Impact of Picture Theory on Epistemology

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Abstract   The author of Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus advanced the picture theory of language .Early   Wittgenstein accepts Russell's distinction between compound and simple propositions. The simple or the simplest propositions derived from the complex propositions are ultimate propositions or unanalyzable propositions. They are atomic propositions which refused to be further simplified. Such atomic propositions are logical pictures of atomic facts which comprised the world outside the language. This picturisability of atomic facts by atomic propositions imparts meaningful atomic propositions. Every atomic proposition is meaningful in so far as it works out a logical picture of a corresponding atomic fact.

For Early Wittgenstein, only tautologies, contradictions and empirical statements can be meaningful. The non- tautologies, non- contradictory and non- empirical propositions such as metaphysical, ethical, mystical, theological, ideological, religious propositions can be neither true nor false but meaningless and non-sense. While a false statement can be meaningful, a meaningless proposition   can be neither true nor false and thus never a component of our stock of knowledge.

KEY WORDS: Wittgenstein, epistemology, propositions, Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus.

Early Wittgenstein's search for meaning has had a powerful impact on truthfulness of various types of propositions constituting the non-logico mathematical and non-empirical discourse. According to early Wittgenstein, there are three types of meaningful statements: Tautologies, contradictions and empirical statements.

The tautologies such as 'All triangles have three angles', 'All bodies are extended', 'All Bachelors are unmarried' etc. are meaningful and true under all conditions. They are true by definition. They are analytic apriori because their predicate terms are already contained in their subject terms. They are tautologous because they

are true under all conditions. On the other hand, such propositions as 'The teacher drew a round square on a black-board', 'He is the son of a barren woman', 'That triangle has four angles' etc. are contradictions. Now, tautologies and contradictions are not part of human knowledge for tautologies are self-confirmatory, whereas contradictions are self-contradictory. We have not to go in for any methical, technical, data-based or empirical research with a view to certifying tautologies or contradictions. It is the countless empirical propositions which are neither self-certifying nor self-contradictory and are or can be true or false under given conditions, which comprise or constitute human stock of knowledge.

According to early Wittgenstein's account of knowledge, propositions or utterances which are neither tautologies nor contradictions nor empirical statements, are at the very outset outside the pale of meaningfulness and therefore of knowledge. The non-tautologous, non-contradictory and non-empirical propositions can be of diverse types. Such propositions can be metaphysical, mystical, theological, ethical, ideological, religious or axiological – such propositions cannot be categorized either as true or false. In point of fact, they cannot even be deemed to be meaningful or significant propositions. They are neither true nor false nor meaningful but simply meaningless and non-sensical propositions.

The true or false propositions have got to be empirical propositions. Only empirical propositions can be confirmed to be either true or false. Only statements of science qualify as empirical propositions. And only such propositions can have significance, of course, by recourse to observation, experimentation or other necessary and relevant procedural strategies. The metaphysical philosophical and axiological propositions, according to early Wittgenstein are condemned to be cognitively insignificant and meaningless propositions. The question of the truth or falsity of such propositions does not arise at all. For, in order to count to be either true or false, a proposition has got to be meaningful. Meaningfulness is a necessary condition of the truth of a proposition. A meaningless proposition cannot be even false not to speak of its being true.

Wittgenstein in his Tractarian phase worked out what is famously known as picture theory of language. Early Wittgenstein is deeply impacted by Russell's logical atomism. He advances an all the more sophisticated version of Russell's atomistic doctrine. Early Wittgenstein accepts Russell's distinction between compound and simple propositions. The simple or the simplest propositions are derived from complex or compound propositions. The simplest propositions are ultimate propositions or unanalyzable

propositions or irreducible propositions. They are atomic propositions which just refuse to be further reduced or simplified. Such atomic propositions are logical pictures of atomic facts which comprise the world outside language. The atomic propositions picturise or mirroriseatomic facts. Or, we can say atomic facts are photographically represented by atomic propositions. This picturisibility of atomic facts by atomic propositions is the basic condition imparting meaning to atomic propositions. Every atomic proposition is meaningful in so far as it works out a logical picture of a corresponding atomic fact. In this way, the atomic propositions become directly meaningful. The compound or complex propositions out of which atomic propositions are derived, to begin with,cannot be directly testified to be meaningful. They can be said to be indirectly meaningful in so for as a given set of atomic propositions derivable from a given compound proposition are directly certified to be meaningful propositions.

