

THE USE THEORY OF MEANING

A READING OF WITTGENSTEIN'S *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS*

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Abstract: There is an unexamined use of words and language in writing and speaking. Philosophy always stresses on argumentation that carries meaning. Wittgenstein even draws pictures of language to relate it to its idea, usage and meaning. This paper, therefore, intends to highlight the relevance of use theory of meaning in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Key Words: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, Meaning, Word, Use.

In the very beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein gives a basic statement: "a particular picture of the essence of human language." There is individual use of the words in a language or names of objects in the form of sentence(s) which are combinations of such words or names. In Wittgenstein's "picture of language" one finds the roots of the following idea: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (PI, p.1). It means there is a relationship between words and objects through language. We may say that in case of word and object the relation is of meaning – the meaning of being an object for which the word stands. And the meaning seems to depend, rather, on the meanings of the words making up the sentence.

Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, himself criticizes his earlier views – the abstract and uniform model of *Tractatus* – and draws attention to the use(s) of words in various practical situations. Having described the 'particular picture' of human language (which is essentially that of the *Tractatus*) he immediately gives an example of someone asking for 'five red apples' in a shop, and points out that each of these words has to be acted upon in a different way. To comply with the word 'apples', the shopkeeper opens a drawer marked 'apples'; for the word 'red', he looks at a colour-chart; and in the case of 'five', he says the numbers from one to five, taking out an apple for each number. This diversity of use is to be contrasted with the uniformity of the 'particular picture of human language'. Wittgenstein then proceeds to pose what may be called the 'meaning question', choosing for this purpose, the word 'five'. But what is the meaning of the word 'five'? One may be

inclined to think that there must be an object of some kind, corresponding to the word 'five', in virtue of which it has meaning (PI, p.1).

Some philosophers have indeed held that there are special 'mathematical objects', corresponding to such words, while others have maintained that the relevant objects are nothing other than the numerals as they appear on paper or in speech. As propounded in *Tractatus*, 'a number is the exponent of an operation' (T, 6.021). Whereas in *Investigations*, the question is how the word 'five' is used. In this (*Philosophical Investigations*), Wittgenstein identified meaning with use. The meaning of a word, he wrote, 'is its use in the language' (PI, p.43); 'the use of the word in practice is its meaning (BB, p.69): This is connected with the emphasis on 'description alone', for the use of a word is something that is available for description; it is not an entity or process that is hidden from us, as were the 'meanings' (i.e., objects) of the *Tractatus*. It may seem obvious that in describing how a word is used, we describe its meaning; and that knowing what it means is the same as knowing how to use it.

Wittgenstein's 'use' is not anything outside language. 'The meaning of a word is its use in the language'. It is the meaningful use of words that he is talking about. Hence, he is not 'explaining' what meaning is, by reference to something other than meaning. It is not, he remarks, as if we could say 'here the word, there the meaning' – as one might speak separately of 'the money, and the cow that you can buy with it' (PI, p.120). The meaning of a word and its use should rather be compared with the value of money and its use. Money (or, let us say, paper money) has value, within a given community, because of the way it is used. Thus, we might say that 'the value of money is its use'.

Oswald Hanfling in his book *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* suggests that Wittgenstein is known as an 'ordinary language' philosopher, for he proposes to 'bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (PI, p.116). D.N. Dwivedi in his book *A study of Wittgenstein's Philosophy* says, It is the use of a philosophical term that is important. That is how John Wisdom and P.F. Strawson have interpreted Wittgenstein's central theme. Wisdom says, "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use." And in the words of Strawson, "One might get the impression that he was saying: In philosophy you want the meaning of the word. Don't look for the mythical, uniquely related term, but look at the use, for that is the 'meaning' it might be better to say: In doing philosophy, it cannot be better to say: In doing philosophy, it cannot be that you are ignorant of the meaning: what we want to know is the use." Whatever be the relation between the meaning and use of a word, in philosophy it is the use(s) that matters.

Now it may be objected that the words mentioned like ‘language-game’, ‘form of life’ are themselves not examples of everyday use. But Wittgenstein is not committed to excluding non-ordinary uses from the category of ‘use’. In the Blue Book, for example, he condoned the practice of psycho-analysts in speaking of unconscious thoughts, volitions, and so on. However, what he says about meaning and use will apply also to non-ordinary uses. Thus, if a philosopher uses such words as ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’ and so on (PI, p.116) in peculiar ways, then his usage will show what he means by them. The purpose of bringing these words ‘back to their everyday use’ is to remind ourselves that they have such a use, and to contrast this with the philosophers’ use, avoiding the temptation to regard the latter as giving the ‘real’ meaning.

The identification of meaning with use was expressed by Wittgenstein in various ways- sometimes just by running the two words together, as when he speaks of ‘the use-the meaning-of [a] word’ in *Philosophical Investigations* (PI, p.30). But we sometimes speak of a conflict between the usage of a word and its ‘true meaning’. Nowadays, for example, the word ‘refute’ is commonly used to mean ‘express disagreement with’, but it may be said that this use is contrary to the true meaning of the word. Whether such verdicts are in order has been a matter of dispute among linguists, and some would claim that there is no sense in invoking a true meaning’ by reference to which an actual usage can be criticized. But in any case, the reference to such a meaning would not go against Wittgenstein’s account. For this ‘true meaning’ would still have to be found in the word’s use- if not the present or majority use, then the use as it was ‘originally’, or among ‘educated’ people, however these terms might be understood. Thus the conflict would not be between meaning and use, but between different uses.

Pitcher tries to criticize the identification of meaning and use by pointing out that ‘it is possible to know its use and to know the use without knowing the meaning’. As an example of the latter: most people know how to use the sign ‘Q.E.D.’ yet far fewer know its meaning. Of course one may know the dictionary-meaning of a word without knowing its uses in the language i.e. the language-games played with it; nor is it plausible to maintain that one can use an expression without knowing its meaning in some sense. If a word has both meaning and use, one can claim to know the word fully only if he knows both of them. Pitcher misses this point because he selects as his examples non-English expressions. The important thing is not the question whether it is possible to know the meaning of a word without knowing its use(s), or the use(s) without knowing its meaning. What is rather important is the question

whether the meaning of a word can be determined independently of its uses in language. It is, thus, the relation of the meaning and uses of a word with which Wittgenstein is concerned.

Wittgenstein's aim is to describe how words get their meanings. In the *Tractatus* he identified the meaning of a word with the object referred to by it. Similarly, one may get the impression; he identifies the meaning of an expression with its use in *Philosophical Investigations*. The statement which strengthens this impression "For a large class of cases- though not for all- in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language (PI, p.43).

Thus, in one way or another, the identity of meaning and use is preserved; and there is no need to postulate a meaning- 'the' meaning- lying beyond the knowledge of those who actually use a given word.

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