Inadequacies of Wittgenstein's Earlier Theory of Meaning

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I.   INTRODUCTION

The main concern of this article will be to discuss the reasons that led Wittgenstein to give up his earlier theory of meaning as advocated in the Tractatus.[1]   There is a specific problem relating to colour predicates, which initially led Wittgenstein to change his theory.   As he realizes, his notion of elementary propositions which provide the foundation for his earlier theory of meaning, cannot be retained.   It is thus felt that the problem posed by elementary propositions signifies the inadequacy of the earlier theory of meaning.   On this consideration, Wittgenstein's analysis of colour predicates assumes a paramount importance in the middle phase (during the period before investigation) of his philosophy.   In this changed perspective, propositions are considered not in isolation, as in the case of elementary propositions, but as a system. Different propositions form a system of propositions.   The idea of system of propositions…. has a lasting impact on the final stage of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning.   In fact, his main attempt to explain meaning in the light of "Language-game" as proposed in the Investigation can be shown to be a full-blown expression of the middle stage of his philosophy.[2] In this discussion we will first see the problem of elementary proposition and second, Wittgenstein's idea of a system of proposition.   Finally, I will   explain some important points relating to this issue.   In the present discussion the above mentioned points will be discussed with reference to Wittgenstein Philosophical Remarks. [3]

II.   CENTRAL IDEA OF WITTGENSTEIN

According to Wittgenstein's earlier theory of meaning, one must be able to distinguish between simple or atomic and compound propositions.   Atomic propositions refer to atomic facts. Logically compound propositions such as $\neg P$, P & q, etc., cannot have sense, as there are no propositions and facts corresponding to them.   But Wittgenstein's does not regard two atomic propositions as contraries.   The collapse of the earlier theory of meaning seems to be explained by this problem.   For example, 'P is white' and 'p is black' are atomic propositions and they are distinct propositions and logical contraries. Wittgenstein explained in Tractatus that if two propositions are contraries then they are not regarded as atomic proposition and we can treat them as non-atomic propositions.   He abandons this option in his lecture 'On Logical forms' and explains that concepts other than colour concepts involve the notion of the degree of a property in an object.   All such concepts yield contrary pairs, and they are treated as atomic propositions. Wittgenstein said that such propositions cannot be true and are

non-sensical.   'q is block' does not contradict 'q is white' since elementary proposition cannot contradict each other but simply exclude each other.   He tried to reformulate Tractatus. His effort to reformulate it led him to develop his work, that is, Philosophical Investigations.

In his later works Wittgenstein seeks to give a better version of the meaning of word.   In this connection Wittgenstein returns to the problem of colour predicates in Philosophical Remarks, which gives a clear explanation of contradictory colour predicates as encountered in Tractatus.   The important part of the discussion is as follows: In logic, contradiction, tautology and various logical forms of construction, such as, conjunction and disjunction are accepted as truth-functional relationships between propositions.   Contradiction is the conjunction of a proposition and its negation, such as P and $\neg P$.   A set of contradictory proposition should appear to exhibit the form of P and $\neg P$.   The propositions "A is white" and "A is black" is true of conjunction but it is impossible for two colours to be in the same place at the same time, or in other words,   white and black both cannot be accommodated in "A" at the same time.   The mere facts that the colours have an elementary affinity with one another looks as if a constant is possible within the elementary propositions. What follows from the example is the fundamental principle that the only necessity that exists is the logical necessity.   Hence, `White' cannot be the name of a simple and a proposition "A is white" is not fully analyzed.   His immediate problem was to remedy the glaring error or mistake in the Tractatus account of logical necessity.   Ramsey objects to this view and states that Wittgenstein is only reducing the difficulty to that of the necessary properties of space and time.

