

WITTGENSTEIN ON MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING Wittgenstein's Undoing of Psychologism

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Abstract. Various schools in philosophy have assumed that meaning of linguistic expressions consists of being conscious of internal states or processes. This view may be called psychologism of meaning. Wittgenstein considers this to be a mistaken view which is due to a false conception of language according to which language is embedded in a fixed structure. Wittgenstein rejects this view and thus does away with Psychologism of meaning. Language, for Wittgenstein, is embedded in human ways of living (and acting). The philosophical conception of meaning, therefore, is ultimately linked with 'doing' (human actions) and not with objects, states or processes etc. Failure to understand this leads to psychologism of meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein has shown that the grammar of 'meaning and understanding' is different from that of 'mental states and processes (including non-conscious processes)' and, for this reason; they belong to two different conceptual realms.

Since Kant, rejection of psychologism — the view that reduces language, logic and knowledge to psychology — has been a continuous theme in the history of Western Philosophy. As observed by Cavell, 'Kant undid Hume's psychologizing of knowledge, Frege (and Husserl) undid psychologizing of logic, Wittgenstein in the Investigations tried to undo the psychologizing of psychology.' (Wittgenstein's treatment of

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private language may be seen as a core device in his undoing of the psychologizing of psychology.) Psychologism of meaning has a long tradition. Various schools in philosophy have assumed that meaning of linguistic expressions consists of being conscious of internal states or processes. Wittgenstein has severely criticized this view (in his writings which may conveniently be classified as his later philosophy). The following discussion will attempt to show how Wittgenstein dismisses psychologism of meaning.

Meaning and Its Correlates

Wittgenstein is of the view that ‘meaning’, ‘explanation of meaning’ and ‘understanding’ are interrelated concepts. The relation that holds among them is expressed in the following words: ‘Meaning is the content of understanding and understanding is the correlate of explanation.’¹ (PG 45, 60) A discussion of these interrelated concepts is imperative in dispensing with the false conception language. It will also throw light on relation between misconceived view of language and Psychologism. Let us begin with a brief discussion of these interrelated concepts.

Explanation of Meaning

Wittgenstein writes:

“The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning.” *i.e.*, if you want to understand the use of the word “meaning”, look for what are called “explanations of meaning”. (PI 560)

This might seem to suggest that Wittgenstein is committing *petitio principii*. It would become clearer as this study progresses that Wittgenstein links meaning with ‘doing’ and it is this relationship that he seems to assume here. The relevant question here is ‘what does “explanation of meaning” [or explanation] consist in?’ For Wittgenstein, all explanations take place within some context (conceptual scheme, frame work of language or form of life). There is no rational justification, for him, for this context. Every question beginning with a ‘why’ must ultimately reach a point where things have to be accepted as such. Such a point would consist of a description of how a thing is done. In the

jargon of Wittgenstein, this would involve a description of a language-game in which regularity in actions is linked with constancy in meaning. Thus, for Wittgenstein, every 'why' question, in being answered, would ultimately lead us to a description of a proto-phenomenon (how a particular language-game is played). So, 'explanation' in the final analysis 'comes to an end'. This point is discussed in one of Wittgenstein's posthumously published works called *Zettel*. Writes Wittgenstein:

"Why do you demand explanations? If they are given you, you will once more be facing a terminus. They cannot get you any further than you are at present."
(Z 315)

Here we come up against a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation; The difficulty — I might say — is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. "We have already said everything. — Not anything that follows from this, no, *this* itself is the solution."

