

BRADLEY AND WITTGENSTEIN ON LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND EXPERIENCE

In what follows, I wish to examine the views of F.H. Bradley and Ludwig Wittgenstein about language, thought and experience. Usually Bradley is known as an idealist metaphysician and Wittgenstein as the precursor of both logical positivism and ordinary language or linguistic analysis. The early Wittgenstein, too, developed a kind of metaphysics through truth-functional analysis of language. But at the same time, one can discern a close affinity between Bradley and Wittgenstein. The present essay is an attempt in this direction.

Both Bradley and Wittgenstein had almost similar views about philosophy. Bradley says :

"Philosophy is a satisfaction of what is known as the mystical side of our nature".¹

The mystical side of life may be said to be the aspect which is not in consonance with pragmatic or utilitarian consequences. In this sense, philosophical questions resemble those of religion. The mystical side of life is not amenable to observation and experiment. In consequence, it cannot be studied by the scientific method. Seen in this light, it can be said that Bradley wishes to distinguish philosophy from sciences. Wittgenstein, too, took philosophical issues very seriously. For him, it was the problem of his existence. Both Bradley and Wittgenstein agree on the point that even if all scientific questions are solved, the problems of life may remain untouched and unsolved. Both of them wish to distinguish the philosophical quest from that of the scientific one. Plato and Kant also come very close to Bradley and Wittgenstein in this respect. In the *Critique*

of *Pure Reason*, Kant visualizes the indomitable urge in man to transcend the bounds of scientific domain. Plato, too in the *Timeus* and other writings, imagines such a role of philosophy as a response to certain basic urge in man. Seen in this light, philosophy turns out to be a subject as music, painting and religion. The latter do not aim at discovering truth at par with scientific ones. They aim at satisfying the mystical aspect of existence.

Language has occupied the focal point of both Bradley and Wittgenstein. Both the philosophers accept that knowledge is judgemental or propositional. For Bradley, the unit of thought is the judgement, whereas for Wittgenstein, it is proposition. Though both judgement and proposition are expressed by means of language, yet they (judgement and proposition) have been treated as non-linguistic in nature. The acceptability of such a thesis depends upon the answer to the question how are concepts and language related? Both judgements and propositions consist of concepts or ideas. Bradley distinguishes between two senses of 'ideas'; (i) ideas as mental images or pictures, (ii) ideas as universals or meanings. Ideas in the sense of universals or meanings come very close to concepts. But now the question is : Are ideas or concepts non-linguistic in nature? Can they exist without having any connection with language? Imagine a hypothetical situation where nobody uses any language. Under such condition can we say that concepts disappear? Concepts or ideas are not linguistic in nature for the simple reason that they cannot be said to belong to any language but the expression and growth of concepts or ideas are very much connected with language. Ideas, concepts and language are intimately connected but one cannot be identified with the other. If the material body is not there perhaps no thought would be possible but for that matter thought cannot be treated as material. In the rationalist tradition, pure thought and pure concepts without any admixture or contact with the material body have been visualized. But we wish to point out that the idea of pure thought in this sense is unintelligible. Historically, language has proved as an effective medium for expression of ideas or concepts but that does not make ideas or concepts linguistic in nature. The materialist, on the other hand, committed similar mistake of equating ideas or thought with their base, i.e., the material body.

Being concatenation of thoughts and ideas, judgements and propositions cannot be construed in linguistic terms. For this reason, they (propositions and judgements) turn out to be a kind of universal and this universal is a unitary meaning. Sometimes, it has been argued that the so-called proposition and judgement are not universals but mere abstractions from the linguistic elements, i.e., sentences. Such a view of judgements and propositions is reflected in the interpretation of the philosophical doctrines of later Wittgenstein by some scholars.

From one stand point, language can be construed as consisting of physical components in that it involves sounds and words which are physical in nature. In order to obviate certain confusions, distinction has been made between language and speech in the recent years. Speech is that which is expressed by means of language. It is bound to be non-linguistic in nature for the simple reason that the same speech can be made in different languages on different occasions. The pure mechanistic and behaviouristic account of language fails to account for its persistent aspect. Language as a system of sound or physical elements is bound to be ephemeral. If there is no persistent element in language, after we utter a sentence or a group of words, the so-called speech would disappear. But this does not happen. It proves that there is something that underlies all linguistic phenomena. This is the persistent aspect of language.

The behaviourist and the mechanist might argue that the so-called persistent aspect of language can be explained by invoking the mind-brain identity argument. It runs as follows: The use of language makes its impression felt on the brain cells and whenever we utter or hear the same linguistic expression, we tend to recall only one kind of meaning. But this type of physicalistic explanation of language and meaning is unacceptable on the ground that a purely mechanistic interpretation cannot account for variety of meanings that the same linguistic expression gives rise to. Meanings grow and grow richer. This aspect of language and meaning cannot be explained by accepting one-to-one correlation of linguistic expressions with the impression on the so-called brain cells.

