

## USE THEORY OF MEANING IN *TRACTATUS*

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Wittgensteinians have been debating for quite sometimes now on whether there exists a serious divide between Wittgenstein's early and later works; his writings would be understood better by highlighting the differences in approach and understanding of the nature and functioning of language or seeing the thematic continuation in it. In this paper, we would discuss in detail the major debates between the classical Wittgensteinians such as Ramsey, Anscombe, David Pears, Peter Hacker and Peter Geach, etc. and the new Wittgensteinians represented by Cora Diamond, James Conant, Juliet Floyd, Alice Crary, Michael Kremer and Rupert Read, etc.

### **Reading Wittgenstein:**

Broadly speaking, there are two popular readings of Wittgenstein: anti-metaphysical or logical positivist reading and metaphysical reading. Positivists like Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, A. J. Ayer are influenced by Wittgenstein's early works where the method of logical analysis seems to give a perspicuous understanding of meaningful proposition. They kept picture theory of meaning at the center to propose verification principle. For them, what cannot be verified is just nonsense. Hence, metaphysics is rejected as nonsense. Being highly scientific in their temperament positivists found it irrelevant to recognize Wittgenstein's metaphysical or transcendental vision of reality.

On the contrary, the metaphysical reading claims that most of Wittgenstein's writings would remain unintelligible without understanding his transcendental vision of reality. Wittgenstein never rejects metaphysics as nonsense as understood by logical positivists. What cannot be expressed by the sense of a proposition is not necessarily incommunicable or imperceptible. Propositions of ethics and aesthetics are nonsensical in the sense that they belong to the realm of metaphysics which is ineffable.

These broad categorizations would not be of any help to define the variant interpretations of Wittgenstein proposed in the last two decades. In fact, the recent renewal of the debate has almost exclusively been concerned with variants of *ineffabilist* (metaphysical) readings of *Tractatus* as advanced by Elizabeth Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and H.O. Mounce and the recently advanced variants of *therapeutic*

(*resolute*) readings advocated by Cora Diamond, James Conant, Juliet Floyd, Alice Crary, Michael Kremer and Rupert Read. The ineffabilist reading argues that role of nonsense in the *Tractatus* is to make us grasp the ineffable truth which strictly speaking cannot be said significantly in accordance with the rules of logical syntax. Contrary to it, the therapeutic reading emphasizes the incomprehensibility of the idea of ineffable truth. Nonsense does not seek to convey the ineffable truth rather nonsense simply means to have no sense. The task of philosophy gets limited to cure us from the temptation to put forward philosophical doctrines or theories by showing that how such attempts lead to nonsense.

There are also interpreters who differ from the *ineffabilist* as well as the *therapeutic* readings of Wittgenstein, particularly of *Tractatus*. The most prominent among them are Daniel D. Hutto and Marie McGinn. Their interpretations have been labeled as *elucidatory* or *clarificatory* reading. They attempt to resolve the paradox faced by the other two readings. They are in agreement with the therapeutic or resolute readers that there are no ineffable truths about reality. But also they avoid reducing *Tractatus* as a work of post-modernist irony. They believe that Wittgenstein's remark achieve a certain order in the reader's perception of language and accomplish something important before they fall away.

After the publication of *Philosophical Investigations* it was believed by many commentators that Wittgenstein's early works particularly *Tractatus* has lost its philosophical relevance. These claims were mooted by his apparent rejection of *Tractatus* in *Philosophical Investigations* where he writes in the preface: "I should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking. ...I have been forced to recognise grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book" (*PI*, Preface). He acknowledges the help he received from the criticisms of his ideas by Frank Ramsey and P. Sraffa who made him to realise "these mistakes." It gave an impression that Wittgenstein in his later writings has made a shift in his position on nature of philosophy and language.

However, recent resurgence of writings on *Tractatus*<sup>1</sup> clearly indicates that it has not at all lost its relevance among the Wittgensteinians. It is evident in the publications on Wittgenstein in the past two decades which are mostly on Tractarian themes than on his later writings. Even the variant readings of Wittgenstein, as discussed above, are based on reading *Tractatus* in different lights. The philosophical insights of *Tractatus* have been found useful to develop understanding on philosophical method, nature of language and logic, ethics, aesthetics and religion. The book cannot be dismissed and remains one of the most profound and rigorous works in philosophy. Wittgenstein himself later remarked to Elizabeth Anscombe that the *Tractatus* is not *all* wrong; it is not like a bag of junk professing to be a clock, but like a clock that does not tell the right time (Anscombe 1971: 78). Recent writers have recognised that the seeds of Wittgenstein's later thoughts are already contained in the *Tractatus*. It is imperative to read his later writings in the light of his earlier ones.