This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. The difficulty here is: to stop. (Z 314)

The very request for an explanation brings to light the fact that explanations must consist in something publicly accessible. When the explanation reaches a terminus, or as Wittgenstein calls 'comes to an end', there lies the action, a form of life or the language-game being played and this is publically accessible. It goes without saying that explanation serves its purpose only when there is an agreement in action. The subjective or psychological aspects have no bearing here. Explanation rests on a description of how 'language-game' is played. The rules of language-game constitute "grammar". So far we have been discussing the nature of explanation in general. 'Explanation of meaning' falls under it. 'Explanation of meaning', therefore, would necessarily involve grammar-description of language-game involved. As Peter

Hacker clarifies; ‘Grammar encompasses all rules for the use of words, and *all explanations of meaning*, including ostensive definitions, belong to grammar.’²

As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein’s notion of language-game is linked with regularity in human action and it is this to which we finally return in seeking explanations. The connection between ‘doing’ and ‘meaning’ constitutes language (language-games) which is brought to light, Wittgenstein thinks, in explanation (of meaning). He says:

Any explanation has its foundation in training.
(Educators ought to remember this.) (Z 419)

Again, he says:

To begin by teaching someone “that looks red” makes no sense. For he must say that spontaneously once he has learnt what “red” means, *i.e.* has learnt the technique of using the word. (Z 418)

The connection between ‘doing’ and ‘meaning’ is fully captured by grammar which gives rules of language. Wittgenstein uses the term “grammar” in specialized sense. Traditional grammarians are concerned with the rules required to construct correct sentences in natural languages. When Wittgenstein uses the word, he is interested in meaning – the rules that make it possible for us to understand a language. It is the bed-rock of our language. In order to make clear the difference between traditional grammarians use of grammar and his own, Wittgenstein uses the terms ‘surface grammar’ and ‘depth grammar’. He writes:

In the use of words one might distinguish ‘surface grammar’ from ‘depth grammar’. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence, the part of its use — one might say — that can be taken in by the ear. — And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word “to mean”, with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about. (PI 664)

If one is interested in meaning, or conceptual investigation, one has to look into 'depth grammar' which is embedded in the language-game. The purpose of depth grammar is to describe how a word [or an expression], for example, is used. It does not explain anything as already shown that 'explanation' takes place within some context. It is the task of depth grammar to state what the context is. The sole function of depth grammar is description.

Grammar [depth] does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfill its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs. (PI 496)

The notion of depth grammar [and language-games] makes a radical departure from the view which considers language to be rooted in a fixed structure [ideal language theory]. The rules which grammar describes are not rooted in any thing logical, metaphysical or psychological. These rules are embedded in human ways of living hence are flexible and capable of being modified. They are contingent or arbitrary. Wittgenstein says:

The rules of grammar may be called "arbitrary", if that is to mean that the *aim* of the grammar is nothing but that of the language. (PI 497)

Though arbitrary, the rules of grammar convey complete meaning as there exists a regularity in human actions which could be known by looking at the language-game under discussion. These arbitrary rules of grammar are out there. There is no hidden element to be discovered in future. It is important to note that in the Wittgenstein's conception of language there is 'nothing hidden'. He says:

The wrong conception which I want to object in this connection is the following, that we can hit upon something that we today cannot yet see, that we can *discover* something wholly new. That is a mistake. The truth of the matter is that we have already got everything, and we have got it actually *present*; we need not wait for anything. We make our moves in the realm

of the grammar of our ordinary language, and this grammar is already there. (WWK 183)

Thus, we conclude that grammar [depth], though arbitrary, conveys complete meaning. It is autonomous, not answerable to anything metaphysical/logical/psychological, and is embedded in human actions. It incorporates the rules for correct use of expressions. That is why *all* explanations of word meaning fall into grammar.³ This shows that the philosophical notion of meaning is linked with ‘doing’ and not with ‘things’ – *i.e.* meanings are not to be seen in logical/psychological or metaphysical objects.

Understanding and Meaning

Having made it clear that philosophical notion of meaning is embedded in human actions; we now come to the notion of understanding which is a correlate of meaning. It has been assumed as a truism that ‘understanding is a mental state or experience or process’. Wittgenstein has severely criticized this view. The thesis, which takes ‘understanding’ to be a mental state or experience or process, can be divided into two sub-theses.

- (i) Understanding as a conscious state or process
- (ii) Understanding as a non-conscious mental state or process, *e.g.* brain process

Let us examine the first sub-thesis.