The contribution made or criticism given by Ramsey was the innovation of new ideas in such a way as to preserve Tractatus's demarcation between logical and empirical truth and to solve the colour exclusion problem.[4] His first step was regarding the problem of a proposition underlying natural language, that is, what one can say in particular language.   What demands explanation?   What gives us the feeling that these must be an explanation?   In Tractatus proposition's function as significant units in isolation from one another, but the truth or falsity of a proposition implies truth or falsity of other.   In this regard, Wittgenstein says that the proposition "A is white" and "A is black" can be written down as two particular propositions and not their logical product.   The question is if each of the two propositions are well formed, intelligible, why is it not possible to write down their logical product of both the propositions. Wittgenstein defends his position and shifts to a new position and

states that intelligibility and well formedness cannot be given to a single proposition taken in isolation and they are not the properties of their own without reference to the way in which they are related to other propositions. Hence, he brings in the notion of a system of proposition, that is, it is not single proposition, but in a system of propositions that language is seen comprising a complex network of propositional systems, each of which comprise a distinct 'logical space'.

In Tractatus, logical space was define in terms of the internal relationship between objects which compose states of affairs corresponding to a single proposition whereas in Philosophical Remarks it is conceived in terms of the relationship of systems of propositions to the ordinary material of sense experience. Wittgenstein concluded that elementary propositions are not logically independent. There seem to be non-truth-functional logical relations. In an analyzed proposition, names designate the objects in a state of affairs. According to the Tractatus the logical forms of the proposition are like the graduating marks of a ruler. This mirrors the logical form of a state of affairs. In Philosophical Remarks, a system of propositions is compared to a ruler or a yardstick. Wittgenstein later argued that a word only has meaning in the context of its propositional system, and the meaning of a word is the rules governing its use in that system. The proposition "P is white", and "P is black" do not correspond to independent states of affairs, but are intrinsically connected to one another as possible alternatives. Syntax may prohibit construction of such propositions as "q is black' and "q is white" but in speech they are not different propositions but different forms of the same proposition. [5] Wittgenstein brings the notion of 'agreement in use' which plays a prominent role with words in the specific context of a discourse and to makes clear various problems regarding the relationship between a system of propositions and the aspects of reality which are mediated by linguistic construction. This is the only possibility through which one can guarantee that others understand words as one understands them. This theme led Wittgenstein to formulate that the sense of a proposition is the method of understanding the meaning of the earlier theory of meaning. According to the Tractatus theory of meaning, we know the meaning of a sentence only when we know the case for the sentence to be true. Wittgenstein in the beginning actually related a proposition to a yardstick but later with his invention of a system of propositions he posited a more complete theory that the whole scale of a yardstick gives a range of interdependent readings. For example; if "P is white" it is not blue, not orange, and not green. The meaning understand from a proposition, that is, when a proposition is compared with reality and found to be true, it is taken as absolute. The meanings of simple expressions are usually given by explanation, that is, through language, by reference to simples which are taken as elements of representation.

The problem of elementary sentence brought a distinct change in Wittgenstein's approach to language and meaning. The meaning of a proposition is linked to its truth conditions. Truth conditions are meant to specify only those conditions under which the entire proposition will be true. Consequently, the absence of those conditions will make the entire proposition false. We know from our earlier discussion that elementary propositions which constitute the base of the Wittgenstein hierarchy of propositions can be true only when they are pictures of reality. To elaborate, an elementary proposition is true only when the pictorial form of the proposition is identical with the state of affairs it purports to describe. Hence, the stated truth condition for an elementary proposition is as follows: if the pictorial structure of the proposition mirrors the actual structure of the state of affairs, the proposition is said to be true. This means that the concatenation of names of the elementary proposition must mirror the structural arrangements of objects in the state of affairs. For an elementary proposition to have sense it must exhibit its own pictorial structure as a concatenation of names - a structure representing some possible state of affairs. The notion of truth in this approach is essentially related to the identity of structure between proposition and fact. What is characteristic of this conception of truth is that for a proposition to be true there must be an identity of form between proposition and fact. The same consideration holds for molecular or compound propositions. The truth or falsity of a molecular proposition is dependent on the truth or falsity of the elementary propositions that compose it. On this ground, the truth or falsity of a molecular proposition is thus determined in a truth-functional way. Its meaning is specified by its truth conditions since they are governed by the particular combinations of truth or falsity of the elementary propositions.

