introduction

The concept of meaningless has played a prominent part in the development of contemporary philosophy. Indeed, questioning the meaningfulness of certain concepts, sentences, and statements became for some, until recently, the chief tactic of philosophic analysis. It is easy to see why this tactic should be considered important, for the great scandal of philosophy has always been its apparent inability to solve its problems. Some, in fact, would complain of all philosophy what Kant lamented of metaphysical philosophy, that “we do not find men confident of their ability to shine in other sciences venturing their reputation here, where everybody, however ignorant in other matters may deliver a final verdict, as in this domain there is as yet no standard weight and measure to distinguish sound knowledge from shallow talk.”

If use of the concept of meaningless were to fulfill its promise, then a complaint such as Kant's could now be answered, at least to some extent. By employing this concept, some philosophers thought, we could distinguish the sound knowledge from the shallow talk. The shallow talk, at least some of it, was to be eliminated, not by declaring it “false,” but by ruling it “meaningless.” In this way, many, although certainly not all, of the traditional disputes—about the existence of God, about Realism or Idealism, about value judgments, etc.—could be said to be settled finally and irrevocably.

But very quickly new disputes arose: disputes about what is and what is not meaningless. Resolving these new disputes, however, proved to be just as troublesome and just as embarrassing as settling the traditional disagreements. For enforcing a ruling that "X is meaningless" proved to be just as difficult as justifying such traditional assertions as "X is good" or "X is real." Until some way could be found to settle the new controversies about what is meaningless, the new solutions to the traditional problems would be of no lasting value, and the old disputes would soon begin again. The new talk of meaningless concepts and statements would have gained us nothing.

Is there a way, then, to settle disputes about what is meaningless? Or is all of this modern talk of "meaninglessness," "nonsense," "depth-absurdities," and the like just as shallow and just as vain as the metaphysical talk condemned by Kant? Many philosophers would now answer the first question negatively; many now agree that there is no way at all to justify assertions about what is meaningless. This is one form of skepticism that has arisen recently concerning the use of the concept of meaninglessness.

Such skepticism also comes in a more radical form. The more radical skeptic claims not only that the techniques of justification are all inadequate but that the very concept of meaninglessness, at least as it is employed by philosophers, is essentially defective. Philosophers have used the concept in trying to prove that certain sentences or statements could not possibly be true—something the radical skeptic argues cannot be done. Even if a sentence or statement could be shown to be meaningless, that would not demonstrate that it could not possibly be true. What is meaningless, the radical skeptic continues, is meaningless only in a given language or only at a given time; change the language or the time, and you may transform what is meaningless into what is meaningful and perhaps true.

To evaluate these two forms of skepticism, it is necessary to consider the criteria typically used by philosophers to justify their charges of "meaninglessness." There are three such criteria: the operationalist, verificationist, and type (or category) criteria. Before evaluating these criteria, however, I should make some preliminary comments about the concept I shall be discussing.

Some philosophers, but not all, sometimes use terms such as "non-
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sensical” or “absurd” as synonyms for “meaningless.” I shall do the same. Distinctions can certainly be drawn among these three terms, and for some purposes, it is imperative that we do so. For example, in at least one very common use of the term “absurd,” a very silly statement may be absurd and yet may still be meaningful. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this essay, there is no need to make the distinctions that could be made; nothing of substance will turn on my occasional use of “absurd” or “nonsensical” as substitutes for “meaningless.” The reason for my allowing such substitutions is simply to make it easier to discuss the views of philosophers who prefer to use “absurd” or “nonsensical” in place of the term “meaningless.”

A second point concerns the meaning, or use, of the expression “meaningless.” Many contemporary philosophers have used it to mean “neither true nor false.” I do think that certain difficulties arise if “meaningless” is used in exactly that way—and I shall offer in my final chapter a slightly different interpretation which escapes these difficulties—but, roughly stated, the expression as I shall be using it implies lack of truth and falsity. There are, however, other uses of the term “meaningless.” It is more common in everyday speech, for example, to use “meaningless” to mean “without importance or purpose” or “without value.” Thus, it is sometimes said that life is meaningless; but that is not to say that life is neither true nor false. For life, not being a linguistic item, as is a sentence or a statement, is not the kind of thing which we normally describe as either having or lacking a truth value. Moreover, when we do speak of linguistic items as being “meaningless,” we do not always, or even usually, mean that they are neither true nor false. For example, the statement “The Vietnam conflict will end some day” might be described as “meaningless” on the grounds that a statement which does not say when the war will end is of no value. It is true, of course, that the war will end some day; but since we all know that, the statement would not be worth making in most contexts. Nevertheless, the statement is obviously true and, consequently, someone who described it as “meaningless” would probably not mean that it was “neither true nor false.”

These other uses of the term “meaningless,” implying lack of importance, purpose, or value, will not be discussed at all in the present essay. I do not think, however, that these other uses are illegitimate—I should
make that quite clear. In a perfectly respectable use of the term “meaningless,” something may be said to be meaningless without its being neither true nor false. The above statement about the war is meaningless and yet true. Although “meaningless” may be legitimately used in this way, it is not the way in which contemporary philosophers typically use it—at least not when they are attempting to solve philosophic problems. For that reason, then, and not because I question the propriety of the other, more everyday uses, I shall be discussing the concept of meaninglessness only as it is used to mean, roughly, “neither true nor false.”

In discussing this concept, I hope to answer many, although not all, of the interesting questions philosophers have raised about its employment in settling philosophic disputes. For example, what does it mean to complain that a statement or sentence is meaningless? How does one justify such a complaint? Further, can sentences or statements—or neither—be said to be meaningless? Are metaphors meaningless? What is the difference between meaningless statements and contradictions? Is what is meaningless relative to a given language, to a given time—or to neither? In part, then, I hope to answer such questions and thereby to provide a somewhat general account of the philosophic use of “meaninglessness.” More than that, however, I hope to show that this term, when interpreted in the manner I shall suggest, can be employed profitably by philosophers in their attempts to arbitrate philosophic disputes, despite the many recent and often trenchant criticisms of this practice.