

CHAPTER - I

THE BACKGROUND

1. Nature of Language
2. Moral Language and the Language of Moral Obligation.
3. Nature and function of Linguistic Analysis
4. Importance and Limitations of Linguistic Analysis.
5. The Problem and the Plan of Treatment

1. Nature of Language

For a fruitful discussion of the nature and function of the language of moral obligation, a broad understanding of language as such is essential. It is, therefore, proposed to discuss, here, in brief, the basic nature of language to enable us to grasp the distinctive nature and function of moral language in general and the language of moral obligation in particular.

As Spair says, "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols"¹. This definition rejects naturalistic approach to language and emphasizes expression and communication as the chief functions of language. It is criticized by the Laguna² from a psychologist's point of view. But we should consider language, not from a psychologist's but from a linguist's point of view. Considering it as such, Urban³ gives three basic characteristics of language, which can be formulated into three specific problems of a philosophy of language. They are (a) language is a bearer of meaning; (b) language is a medium of communication; and (c) language is a sign or symbol of reality. Any kind of language, moral language for example, does have in one form or the other, these basic characteristics and can be studied from those angles.

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1. Spair, Edward, *Language : An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. p.8.
 2. *Speech : Its Function and Development*, p. 4
 3. Urban, W.M. : *Language and Reality*, p. 67

The nature of language according to Wittgenstein is summed up by Taylor⁴ in two statements (a) a language is a set of social practices; (b) a language is a set of instruments.

Wittgenstein's theory of language, like Spair's stresses creativity and conventionality as against naturality. For him, to invent a language is "to invent an instrument for a particular purpose on the basis of the law of nature"⁵. Language being, a social institution, to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life. Language is a system of sensibly perceptible signs having semantical and syntactical structures; and it is we who make these propositional signs with a definite purpose. It is the use or practice that is important in determining the meaning. As he says, "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. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer"⁶. This may be called 'usage theory' following A. Pamapatathy Rao.⁷

Add to this the game-view of language along with its rules, and the picture is complete. The rules of a system of language are its grammar determining its semantic and syntactic structures. They are dynamic, and change with our purposes in using a language. There is no one single purpose served by language as a whole. For every practice of language, there is a point or purpose. In short, "a language is set of practices defined by certain rules, namely, the rules which govern all the various uses of words in the language."⁸ Further these words and sentences are instrumental and have many purposes to serve like ordering, describing, asking, reporting etc.

To sum up, it may be said, that language is a meaningful medium of communicating reality. It is conventional and is governed by certain rules regarding its structures corresponding to the various uses to which it is put. Its grammar or logic is dynamic and changes with the purpose it serves or the function it performs.

4. Taylor, Paul W. : *Normative Discourse*, p 265.

5. *Investigations*, Part I, 492.

6. *Ibid*, I, 43

7. *A Survey of Wittgenstein's Theory of Meaning*, p 58.

8. Taylor-Op cit. p. 275.

In the light of this broad characterization of language, we may view the nature of the language of moral obligation. But, before we do that, it is necessary to distinguish between Moral language in general and the language of Moral Obligation in particular and to determine the place of the later in the setting of the former.

2. Moral Language and the Language of Moral Obligation

Broadly speaking, moral language is the one in which we carry on moral discourse and express our moral experiences. Moral discourse is mainly normative in kind and actually expresses the judgements regarding moral actions-decision, feelings and beliefs of which the moral life of man is made. It also gives reasons for those judgements. As Taylor says, "Moral discourse... includes all the manifold ways in which we express to others or to ourselves our moral judgements, decisions, attitudes and beliefs. It also includes any reasons we might give to justify them to others or to ourselves."⁹ Such a discourse covers an enormous variety of uses of language. Taylor enumerates a few typical uses as-exclamation of shock or indignation; admitting or acknowledging responsibility; expressing remorse or guilt; blaming or praising; criticizing motives; appraising conduct; prescribing an act to some one; uttering a decision or making up one's mind; admonishing or reproving someone; asking moral questions; deliberating; and stating a general rule or resolving to follow one. It will be clear from this that the scope of moral language is really very wide.