Wittgenstein's early work namely *Tractatus* cannot be overlooked at all also for the reason that ideas developed on philosophy, language, ethics and religion kept reflecting even in his later writings. He remained captive of those ideas throughout his life (Chandra 2002: 88). Cyril Barrett also writes, "the picture theory of propositions is preserved in *Philosophical Investigations* and its implications developed, but within the new context of logical grammar" (Barrett 1991: 125). It would not be appropriate to see his later works as against his early position in philosophy. Though he seemed to have moved from his old way of thinking but he could never come out of it completely. His later writings are more of filling the gaps he left in his earlier writings. In other words, in his later writings Wittgenstein is justifying his old thoughts in a new fashion (Chandra 2002: 84). When a comparison is made between the early and later writings of Wittgenstein, one is tempted to highlight the differences in the approach and understanding of the nature and

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the major works are: Alice Crary, and Read Rupert (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000). Daniel D. Hutto, *Wittgenstein and the End of Philosophy: Neither Theory nor Therapy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and The Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991). P.M.S. Hacker "Wittgenstein, Carnap and The New American Wittgensteinians" (*The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 210, 2003). Cora Diamond, "Logical Syntax in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", (*The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 218, 2005).

functioning of the language. There have been debates for more than two decades now between the classical Wittgensteinians and new Wittgensteinians on these issues.

### **Debating the Divide:**

Classical Wittgensteinians have been finding the divide between Wittgenstein's early and later works quite significant for understanding his writings. The nature and the limits of language in *Tractatus* are determined by the syntactical structure of language, which is *a priori*. Hacker writes;

The *Tractatus* purported to give an account of the essential nature of the world, thought and language while arguing that *stricto sensu* this endeavour transgresses the bounds of sense in trying to say something which is and must be shown by any symbolism, but cannot said. This account being definitive, the sole role for future philosophy is analysis (Hacker 2001: 330).

A rigid logical structure draws a strict boundary between propositions with sense and nonsensical propositions. However, in his later writings use of words and context get the center stage in determining the meaning. The 'form of life' comes to replace the 'logical form' in carrying out the meaning of propositions in everyday language. There is no rigid syntactical structure rather the distinction between the propositions is made based on the criteria of 'use', 'practice', 'purpose', etc. The *a priori* logical structure of language in the *Tractatus* gets replaced in later writings by the *a posteriori* method of assigning meaning by looking into the working of language. This shift, for classical Wittgensteinians defines the divide between the early and the later Wittgenstein.

Philosophy no longer strives to disclose the logical structure of the world, the objective language-independent essence of all things, for there is no such thing. Consequently the *de facto* practice of philosophy in the *Tractatus* is rejected. Its *de jure* prescription, however, contained much truth, though 'seen through a glass darkly'. ... Philosophy is an activity of conceptual clarification, although the conception of clarification has shifted dramatically away from the *Tractatus* paradigm of logical analysis (Hacker 2001: 332-333).

In the later works, Tractarian logical analysis seems to have failed to unfold the intricacy in the functioning of language. Philosophy is seen as purely descriptive in nature and its role is to describe the working of our language. To resolve the philosophical problems we are required to rearrange what we already know, that is, the rules for the use of words. The task of philosophy is now to give a clear view of our entanglement in the rules of the use of words.

In classical Wittgensteinians term the move is from essentialism of *Tractatus* to pluralism of *Philosophical Investigations*. In the *Tractatus*, language is used in a very narrow sense whereas in his later writing, language is conceived as dynamic and is related to multiple activities and usages. This multiplicity of different uses of language-games was missed out in Wittgenstein's early writing. *Tractarian* proposal of a pictorial relation between language and the world was found to be limited in its scope to explain the functioning of language. Wittgenstein's later writings break away from such rigid representation. Now language is seen as a series of games that is played out, each with its own rules. Meaning of a word is in its use in language. A word does not have an underlying essence or unitary meaning. It may have different meanings depending on the difference in the context of its use.

New Wittgensteinians reject this sharp distinction made between the early and later works of Wittgenstein. On the contrary, they emphasize more on the continuation in Wittgenstein's entire works. The very central notion of *Philosophical Investigations*, 'meaning as use' implicitly originates from his early writings. They argue that the problems Wittgenstein is concerned with are same in both of his writings. His position on the exploration of the nature and function of language remains the same. Philosophy is seen as an activity (*TLP*#4.112, *PI*§23). It is an activity of clarification of the working of language.

