utterances of the expressions '*now*' '*today*' '*this*' '*that*' and '*there*' is determined by the contextual factors operating when any of these utterances are made. The expression '*I*' has no special status excepting that the contextual rules determining its unique reference are very specific. However, from the point of view of K. C. Bhattacharyya, Strawson is correct only in drawing attention to the special contextual rules governing the use of expression

'*I*' in the communication process. But Strawson is mistaken when he goes on to claim that the speaker uses the expression '*I*' to refer to himself. In fact the speaker does nothing of the kind. The use of the first person singular pronoun '*I*' only signals the communicating activity of the speaker as a part of the stage set-up. The speaker can communicate his self consciousness to the hearer by using the expression '*I*' but certainly *does not refer* to (or intend to) himself and hence is not using the expression '*I*' to achieve unique reference. The use of the expression '*I*' no doubt has for the hearer a referent — namely the speaker — but this unique reference is not achieved through the mediation of any meaning, but rather by the very stage set up of communicating process.

Thus, finally, it may be said that according to K. C. Bhattacharyya, the hearer understands from the expression '*I*' what is conveyed or intended by the use of it, but the speaker's awareness of '*I*' is a felt awareness. On the basis of the differences between the hearer and the speaker's awareness, it cannot definitely be said that the expression *I* has a singular or general reference. In K. C. Bhattacharyya's own words "as used the term (*I*) has a uniquely singular reference,⁸ but as understood, it is general in the sense the term unique is general"⁹

Mr. Russell¹⁰ in his response to Professor Strawson's critique of his theory of descriptions observes that the critique is actually based on Mr. Strawson's failure to isolate the problem of developing a satisfactory theory for explaining unique reference via definite descriptions from the quite distinct problem of the accounting for the manner in which egocentric particulars¹¹ (i. e. expressions whose reference is dependent on context of communication) are used for achieving successful reference.

The controversy between Russell and Strawson is not really pertinent to the issue that K. C. Bhattacharyya wishes to focus our attention on. Both for Russell and Strawson the expression *I* is used by the speaker to refer to himself. Both for Mr. Russell and Professor Strawson all ego-centric expression including the expression *I* have a referential role in the communication act for the speaker as well as for the hearer. For these two philosophers the egocentric expressions are characterized only by the context-dependent nature of their referential function. For K. C. Bhattacharyya, the expression *I* as stated earlier can never have a referen-

tial function in the communication act so far as the speaker is concerned. The 'I' enters essentially as a constituent of the speech act and cannot be a *mean* entity either for the speaker or for the hearer. Although the expression 'I' can have a meaning unmediated referential role for the hearer.

Thus, K. C. Bhattacharyya's position is similar to the analytical approach in so far as it recognizes the context dependence of the reference of the expression 'I'. On the other hand, it has something more different to say on this issue. *I* is not understood as pointing to either some referential or meanable entity; on the contrary, it is understood by the hearer through the word but not through the meaning of the word. In other words, when speaker's "self consciousness is communicated it is not his self only but the self as speaking, communicating or expressing itself that is understood."¹² The speaker's awareness of 'I' as has been said earlier, is a felt awareness. According to K. C. Bhattacharyya the speaker cannot assert his personal identity, in a recognitive judgement ("I who am now am I who was then") because speaker's personal identity, to him, is only a felt content and hence cannot be asserted by him. "It is only another person who can assert my (speaker's) personal identity in a recognitive judgement".¹³

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NOTES

1. According to K. C. Bhattacharyya, pure consciousness, which remains in complete dissociation from object at all levels, when identifies itself with other things, gains ontological status and is called the Self. The metaphysical notion of *self* is indefinite while *subject* as pure consciousness is definite.
2. Bhattacharyya, K. C. *Studies in Philosophy*. Progressive Publishers, Calcutta (1958) Vol. II, p. 19.
3. Krishna, Daya. 'The Philosophy of K. C. Bhattacharyya' *The Viswa Bharti Quarterly* (1960) Vol XXVI, No. 2, pp. 137-149.
4. Bhattacharyya, K. C. *Studies in Philosophy* Vol. II p. 19.
5. *Ibid* p. 20
6. Strawson, P. F. 'On Referring' included in *Classics of Analytic Philosophy* (Ed.) by Ammerman, R. R., McGraw Hill, Inc New York (1965) pp. 315-339.

7. Ibid. p. 329.
8. This should not be confused with the similar expressions used by analytic philosophers.
9. Bhattacharyya, K. C., *Studies in Philosophy* Vol. II p. 20.
10. R. R. Animerman : *Classics of Analytic Philosophy* (Ed) pp. 335-39
11. See Russell, B. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* R Penguin Books, Baltimore Maryland (1962) Chapter 7, pp. 102-109. and *Human Knowledge : its scope and Limits*, Simon and Schuster, New York (1962) Part II Chapter IV. pp. 84-91.
12. Bhattacharyya K. C. *Studies in Philosophy* Vol. 5 p. 19
13. Ibid. p. 21.

