

## Language – Logical Positivism to the later Wittgenstein

[Rough notes for students, for personal use only, not for reproduction.]

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) suggested that philosophical problems would be solved if the language people used was more precise, and limited to statements for which there could be evidence. In the opening statement of *Tractatus* (1921), he identifies the world with the sum of true propositions: 'The world is all that is the case.', but he has to acknowledge that there are therefore certain things of which one cannot speak. One of these is the subject self ('The subject does not belong to the world; rather it is a limit of the world.') another is the mystical sense of the world as a whole. Whatever cannot be shown to correspond to some observable reality, cannot be meaningfully spoken about. Wittgenstein's early approach to language presented it as a precise but narrowly defined tool for describing the phenomenal world.

His ideas were taken up by the 'Vienna Circle', a group of philosophers who met in that city during the 1920s and 30s. The approach they took is generally known as **Logical Positivism**. Broadly, it claims that:

- Metaphysics and theology are literally 'meaningless' - since they are neither matters of logic (and therefore true by definition - *a priori*) nor provable by empirical evidence.
- Analytic propositions tell us nothing about the world. They are true by definition, and therefore tautologies. They include the statements of logic and mathematics.
- Synthetic propositions are dependent upon evidence. Therefore there can be no necessary synthetic propositions.

Maurice Schlick, argued that **the meaning of a statement is its method of verification**. This became known as the 'verification principle'.

Logical Positivism was promoted by the British philosopher A J Ayer (1910-1989). In *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), he asks 'What can philosophy do?' His answer is that it certainly cannot tell us the nature of reality as such; for that, we have to rely upon the evidence of our senses. Philosophy cannot actually give new information about anything, but its task is analysis and clarification.

Ayer set out two forms of what can be called the verification principle. They are:

1. (a strong form) 'a proposition is said to be verifiable in the strong sense if the term, if and only if its truth could be conclusively established in experience.'
2. (a weaker form) 'if it is possible for experience to render it probable' or 'some possible sense experience would be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood.'

Other statements can have meaning, but Ayer is concerned with statements which have '**factual meaning**' - in other words, if experience is not relevant to the truth or falsity of a statement, then that statement does not have factual meaning.

By the 1930's Wittgenstein (who, in the earlier phase of his work had espoused this radically reductionist approach to language) broadened his view, and accepted that language could take on different functions, of which straight description of phenomena was only one.

In his later work, Wittgenstein recognised that expressing values and emotions, giving orders and making requests, were all valid uses of language.

**His key idea for the later period: that the meaning of language is found in its use.**

Just as there are many different activities that are all called 'games', although they have little physically in common with one another, so there were all different 'language games'. In other words, language was no longer just 'picturing' reality, but found its meaning in its many different uses to which it was put.

To know the meaning of a statement, you have to see it in its context and understand what it is intended to achieve.

The Logical Positivists had hoped to find a way of making language simple, transparent and 'scientific'. They could only do that by restricting its valid use.

But language cannot be simple or transparent, because:

- People (hopefully) think before they speak
- They may also perceive before they think

**Therefore**

What they say reflects the nature of thought and of perception

- Language is therefore only as simple and straightforward as the thought and perception that produced it

**Add** intuition, emotion, existential angst and the general confusions of human life, and the resulting language is very complex indeed.

- It may perform many different functions
- It may play many different games
- We may not even be aware of the implications of what we are saying, which is to return to Plato, who in his dialogues portrays Socrates as a man who is constantly asking people what they mean, and thereby exposing their confusions and opening up the way to greater clarity.

Without language we cannot have metaphysics or epistemology: indeed, we cannot have philosophy, civilisation, culture or other distinctively human features of life.

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