Thus the functions performed by moral language are varied. The language in which we express evaluations, prescribe acts, and give reasons for or against evaluations and prescriptions is normative language. There are three key concepts of normative discourse, viz., 'good,' 'right', and 'ought'. Of these, good and 'right' are evaluative terms and 'ought' is the basic prescriptive term. As Wellman says, "... an ethical sentence is any sentence which states either a

9. Taylor, Paul W (ed.) : *The Moral Judgement* Introduction p. X.

judgement of value or a judgement of obligation."¹⁰ For Hare, "The language of morals is one sort of prescriptive language."¹¹

From a close study of moral discourse and the history of moral philosophy it becomes clear that the key moral concepts are good, right and obligation or ought. There are many other concepts such as value, ideal, duty, law, authority, freedom etc. which are involved in the study of the first three. It should however, be remembered that all these concepts have non-moral as well as moral uses, and it is a task of moral philosophy to determine their morality, to state under what conditions the judgements involving these concepts are moral.

Some of the questions that arise are—Can a single theory of moral language explain adequately all these concepts? Or, do they need more theories to explain them? If yes, how are they inter-related? The variety of the theories of moral language can be traced to the variety of basic moral concepts and the variety of uses their languages are put to. They show how variously moral language can be used, in different moral situations, with the help of different moral concepts or of different uses of the same moral concept. However, though the same moral concept can be used to perform many functions depending on situations or contexts, this does not mean that the concept cannot have a definite meaning, which is central to it.

Let us look at the various theories of moral language in order to get a clear picture of the functions it performs. According to descriptivism, ethical sentences have descriptive meaning. They state or describe moral facts whether natural, as naturalism holds, or non-natural as Intuitionism holds. As Nowell-Smith puts it. "the truth or falsity", on this view, "of an opinion depends wholly on what the facts are, not on whether any one holds it."¹² According to Evaluative theory, the function of the ethical sentences is to evaluate objects, persons, situations, attitudes etc. The moral terms 'good' and 'right', are evaluative terms. Moral judgements are value judgements. According to Kant, on the other hand. Moral Law is supreme and all the moral judgements are its applications, they

10. Wellman, Carl : *The Language of Ethics*, Intro pp 8-9.

11. Hare R.M. : *The Language of Morals*, p. 1.

12. *Ethics*, p.260

are the commands of reason. In the religious view of morality, the moral rules are the divine commandments' and all the moral judgements are their particular applications. For Emotivism on the other hand, ethical sentences have only emotive meaning, that is, their function is to create an affective influence, to recommend something for approval or disapproval. As Tomas puts it, they "are used more for encouraging altering or redirecting people's aims and conduct than for simply describing them"¹³. According to Hare,¹⁴ however, moral language is prescriptive. Urmson¹⁵ urges that its function is to grade. Other functions ascribed by various thinkers to moral language are guiding, recommending, persuading and so on. We shall discuss the important theories of moral language in due course. Here we want only to point out the variety of functions that moral language is said to perform, and consequently, the complexity of the nature of moral language, by just referring to the various theories.

The expression 'Language of moral obligation' has a two-fold meaning. In a broader sense, it includes the whole discourse of and about moral obligation, that is, the whole obligation-discourse, including sentences expressing the judgements of moral obligation as also the reasons or arguments to justify them. In a restricted sense, it includes only the former; that is the sentences expressing the judgements of moral obligation. For the purpose of the present study, we shall use it only in the restricted sense. The common obligative term are 'obligation', 'obligatory', 'duty' and 'ought'. The language using them is called the 'ought-language'. 'Obligation' and 'duty' are nouns; 'obligatory' is an adjective and 'ought' is an auxiliary verb. 'Ought' is a more significant and popular term in the discourse of moral obligation. That is why moral obligations are generally expressed in terms of 'ought'. The basic concept of the language of moral obligation is, thus, 'obligation' or 'ought'.