### **Classical Wittgensteinians interpretation of 'meaning':**

The Classical interpretation emphasizes more on logical syntax in *Tractatus*. For them, it is the set of rules which determines whether a proposition fulfills the representational relationship with the reality that it depicts or not. Legitimacy of a proposition depends upon the fulfillment of these rules. "What a proposition expresses, it expresses in a determinate manner, which can be set out clearly: a proposition is articulate" (*TLP*#3.251). Syntactical rules determine the sense of a proposition. Max Black also holds that "if a proposition is to make sense then the syntactical employment of each of its parts must be settled in advance" (Black 1964: 134). To identify a proposition with sense is to understand the syntactical rules it must follow in arranging its components. That is, all legitimate propositions are articulated and have sense. This interpretation would be very close to Fregean view of sense. Both, Black and Frege give emphasis on the well formed logical structure of

the proposition. A proposition which fulfills the syntactical rules would only be categorized as legitimate and will have sense. Hacker goes a step further by proposing that a proposition shares an internal relation with reality. In a picturing relation both proposition and reality share a common logical form.

Over emphasis on logical structure of language makes Classical Wittgensteinians' position more deterministic in defining the sense of a proposition. Language functioning in such deterministic way would not permit for introducing newer uses of signs in a proposition. The usages of signs in a proposition are determined by the previously established rules. Hacker interprets that a sign wouldn't be permitted to be used as a completely different symbol in a different mode of significance (Hacker 2003: 1-5). Meaning consists of a representational relationship between name and object. "In a proposition a name is the representative of an object" (*TLP*#3.22). Therefore, meaning of a word is seen as fixed and determined because it is set by the rules of logical syntax. In order to have a proposition with sense, the use of words must be covered by the previously established rules. Otherwise, no meaning would be assigned to those words and thereby, the proposition ceases to have sense. This implies that a sign has a determinate use set by the rules of logical syntax. So, Hacker argues that a proposition becomes nonsense if it violates the rules of logical syntax. For him, nonsense arises out of the illegitimate combination of meaningful words i.e. when the combination is contrary to the rules of logical syntax (Hacker 2003: 9). This way, language seems to be functioning as a machine whose operation is decided prior to its application.

#### **New Wittgensteinians interpretation of 'meaning':**

Contrary to the Classical Wittgensteinians' reading of *Tractatus*, New Wittgensteinians hold that meaning of a word in a sentence can be understood in relation to the context of its employment. Language is conceived as a tool which can be used for various purposes depending on the situations. Operation of linguistic expressions is not decided prior to its application; its operation keeps on changing in accordance with the usages or applications. New Wittgensteinians are right in believing that the sense of a proposition emerges out of using the signs in everyday practices and not merely from the logico-syntactical rules. Wittgenstein makes it clear how a sign is associated with the sense of a proposition, "In order to recognize a

symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense” (*TLP*#3.326). A sign has no meaning unless it is syntactically employed. So a symbol is a sign together with its meaning in a particular context. The actual use of a sign is what makes it into a symbol and determines its ‘mode of significance.’ The notion of use concerned in 3.326 is closer to Wittgenstein’s later writings. It is the use which determines the meaning of signs and sense of a proposition. Therefore, sense of an expression is closely associated with its context.

New Wittgensteinians, in their reading of *Tractatus* give primacy to use of a word in determining its meaning. Logical syntax cannot alone provide the meaning of a sign; it is its use in an expression in which a sign symbolizes its meaning. “In logical syntax the meaning of a sign should never play a role. It must be possible to establish logical syntax without mentioning the *meaning* of a sign: *only* the description of expressions may be presupposed” (*TLP*#3.33). Logical syntax is seen only as a necessary rule which gives legitimacy to a well formed proposition. The rules of logical syntax are not sufficient to determine whether a proposition is meaningful or not. It is a set of rules which governs the arrangement of signs in a sentence but does not regulate the way a sign is used.

Logico-syntactical rules define the correlation of names in a sentence and objects in a state of affairs but they cannot decide how such correlation would be in a particular mode of significance. The logico-syntactic employment of a sign determines a form but it does not determine content (Diamond 2006: 158-159). A sign, as a name in a propositional structure or form, may stand for an object in a state of affairs but that alone does not determine its meaning. In everyday language a sign is used in various contexts giving rise to different meanings. The meaning assigned to a sign is drawn from the language in its everyday practice.