From our earlier account of colour terms, we know that Wittgenstein realized the untenability of elementary propositions. The down fall of elementary propositions brought a radical change in his approach to language and meaning. He finds that he can no longer rely on his earlier theory of meaning. The reason is that there is a distinct change in his attitude towards language. As he argues, language should be explored as we find it and this indeed is in sharp difference with his earlier Tractatus belief that for its exploration, language should be submitted to a process of logical analysis in accordance with the requirements of truth-function logic. To see language as it is transformed by logic and to see language as it is practiced are two distinct philosophical standpoints on language.[6]

Now, we would like to mention some additional points in order to explain further the problems or inadequacies associated with the picture theory of meaning. One important source of confusion lies on the vague and metaphorical use of the word "object". In general, to use this word is to refer some things like "Pens" and "Books". When we give the name "Pen" to an actual "Pen", then we call the "Object signified" by the word "Pen". This is the actual use of the expression "object signified by such-and-such a word". But when we also give the name "red" to the colour signified by that word, we commonly stretch the use of the word `object' so as to call also the colour `the object signified by the word `red'. When we are to stretch the expression `object signified by the name A' then it will apply to certain things which are not physical objects like 'Pens' and 'Books'. It is very important to avoid the confusion that `A' is not a physical object whereas `Pens' and `Books' are physical objects. We have to understand these two distinctions, namely physical object and non-physical object. If we speak of the object signified by the

word 'red', this expression must be a substitute for the word 'red'. Now, if we compare the phrase 'the object signified by 'red' and 'the object signified by "Books", then we can understand that the grammar of this expressions is different from the grammar of the words 'Red' and 'Books'. We will go on calling 'Red' and 'Books' on objects. However, we must note that they are objects in very different senses. This means that the expression 'the object' 'red' is different from the expression the object 'dog'. To use the word 'object' about both in instances does not result in making them any more similar than they were before. And to say that a fact is composed of objects is a misuse of the word 'object'.[7]

According to Wittgenstein and Schlick, it is the transference of a definite `form' or structure that constitutes the nature of communication. We can represent the form of a fact by the use of variables: thus ` aRb" may be used to represent the form of the fact. That "John loves Mary". Two names are having identity of structure in term of the description of those facts they imply in language. Two facts have same structure and the sentence expressing them shows it. Speaking of the structure of a fact makes sense only in relation to a given language. But the phrase "identity of structure" misleads us only too reality into losing sigh of this reference to language while we are thinking that two facts may have in themselves the same structure independently of their linguistic expressions.

Suppose, we substitute the sentence 'John loves Mary' by the following words: 'Russell for John', 'taught for loves' and 'Wittgenstein for Mary'. We will get a new sentence, that is, "Russell taught Wittgenstein". This sentence also has the same structure as the former sentence. According to Russell's view, the two facts, which are corresponding to those sentences are supposed to have the same structure. Now let us imagine a situation in which Wittgenstein's learned from Russell and in the same way as John express his attraction for Mary. Notice that in both the cases facts and structures are the same but expressed in a different way. As Schlick says, "one and the same fact may be expressed in a thousand different languages, and the thousand different propositions will have the same structure, and the fact which they express will have the same structure too". We will clarify the point with the help of the example given below:

> "'X is greater than Y'
> Y is greater than Z'".

This may be said to be describing that 'X is greater than Z', and 'Y is between X and Z'. These two descriptions are equivalent: They both express exactly the same situation. I can replace one by the other without changing the meaning. The logical form of the two descriptions is totally different. These two sentences are symbolically represented by Russell as:

> "X G Y. Y G Z
> X G Z . B (Y X Z)".