Besides this, as we know there are other, at least two concepts which are basic to moral language in general, namely 'good' and 'right'. These words may be called evaluative. Almost all the writers on this topic have characterized

13. Tomas, Vincent : "Ethical Disagreements and the Emotive Theory of Value", *Mind*, 1951, p.205.

14. Op. cit., Ch. 1.

15. Urmson, J.O. : "On Grading", *Mind*, 1950.

'ought' as prescriptive. But I think that the complete meaning of 'ought' is not exhausted by calling it prescriptive. As 'ought' has its own separate individuality, I prefer to call it simply 'obligative', and it is the purpose of this part of our study to formulate a theory of the obligative language. Thus, within the moral discourse can be distinguished at least two realms, the evaluative, using the words 'good' and 'right', and the obligative, commonly called the prescriptive, using the word 'obligation' or 'ought'. It is logically conceivable, therefore, that what holds goods of the one need not necessarily hold good of the other. Hence the importance of the distinction between moral language in general and the language of moral obligation in particular. To accept the distinction between 'good', 'right' and 'ought' is not, however, to reject their intimate interrelation. May be, that they are even interdependent. What kind of inter relation or inter dependence exists among them can not be exactly stated unless and until all the three concepts are thoroughly discussed.

Thus, the language of moral obligation is only a part of moral language in general and therefore, has only a limited scope. The concept of moral obligation is certainly very important, as it brings out clearly the practical nature of moral life, experience and discourse. None the less, being only a part, it does not exhaust the whole of moral life and discourse. The same applies to its language. The difference between our theory and other theories will be precisely this : while ours will be a particular theory of the language of moral obligation, other theories like prescriptivism, emotivism, etc. are general ones of moral language as such, without distinguishing between the languages of 'good', 'right' and 'obligatory' so to say. The concepts being different their languages are bound to be so, though, not without intimate interrelations or mutual implications. This study, while describing the nature and function of the language of moral obligation, will, I hope, throw some light on the nature of other moral concepts like 'goods', 'right', 'virtue' etc. and bring out also the complex nature of the structure of moral language and the variety of its referents.

3. Nature and Function of Linguistic Analysis

A few words regarding the nature, importance and also limitation of the analytical approach in Ethics will be in order. 'Linguistic Analysis' seems to be the watchword of recent philosophical writings. Accordingly, a large bulk of

ethical writings is devoted to the analysis of ethical terms, sentences, arguments and so on. What is aimed at in this pursuit of the analysis of languages is 'clarification of concepts',¹⁶ and the explanation of how a language operates within the context which includes its referent and its users. It tries to tell us what sentences mean in their contexts.¹⁷ As Stevenson says, "its first object is to clarify the meaning of the ethical terms."¹⁸ A linguistic analyst, tries to distinguish the language he studies from other languages. He further clarifies the internal distinctions and determines the logic of its behaviour assigning it its proper function. In fact these writers consider this to be the sole task of Ethics. Hare, for example says, "Ethics, as I conceive it, is the logical study of the language of moral."¹⁹

The aim of this kind of study is purely theoretical. It has received the significant name of 'meta-ethics' as distinct from 'normative ethics', which provides 'object language' for the former. Stevenson calls it 'analytical' ethics.²⁰ Its purpose is not to provide moral guides to conduct; its subject matter is the whole 'universe', of moral discourse, concerning which it asks 'three sorts of questions: questions about meaning, questions about truth, and questions about method.'²¹ As such, logically, meta-ethics precedes normative ethics, because normative ethics presupposes definite answers to these questions, but does explicitly deal with them.

But, not all writers are in favour of a sharp distinction between meta-ethics and normative ethics, leave aside the reduction of moral philosophy to meta ethics. We need not enter the controversy on this issue. And yet, we must have a clear notion of the nature and status of linguistic Analysis constituting meta-ethics. Gewirth devotes a full article to this problem. Meta-ethics according to him," consists in logical analysis of the meanings of ethical predicates and of the methods of supporting the judgements.²² After discussing the pros and

16. Moore, Willis : "The Language of Values' in Leply (ed) *Language of Value*, p. 9.

17. Wellman : Op. cit., p.2

18. Stevenson, C.L. : *Ethics and Language*, p.1

19. Hare : Op. Cit., Preface, P.V.

20. Stevenson, C.L.; *Facts and Values*, Preface, p. VIII

21. Taylor, P.W. (ed): Op.cit, introduction, XIV.

22. Gewirth A. : "Meta-ethics and Normative ethics". *Mind*, 1960, p. 187.

cons of the problem of relation between the two, he concludes that there are some important situations in which, and points of view from which, the tasks of normative ethics and meta-ethics are not distinguishable.²³ As Blanshard²⁴ says, it is not true to say that meta ethics has no ethical implications and may be discussed in a logical vacuum, antiseptic to moral commitments.

