

Cartwright on propositions

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Cartwright's question: what is true or false? His aim is to identify one sort of thing which is true or false, and distinguish it from other sorts of things with which it is sometimes confused.

His strategy is to begin by looking at the things that we say are true or false — the things of which we predicate truth or falsity. Example:

A: 'Botvinnik uses it.'

B: 'That's true. But he lost with it against Tal.'

B predicates truth of something. What is it?

We can use various phrases to pick out the thing of which B predicates truth: 'what A said,' 'the statement A made,' 'the statement that Botvinnik uses the French Defense.' Cartwright's aim is to distinguish the item picked out by these various phrases from other things with which it is sometimes confused. This goes in three steps.

Step 1: what is asserted vs. what is done

What did A do? Among other things, he asserted something. What did he assert? That Botvinnik uses the French Defense. Is what A asserted identical to what he did — namely, assert something? Cartwright says: no, because then we would have

What A did is that Botvinnik uses the French Defense.

which is nonsense. So we have to distinguish

- (i) what A asserted, namely that p
- (ii) A's asserting on that occasion that p
- (iii) asserting that p

Somewhat bizarrely, given the title of the paper, Cartwright uses ‘statement’ or ‘assertion’ for things of type (i).

Step 2: what is asserted vs. what is uttered

How did A assert that Botvinnik uses the French Defense? Among other things, he uttered a certain sentence. We can make distinctions with respect to the utterance which are parallel to the distinctions made with respect to the assertion. So we can distinguish:

- (v) what A uttered, namely ‘Botvinnik uses it’
- (vi) A’s uttering those words on that occasion
- (vii) uttering those words

How are (i) and (v) related? Cartwright: they must be distinct, since (a) someone, e.g. a Russian speaker, could assert (i) without uttering (v), and (b) A asserts what he utters iff the Russian speaker does. (Further absurdity: if (i)=(v), then the Russian speaker who asserts (i) asserts the sentence ‘Botvinnik uses it’ without uttering that sentence.)

Supposing that (i) \neq (v), does it follow that (ii) \neq (vi) and (iii) \neq (vii)? Cartwright is noncommittal. He wants to leave open the possibility that Jones’ striking Smith is the same event as Jones’ assaulting Smith even if striking and assaulting are distinct types of actions. We will leave this sort of question to philosophers of action!

Step 3: what is asserted vs. what sentences mean

Last, Cartwright turns to the relationship between what is asserted — a proposition — and

- (ix) the meaning of the sentence uttered.

Just as we can distinguish between the proposition asserted and the sentence uttered, so we can distinguish (it seems) between sentences and their meanings. If we consider the translation of S into another language, it is natural to say that S and its translation, while distinct sentences, mean the same thing. But then (as above) we can argue from the claim that S = its meaning iff its translation does to the conclusion that all sentences are distinct from their meanings.

So, Cartwright, thinks, we have propositions and sentence meanings, both of which are distinct from sentences. Isn’t it tempting to just identify (i) with (ix)?

Cartwright’s first point: it is not *always* true that the proposition one asserts = the meaning of the sentence one utters. Consider what he calls ‘incomplete sentences,’ like ‘It’s raining.’ It means the same thing today as it meant yesterday, but what was asserted by uttering it yesterday is not the same as what is asserted by uttering it today.

This shows that we cannot identify the distinction between what is asserted and what is uttered with the distinction between what is uttered and what the sentence uttered means.

A possibility left open: at least some propositions are identical to the meanings of complete sentences which can be used to assert them.

But this possibility is closed by the fact that it 'is obvious on very little reflection' that we can predicate different things of propositions and of sentence meanings. It makes sense to say of a proposition that it is asserted; but, Cartwright says,

It simply makes no sense to say that someone asserted the meaning of a sentence ... (50)

So, Cartwright concludes, propositions and sentence meanings are disjoint.

Cartwright is correct that sentences like the following sound bad:

A asserted the meaning of 'Botvinnik uses the French Defense.'

But other data is more equivocal. Both of the following sound ok:

What A asserted is that Botvinnik uses the French Defense.

What 'Botvinnik uses the French Defense' means is that Botvinnik uses the French Defense.

and doesn't it seem like it should follow from these that

What A asserted is what 'Botvinnik uses the French Defense' means.

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