(i) Understanding as a conscious state (experience) or process

Understanding, Wittgenstein holds, is not a state or process. The logic (grammar) of understanding and that of mental states, experiences and processes is totally different. The two belong to two different language-games as their grammar of is different. Their meaning and employment cannot be the same.

For neither the expression “to intend the definition in such-and-such a way” nor the expression “to interpret the definition in such-and-such a way” stands for a process which accompanies the giving and hearing of the definition. (PI 34)

Understanding as a state (experience)

There are certain experiential states which accompany when something is meant or understood. Wittgenstein does not deny this. What he repudiates is the view that meaning and understanding consists in being conscious of these experiential states, *e.g.* the view that meaning consists in being conscious of a picture or an image. (This is central to the empiricist's conception of meaning and understanding). The reason, Wittgenstein argues is that our investigation is logical or conceptual rather than being empirical or psychological. The coming of an image or a picture before one's mind, or being in a certain conscious state, may be psychologically relevant. This has nothing to do with the logical/conceptual status of meaning and understanding.' — For we might also be inclined to express ourselves like this: we are at most under a psychological, not a logical, compulsion. (PI 140)

The intention seems to interpret, to give the final interpretation; which is not a further sign or picture, but something else — the thing that cannot be further interpreted. But what we have reached is a *psychological*, not a logical terminus. (Z 231) (Italics mine)

Again, the image or picture, which accompanies when something is meant or understood, cannot by itself determine that it is to be taken in the same connotation in future as well. However, it is characteristic of conceptual investigation that it must be used in the same connotation in all its occurrences whether in the present, past or future.

What is essential is to see that the same thing can come before our minds when we hear the word and the application still be different. Has it the *same* meaning both times? I think we shall say not. (PI 140)

What comes before one's mind could well be a symptom of understanding? It could in no way be treated as a criterion of understanding without the risk of committing absurdity.

There is a logical gap between 'an image that comes before mind' and 'understanding'. The conceptual maps of the two are different. This could be judged from the fact that temporal

predicates are applied on them differently. Experiences and states of consciousness take place in “time”. So is the case with understanding and meaning. But here the similarities end. States of consciousness continue or stop. They are characterized as strong or weak etc. Such predicates cannot be applied to meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein writes:

Determine how long an impression lasts by means of a stop-watch. The duration of knowledge, ability, understanding, could not be determined in this way. (Z 82)

(a) “Understanding a word”: of a state. But a mental state? — Depression, excitement, pain, are called mental states. Carry out a grammatical investigation as follows:
We say

“He was depressed the whole day.”

“He was in great excitement the whole day.”

“He has been in continuous pain since yesterday.” —

We also say “since yesterday I have understood this word.” “Continuously”, though? — To be sure, one can speak of an interruption of understanding. But in what cases? Compare: “When did your pains get less?” and “When did you stop understanding that word?” (PI p.59)

The general differentiation of all states of consciousness from dispositions seems to me to be that one cannot ascertain by spot-check whether they are still going on. (Z 72)

The occurrence of an experience is neither necessary nor sufficient condition for understanding. Wittgenstein thus rejects the above view.

Understanding as a Process

A process comprises of a sequence of events which are linked together exhibiting both change and unity. Change in successive stages, unity as a whole in the purpose it serves.

Events are internally joined together in a process. A certain sequence of the occurrence of events is necessary in defining a process. Any change in the internal relation will change the process. Again, the sequence of events that constitute a certain process must be independently given. It is only by seeing the sequence of events that we judge whether a certain process is going on or it has stopped, it is fast or slow, etc. The case of understanding is different. Change, unity and the sequence of events are characteristic of processes. They are not, however, characteristic of understanding. It makes perfectly good sense to talk about the sequence of events that constitute a certain process but it is senseless to ask about the sequence of events that allegedly constitute understanding. We say of processes that it is going to finish in ten minutes but not of understanding that it is going to finish in ten minutes. Again, had understanding been a process, the successive stages constituting it must have been independently given. There is no such series of events independently given which constitute understanding. Finally, temporal predicates do not have the same application in the case of understanding as is the case with processes. To say that understanding is going on at a rapid pace is non-sensical whereas to say that a certain process is going on at a rapid pace is perfectly all right. As the application of the two is different, therefore, Wittgenstein concludes that understanding is not a process. He writes:

Try not to think of understanding as a 'mental process' at all. — for *that* is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, "Now I know how to go on," When, that is, the formula *has* occurred to me? —

In the sense in which there are processes (including mental process) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process.