Adams²⁵ holds the same view but for a reason of his own. For him, it is misleading to hold, as Brandt²⁶ and Hospers²⁷ have done, that normative ethics and meta-ethics are two distinct divisions of the same subject. According to Adams, they are not distinct branches having different subject matters. "The difference lies in method and style rather than subject matter."²⁸ He has endeavoured to show that the classical moral principles can be translated into meta-ethical theories.²⁹

The identification of philosophy with linguistic analysis as suggested by the 'left wing' logical positivists, to use Copleston's phrase, is subjected to still sever criticism by certain writers. This criticism mainly points out the glaring drawback and limitations of the one-sided approach of linguistic analysis which is only a useful method and nothing more. Blanshard³⁰ in a mild way and A. Laxman Rao³¹ in a more aggressive way do the same.

So far as the nature and function of Linguistic Analysis is concerned, we can say that, it is a methodology developed into a science in its own right.³² Its

23. Ibid, p. 205.

24. Blanshard, Brand : *Reason and Goodness*, p. 263.

25. Adams, E.M.: *Classical Moral Philosophy and Meta-ethics*, Ethics (1963-1964), p. 97.

26. *Ethical Theory*.

27. *Human Conduct*.

28. Ibid, p. 97

29. Ibid, p. 99.

30. Op. cit, pp. 262-265.

31. "Metaphysics and Linguistic Analysis", *Philosophical Quarterly* (1958)

32. Rickman, H.P. : "Linguistic Analysis is distinct from the sociology or psychology of communication. It has its distinct subject matter which is the meaning of language and its distinct method which is analysis and not social survey. (Linguistic Analysis and Moral Statements: *Philosophy*, 1954, p. 124.).

function is to study the logic of a language including terms sentences and arguments, with a view to clarify definite meanings in the various contexts and to enable us to understand how language assumes different logical structures and behaves according to the various purposes it is made to serve.

4. Importance and Limitations of Linguistic Analysis

As said earlier, linguistic analysis aims at 'Clarification of concepts', which is indispensable to any study whatsoever. Man is what he is because of language. Life is meaningful because of language as, "the meaning of life can neither be apprehended nor expressed except in language of some kind"³³ In very real sense the limits of my language well made. Language is the only articulate medium through which experiences and thoughts are verbally, symbolically communicated to others. Words are verbal symbols meant to express more basic non-verbal experiences, moral experiences among them. To understand clearly the experiences behind the symbols, it is inevitable that the symbols themselves must be clear enough; otherwise they may lead us astray in our understanding of them. Of course, the confused meaning is not the result of bad choice of symbols alone; may be that the experience itself is confused. But here also we expect a symbol to state faithfully what it represents or expresses. What I want to say is that a thorough analysis of the language in which the concept which we want to study is expressed, is inevitable for the proper understanding of the concept itself, and of the basic experience it expresses. Linguistic analysis, therefore, is a very important³⁴, nay, indispensable instrument for understanding the concept especially so far as its linguistic expression is concerned. We cannot, without harming the clarity and completeness of knowledge, entirely do away with 'linguistic analysis'. We may or may not like it; but it will not be wise to disregard the advantage this 'new approach' offers. Our philosophical discussion will remain incomplete without it. It should also be noted, in this connection, that only the exclusive emphasis on linguistic analysis is new, not the basic approach itself. 'Clarification of concepts' has been one of the main tasks of philosophers right from Socrates.

33. Urban : Op. cit, p. 21.

34. Wellman : Op. Cit., Introduction, sec. 3.

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What is generally objected to and rightly, I think is precisely the exclusive emphasis on it. The methodological importance of this approach is accepted even by those who severely criticize it. But they accept it only as a means to the understanding of reality which is the end. Indian thinkers also have done the same thing.³⁵

Even after granting the importance or even indispensability of linguistic analysis for the understanding of a concept, that of moral obligation, in the present case, we have also to be aware of its limitation to yield a thorough and complete knowledge by itself. We have to remember that linguistic analysis is not the only and sufficient instrument of complete knowledge. Even on the basis of the general theory of language that we outlined before, it cannot be its own end. Since language refers to reality and is only an instrument of communication about it, the aim of any study-even that of language, can only be the 'knowledge of reality.' 'Study of language' can be only a part of the means to it. Taken with its complementary means it is certainly a force; but taken by itself it suffers from serious limitations which we shall now consider briefly.