New Wittgensteinians claim that the origin of the notion of meaning as use is implicitly found in the *Tractatus* at #3.326 which claims that in order to know the symbol by its sign, we must look at its use in a sentence (Diamond 2005: 79-81). This gets reiterated more explicitly in Wittgenstein’s later writings: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (*PI*§43). Wittgenstein suggests for asking not the meaning of a word rather how it is used in a particular context. He has already been saying this in *Tractatus*: if a legitimately constructed proposition has no sense, “it can

only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents” (TLP#5.4733). New Wittgensteinians take propositions #5.473 and 5.4733 more seriously to make their point. For them, a nonsensical proposition is not the result of the illegitimate combination of symbols i.e. contrary to the rules of logical syntax. In such cases we fail to give meaning to the propositional symbols in the given context.

The proposition ‘Socrates is identical’ is *nonsensical* because we have failed in giving any adjectival meaning to the word ‘identical’ in this case (TLP#5.4733). Nonsensicality does not arise due to the illegitimate combinations of symbols i.e. for being contrary to the rules of logical syntax. Diamond points out that “if one reads 5.4733 in that way, it follows that Wittgenstein held that there is no such thing as a sentence which is nonsensical in virtue of use of the signs in it in ways which are excluded, because no ways of using signs are excluded” (Diamond 2005: 89). So meaning of a word in a sentence is not only understood in relation to the context of its use but the context of its use also creates the meaning of a word. The combination of words in the proposition ‘Socrates is identical’ is not illegitimate but it is only that the other newer uses for the word ‘identical’ has not been arrived at. Thus, it is not correct to say the word ‘identical’ has only a fixed use as a relational term and further use of that word wouldn’t be permitted within the purview of the rules of language.

According to Diamond, Conant believes that these propositions like ‘Socrates is identical’ ‘A is an object’, ‘Red is a colour’, etc., wouldn’t be nonsensical from such combinations of signs being violation of the rules of logical syntax. Conant considers the nonsensicality of such combinations to arise only “from the presence in them of a sign or signs which have no meaning in the particular sort of context” (Diamond 2005: 84-85). Conant’s emphasis on the context of a word gives primacy in incorporating the change in meaning of a word in different propositional functions. So explaining the meaning of a word would simply be explaining its contextual use. Given this, we would then also characterize the meaning of a word as its use in a given context. A word can be identified with its meaning when it is used in a sentence in a particular context. That is to say, the use of a word in the language is its meaning. In this way, a proposition is nonsense when we have not given appropriate meaning to some of its constituents in a given context.

*Anything* that is nonsense is so merely because some determination of meaning has *not* been made; it is not nonsense as a logical result of

determinations that *have* been made. - - - There is no ‘positive’ nonsense, no such thing as nonsense that is nonsense on account of what it would have to mean, given the meanings already fixed for the terms it contains (Diamond 1991: 106-107).

*Tractatus* #5.4733 resonates in *Philosophical Investigations* §500 where Wittgenstein writes, “a sentence is called meaningless when a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.” This implies that no meaning can be assigned to a word without knowing the context of its use. If the word or sign is useless, it is meaningless (*TLP*#3.328). We can always find a context of use in which the words would be doing something under such circumstances (Conant 1998: 241). Meaning of a word is drawn from the context of its use, that is, its employment in a propositional context. If a word and the context where it is employed do not fit together it would lead to nonsensicality. The proposition would become incompatible with the context of its use. A proposition is nonsense because of an *incompatibility* between the *Satz* and the context of use; the *Satz* and the context do not *fit* together, they disagree (Conant 1998: 223). Emphasis on everyday linguistic practices makes New Wittgensteinians’ position more open in determining the sense of a proposition. Language functioning in such flexible way would permit for introducing newer possibilities of using signs in a proposition. So the idea, ‘meaning of a word is its use in the language’ gets reiterated and extended in Wittgenstein’s later writings and becomes central to it. Highlighting such notion of meaning in all his writings, New Wittgensteinians see a clear continuation in Wittgenstein’s early and later works.

From the above discussion, we conclude that Wittgenstein’s later works can be understood well only in the light of his early works. In his entire writings, language is seen as an activity – our way of living; describing the language means describing our life and activities. For new Wittgensteinians, over emphasis on the representational relationship between language and the world as *a priori* logical structure would not help in developing a better understanding of the nature and functioning of the language. For them, the relation between language and the world reveals itself in the description of the functioning of working of language. Their emphasis is more on Wittgenstein’s aim to bring philosophy closer to everyday life. This way philosophy, as an activity, is brought closer to human way of life as

represented in language. Language is seen as an autonomous entity and is dynamic and vibrant. It is capable of representing the life in its entirety.

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