(A pain's growing more and less; the hearing of a tune or a sentence these are mental processes.) (PI 154)

Let us examine the second sub-thesis.

(ii) Understanding as a non-conscious state or process

With the rise of science in the 20th century there is a strong tendency to construe understanding as a non-conscious physical process occurring in brain and nervous system. This means that an increase in our knowledge of chemistry and chemical processes in the brain would further our knowledge of human understanding. Human understanding, it is implied, is nothing more than the sum of processes occurring in the brain. A little thought on the matter will bring to light the fact that understanding is taken here to be causally connected to the physico-chemical processes of the brain. A causal process could be of a great interest but it can never define what understanding is. There is a big gap between causal investigation and conceptual investigation. The former needs empirical data whereas the latter demands grammatical rules or the rules for the use language. Moreover, the empirical data with which a causal investigation is done stands in need of a theory or hypothesis grounded in our conceptual schemes. This means that the grammatical rules or language is a pre-requisite for a conceptual investigation. In other words conceptual investigation is logically prior to empirical/causal investigation. Causal connection, therefore, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for understanding. The following example will help us understand this point.

Let's take the example of a movie we see on screen. We know that the motion pictures we see on the screen are caused by the rotation of motionless pictures at the back. Now this knowledge of causal connection depends on our knowledge of waves and optics. This knowledge constitutes our background. (We know how difficult was it to convince that what we see through telescope is reliable until Kepler formulated the laws of optics.) Again, the crucial point is that in order to appreciate a movie or know the meaning of a feature film one needs not know this causal connection. It belongs to grammar or the 'form of life'. We need not know what process is going on in someone's head in order to appreciate the work of art. Wittgenstein hints to the same in the following remarks in *Zettel*:

No supposition seems to me more natural than that there is no process in the brain correlated with associating or with thinking; so that it would be impossible to read off thought-processes from brain-processes. I mean this: if I talk or write there is, I assume, a system of impulses going out from my brain and correlated with my spoken or written thoughts. But why should the *system* continue further in the direction of the centre? Why should this order not proceed, so to speak, out of chaos? The case would be like the following — certain kinds of plants multiply by seed so that a seed always produces a plant of the same kind as that from which it was produced — but *nothing* in the seed corresponds to the plant which comes from it; so that it is impossible to infer the properties or structure of the plant from those of the seed that comes out of it — this can only be done from the *history* of the seed. So an organism might come into being even out of something quite amorphous, as it were causelessly; and there is no reason why this should not really hold for our thoughts, and hence for our talking and writing. (Z 608)

It is thus perfectly possible that certain psychological phenomena *cannot* be investigated psychologically, because psychologically nothing corresponds to them. (Z 609)

I saw this man year ago: now I have seen him again, I recognize him, I remember his name. And why does there have to be a cause of this remembering in my nervous system? Why must something or other, whatever it may be, be stored up there *is any form*? Why *must* a trace have been left behind? Why should there not be a psychological regularity to which *no* physiological regularity corresponds? If this upsets our concept of causality then it is high time it was upset. (Z 610)

Wittgenstein's View of Meaning and Understanding

Wittgenstein concludes that understanding is not an experience, state or process (conscious or unconscious). These

states and processes have duration while understanding lacks duration. True, certain states or processes accompany when one understands something, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient condition of understanding. Understanding belongs to another logical category.