Though it is true that philosophy involves linguistic analysis, it is not true that all philosophical problems are only problems of language, a claim put forth by the linguistic analysis. We have to accept what Hall³⁶ calls 'lingua-centric predicament' in so far as our thoughts are fundamentally connected with the forms of language. But that does not mean that philosophy is only the logic of language. The most serious difficulty in the study of language is that of infinite regress. Any language can be an object language requiring a higher order meta-language and this may continue *ad infinitum*. On the other hand, if we want to avoid mere verbiage and go deep into reality, we have to admit that analysis of 'language' alone cannot yield reality since it is apt to deceive us in many ways. As Blanshard points out, the actual usage of words, if taken as guide, may prove to be "inadequate, erroneous and contradictory."³⁷ Further,

35. A. Lakshmana Rao : *Metaphysics and Linguistic Analysis*". *Philosophical Quarterly*. (1958) p. 259, 262, 264.

36. *What is Value?*

37. *Reason and Goodness*, p. 264.

"in conceptual analysis language must follow the distinctions of thought, not thought the set of labels that language happens to provide."³⁸

The limitation from which any linguistic analysis suffers may be seen to be three-fold. Firstly, though the moral experiences can be said to be universal, the many particular human languages in which they are stated may use different symbols emphasizing different shades of those experiences; and therefore, the study of any one such language may not give us the entire moral experience. It is in this situation that Ladd's³⁹ suggestion that a cross-cultural study of ethical utterances is necessary, becomes significant. Secondly, a language may fall short of completely adequate expression of the experience which it is meant to express. It may be unable to express certain elements in the moral experience which are very important. In other words, the reality, moral experience in the present case, may not be completely exhausted by its linguistic expression. This we may call its limitation of omission. And thirdly, a language may give us a distorted picture of the original experience and mislead us in what it expresses. This is its limitation of 'commission'.

5. The Problem and the Plan of Treatment

Further, as Rickman says, if linguistic analysis is piecemeal, it become discursive and collection of trivial anecdotes and confuses linguistic, psychological and sociological reflections. Therefore, he says, "What is required is a positive and systematic approach squarely placed within the frame work of a general theory of language as an instrument for the expression of meaning."⁴⁰

Again, while carrying on linguistic analysis, we must avoid the confusion between the purposes of people using language and the function of statements. For example, such confusion can be seen in Stevenson's definition of meaning as "the disposition of a sign to evoke certain sorts of psychological responses."⁴¹ It is also necessary to separated the references in the first and the third persons, that is, agent and assessor, as Hems points out. He thinks that this confusion

38. Loc. cit.

39. *The Structure of a Moral Code*, p. 31

40. Rickman Op. cit, p. 122.

41. Paraphased by Moore, *Mind*, 51.

has created many problems like 'subjective and objective right' in the deontologists, 'confusion of factual and propositional references in the analysts, 'feeling of ought and ought' in Hare and so on. As he says, "We cannot regard ourselves at once and the same time as assessor and agent in respect of one and the same action."⁴² The reflection which is required in order to distinguish between assessor and agent must also be invoked if we are to distinguish between analyst and proposer. Only thus are we enabled to keep our references clear and consistent, be they propositional or factual.

The upshot of the above discussion is that the approach and methodology of linguistic analysis is certainly essential to any thorough study, but it has also its limitation. Bearing this limitation in mind, we have to attempt an analysis of the language of moral obligation for what it is worth and for what light it throws on the nature of the concept of moral obligation. Before I conclude, I have to state that this study of the language of moral obligation assumes, as Willis Moore does, "the actuality of a value situation that is both chronologically prior to and logically independent of the use of language of any kind."⁴³

42. Hems J.M. : "Reflecting on Morals", *Philosophy' Mind*, 1956, p. 99 and 110

43. Moore, Willis : Op. cit. p. 9.