These two descriptions originally cited are now made into three descriptions. These two descriptions have quite different forms. Now given these two forms the question that may be raised in which one among these two structures is to be called the structure of reality. As a final defence of this view it could be said that the structure of a fact mirrors itself in all the sentences which can be transformed into each other without altering the meaning and that this class of propositions is the true expression of the structure of a fact. But if we say this, the word becomes so vague that it loses any definite sense. For the concept of 'all sentences which can be transformed into each other without alteration of meaning' is not clearly limited. Such sentences depend essentially on what kind of language we admit, whether only word-language or gesture-language or picture-language…etc. There is no concept of `structure' which applies to all these languages indiscriminately.[8]

The word `structures' may cause confusion due to the properties constituent of structure. In mathematics every word has well-defined meaning for example, the structure of the series of cordinal or rational members. We can say that all separated or isomorphic groups have the same structure. Russell very brilliantly transferred this expression from mathematics to logic. He said that two systems of relations have the same structure when they are represented by the same map. We can also give a different sense that the structure of a proposition will be divided into two parts. That two parts are the subject and the predicate. That these propositions have two and three relations, and so on. What can we understand by the structure of a fact? As we have seen the former expresses that the same fact can be expressed by sentences which have entirely different structures. The word 'structure' as applied to a fact, loses all definite meaning and we can arbitrarily choose one of these sentences. Than we may decide that the structure of the fact is to be the same as that of the sentence chosen. But if we may do this, the statement that 'the fact has the same structure as the sentence' may become true. The structure of the fact will be defined as the structure of the sentence. The statement explains how facts can be expressed by language.

The conclusion which we draw from this is that it is best to avoid altogether the term `structure' is the light of these considerations. If we want to say something about the structure of a mood then we have to explain first of all what the meaning of the phrase is. At the same time if we speak of the structure of facts in general, or say that sentence imitates the structure of the fact it expresses, it is nothing but a misuse of language.[9]

Generally, our ordinary language is vague. So we are tempted to say that `every sign represents an object' and that the sentence stands for the situation it expresses in the way as expressed above. This is misusing the expressions 'stand for' or 'represent'. We say for example, 'the sign R stands for Russell', but does not represent Russell. But we can say that R stands for the particular person or particular object. Whenever there is a similarity between the sign and what it represents, it is found to be misleading. For example, when the person 'John is symbolized by a picture of a little figure with a dog, we can speak of representation and such an expression is quite fitting. But to say that the word 'John' represents the person John is misleading.

Certain words are used for representation, for example representing a person. Suppose, I put cards with the names of Mr, X, Y, Z, etc., printed on it on conference chairs in order to indicate the chair where they are to sit. We can say that those cards with the printed names are kept to indicate seats meant for Mr.X, Y, Z, etc. Those particular seats represent these particular persons like Mr.X, Y, Z, etc. Hence the names Mr.X, Y, Z, etc., represent these particular person. In view of this characterization, one may argue that the word 'chair' represents objects, namely object chair, and the word 'sit' represents specific place for people to sit. But to say this will be a misuse of the language. Because the word cannot represent a person. We can only say that the word stands for a person. So while we are using these two words – 'stand for' or 'represent', we must understand the slight difference of use of these terms. If we do not understand the use of these two words in the specific sense then we will be misusing language.

In accordance, we may briefly mention the difficulties associated with Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning. After the publication of Tractutus, Wittgenstein realized that the central ideas of his picture theory of meaning were false. He recognized grave mistakes in his earlier theory of meaning. To quote Wittgenstein, "I was helped to realise these mistakes to a degree which I myself hardly able to estimate - by the criticism which my ideas encountered from Frank Ramsey".[10] It is very important for us to consider those criticisms of his earlier views which Wittgenstein discussed in his Philosophical Investigation. As he pointed out, in his earlier period he had imposed impossible demands on proportion. Another of his important earlier view which he extensively criticized has concept of meaning. The doctrine that the meaning of a name is whatever it denotes is abandoned. There is no longer any need to suppose such a theory of meaning. A name can have a meaning even though nothing exists corresponding to it. The earlier theory of proposition is unable to survive. It makes no sense to speak of absolutely simple, indestructible elements of reality, that is, what Wittgenstein called objects in the Tractatus.

III. CONCLUSION

Finally, he came to the conclusion that his earlier theory of meaning was fundamentally wrong. It is significant to note here that Wittgenstein himself realized in his later writings the mistakes and shortcoming of his earlier theory of meaning as presented in the Tractatus.

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