“He understands” must have more in it than: the formula occurs to him. And equally, more than any of those more or less characteristic *accompaniments* or manifestations of understanding. (PI 152)

If there has to be anything ‘behind the utterance of the formula’ it is *particular circumstances*, which justify me in saying I can go on — when the formula occurs to me. (PI 154)

[F]or us it is *the circumstances* under which he had such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on. (PI 155)

In order to get clear about “understanding”, we must inquire into the meaning of related terms (as they are used in language).

The grammar of the word “Knows” is evidently closely related to that of “can”, “is able to”. But also closely related to that of “understands”. (‘Mastery’ of a technique.) (PI 150)

Understanding is closely related to ability (or to mastery of a technique). Abilities and skills are always acquired. The ability to play chess is to ‘know how’ the game is played. Knowing how here indicates that there is a certain way of doing or using something. (There is regularity in practice which is called habit or custom.) This regularity is the regularity in ‘actions’. The regularity in action is to be seen in ways of living or forms of life. There is nothing hidden as far as way of living is concerned. What is given in the final analysis is a description how an activity is carried out. Language, for Wittgenstein, is interwoven with action. The regularity in action is what is known as the ‘rules’ of language/action. Since, rules constitute language-games, there-

fore, understanding a language-game involves an understanding of the rules that constitute it.

Understanding, as we have seen, is a mastery of a technique or ability. Meaning is the content of understanding. Since understanding consists in knowing how, therefore, its content is given by the description of this knowing how. The description of this knowing how is the explanation of meaning.

By emphasizing on the fact that meaning is functional rather than definitional, Wittgenstein impresses the point that knowing the context, function or use is prior to knowing the meaning through ostensive definition. 'The use of words in practice is its meaning.' (PI) Again, 'the question what is a word really is analogous to what is a piece of chess.' (PI) The meaning of a piece of chess is expressed by the role it plays in the game, likewise the meaning of a word is expressed by the functions it plays in various contexts.

Language is rule governed. There is conformity in the use of language in different contexts. It is due to this that communication and understanding is possible. As already stated there is a similarity between language and games. The place of rules in games is of great help in understanding the place of rules in language. The rules of game, say chess, constitute that game; similarly the rules for the use of a word constitute a particular language-game. Rules have to be kept whether one is playing chess or any language-game. The symbols or signs by themselves are empty. They reveal their meaning in being used in different language-games.

Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? — In use it is *alive*. Is life breathed into it there? — Or is the use its life. (PI 432)

A language-game may be simple or complicated. It is always complete. A language-game itself is a language (or a simplified model of it). Rules constitute language-games. As the rules are conventions or customs within certain contexts their being observed consists in ways of doing or living. That is to say that to understand a language-game is to understand a form of life.

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique. (PI 199)

Wittgenstein's view of meaning as use is sometimes referred to as 'use theory of meaning'. This, however, is not correct. It is beyond his project to advocate any theory in philosophy. Theories are true or false, probable or improbable. Description of use is not like this. Meaning is, thus, logically prior to theorizing.

It shown here that language, for Wittgenstein, is embedded in human ways of living (and acting) and is not rooted in any fixed structure. The philosophical conception of meaning, therefore, is ultimately linked with 'doing' (human actions). Meaning of linguistic expressions is to be seen in ways of living/acting and not in any fixed structures. Failure to understand this view leads to psychologism of meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein has shown that the grammar of 'meaning and understanding' is different from that of 'mental states and processes (including non-conscious processes)' and, for this reason; they belong to two different conceptual realms.

END NOTES

- 1 G. Baker and P. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*. Volume 1 (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1980), p. 595.
- 2 Peter Hacker, *Insight and Illusion, Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1972), 2nd edition, 1986, pp. 184-185.
- 3 G. Baker and P. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity: An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*. Volume 2 (New York, Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 57.

Abbreviations used in this work:

Wittgenstein, L.

PG *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. R. Rhees, tr. A. Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974). (References are to page numbers.)

PI *Philosophical Investigation*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953). (References are to sections.)

WWK *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, notes recorded by F. Waismann, ed. B. F. McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). Tr. *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979). (References are to page numbers.)

Z *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. W. von Wright, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). (References are to sections.)