Metaphysical, theological, axiological and other such propositions are beyond the pale of atomistic analysis. It is so because, we just cannot have atomic propositions derivable from compound metaphysical, theological and axiological statements. In view of the fact that theological, metaphysical and axiological propositions cannot operate within the paradigm of atomistic analysis, Wittgenstein deems such propositions squarely to be neither true nor false but simply meaningless and nonsense.

Wittgenstein's theory of propositions in the Tractatus has far reaching and important consequences. All propositions, according to that view, are truth-functions of elementary propositions. It follows that there are only three kinds of propositions: (1) tautologies, those whose truth-tables assign them truth-values of truth only, (2) descriptive propositions, those whose truth-tables assign them truth-values of both truth and falsity, and (3) contradictions, those whose truth-tables assign them truth-values of falsity only. Since tautologies and contradictions "say nothing", the only kind of propositions that say anything are descriptive propositions. And all that a descriptive proposition can say, in the end, is that certain states of affairs exist or do not exist, or that certain "truth-functional" combinations of them exist or do not exist. This, then, is all that can be said. All intelligible discourse is thus limited to assertions about states of affairs (Pitcher, 1964, p. 139).

According to early Wittgenstein, any thought can, in principle, be put into words. There cannot be a thought which cannot possibly be put into words or we cannot have a thought which it is impossible in principle to put into words. Thus

Wittgenstein limits significant discourse to statements of natural science. It is empirical or descriptive propositions which assert the existence and non-existence of states of affairs. Descriptive or empirical propositions can be physical object statements as well. However, it is the propositions of natural science which can be said to be constituting the hard-core of true propositions. The following propositions from the Tractatus bring out the same:

Propositions represent the existence and non-existence of states of affairs.(T.4.1)

The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences).(T.4.11)

Descriptive propositions, as a matter of fact, constitute the entire body of what can be significantly said. The tautologies and contradictions can say nothing. It is the propositions of natural sciences which assert all that can be said:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then,

whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – this method would be the only strictly correct one (T.6.53)

The early Wittgenstein as represented by *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, is not carrying out any epistemological investigations. He is not forwarding any epistemological theory. He is not defending rationalism, empiricism or intuitionism like Descartes, Locke or Bergson. He is not finding truth, belief and justification conditions of knowledge to be insufficient to the purpose and recommending indefeasibility condition like Gettier, with a view to arriving at indubitable knowledge claims. He was not an advocate of skepticism like Hume and advancing a critique of causality, induction or law of uniformity of nature. He is not defending religious beliefs and values by recourse to mystical, intuitive or revelatory experience.

He is rather carrying out logical and methodological investigations of philosophy. He is evaluating the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of propositions or statements under consideration with a view to demarcating the sphere of sayability from the sphere of unsayability. He is trying to figure out what can be meaningfully asserted and what can be meaninglessly blurted out.

Now, the quest for such methodological clarification or logical investigation can be multidimensionally impactful. It can horizontally impact multiple spheres of human discourse. It entails a comparative and cross-ventilative clarification of the propositions of mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, religious sciences, humanities etc. Within philosophy, it can have deeply disturbing implications. It can provide a devastating critique of the entire philosophical discourse. The most time-honored and entrenched metaphysical, cosmological, axiological, ideological and epistemological claims can be shaken to their foundations. By surveying the logical geography of philosophical discourse, it can question the truth-value of metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, theological and ideological statements. Most importantly, it can interrogate the truth of theories of knowledge and knowledge-claims of various disciplines.

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