Both Bradley and Wittgenstein recognize the importance of universal elements in language and speech. Without these elements

thought and communication will be impossible. Communication is an inter-subjective act and for it to be possible, certain persistent and universal elements are absolutely necessary. Both judgements and propositions are assertions either positive or negative. But according to Bradley, all judgements are interconnected so as to form a coherent, consistent and logical system; whereas, no such coherence exists among propositions. It is precisely because of this reason that Bradley advocates monism and Wittgenstein pluralism. For Bradley, the entire communication system is a unitary whole wherein all aspects are internally connected. A judgement is characterized as a mental act. This means that it is opposed to physical acts. But it should not be taken to mean that they (judgements) are subjective in nature. As a matter of fact, a judgement is the union of subject and predicate. This proves the objective character of judgements. But the nature of the predicates is such that they (predicates) mutually lead to one another. This kind of argument is the source of monism. A proposition like a judgement is the union of subject and predicate but Wittgenstein does not admit the mutual implication of predicates. This is why the propositional view of knowledge leads to pluralism and realism whereas the judgemental view to monism and idealism.

Ideas and Meanings

Both Bradley and Wittgenstein are concerned with linguistic communicative system. Both in the early and later works, communication was one of the major concerns of Wittgenstein. Again, Bradley and Wittgenstein were busy in exploring the basis, presupposition and implications of such a communicative system. Their discovery was that ideas, concepts or meanings constitute the basis of communication. The entire idealistic tradition in philosophy upholds this type of view and it has, in its turn, led to the theory that the world is a system of ideas or concepts. Bradley is no exception to it. Frege, too, belongs to this tradition but with a difference. He makes a distinction between meaning and reference. In this respect, he comes very close to Bradley. If meaning is tied down either to the mental image or to the physical fact, it ceases to have intersubjective character. The empiricists like Locke, Berkeley and Hume tried to interpret meaning in terms of psychic content. Bradley says :

"In England at all events we have lived too long in the psychological attitude".²

If meanings are understood in terms of psychic contents, interpersonal communication becomes impossible for the simple reason that what one means and understands belongs entirely to one's psychic world and others cannot understand it. One's own mental or psychic content is one's own private possession and nobody, even in principle, can have any access to it. The fact that we understand each other and interpersonal communication is possible, proves that meanings can never be understood in terms of psychic or mental contents. Plato, Kant, Bradley and Frege were responsible in saving meanings or ideas from being merged either into physical fact or mental content. But at the same time, once meanings are understood in terms of objective ideas they become very general and fail to secure unique references. Bradley says

"And if you take this mere idea by itself, it is an adjective divorced, a parasite cut loose, a spirit without a body seeking rest in another, an abstraction from the concrete, a mere possibility which by itself is nothing".³

This view of meaning seems to be based upon the assumption that there is a diametrically opposed relationship between meaning and reference. Referring cannot be done with nouns and adjectives which are otherwise meaningful. But I wish to point out that general expressions like common nouns and adjectives with the help of other words such as definite articles, prepositions and etc. perform the act of referring.

There is no word in any language which is not used either directly or indirectly to secure reference. This shows that meaning and reference are vitally connected. By treating meanings as mere souls Bradley did not take note of the referring aspect of human speech. The empiricist attempt to locate the origin and source of ideas and impressions can be interpreted as an attempt to trace out the point of reference of communicative system. But where to locate it? Hume could have located it in the external world. But he preferred to locate it in the internal world which is supposed to be the seat of knowledge and understanding. Further, the urge

to make a radical distinction between meaning and reference compelled Hume to treat impressions purely as undifferentiated, elementary and without any part. The reason for treating the impressions as fleeting could be the following :

There is no necessary connection between what an expression means and that it refers to. Even if this reason is accepted, yet it cannot be agreed upon what meaning and reference are not at all connected. Hume and other empiricists seem to be arguing that meaning and reference are not at all connected. Bradley went in the opposite direction. If the empiricists assimilated meanings to reference, Bradley sought to assimilate reference to meanings. In fact, Bradley in the process, tried to demolish 'reference'. This is why he argues that by applying any number of categories or concepts one cannot secure unique reference. In fact, application of more and more categories moves in the direction of further generality. The unique reference is never secured. As a matter of fact, the supposed object of reference goes on receding to the background.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, looks at the problem of meaning and reference altogether from a different stand point. In the early writings, particularly in the *Tractatus* he seeks to explore the base of language. For him, language or communicative system at the base, is purely referential. The referring function at this level is so strong and sharp that linguistic expressions get glued to the world, as it were. His argument is that language at the base consists of pure names and those names only refer and do not describe. Meanings get divested of descriptive contents and only referring functions remain in the end. This is just the opposite of what Bradley advocates. For Bradley, language of communicative system is non-referential at the base. Whereas, for the early Wittgenstein, it is purely referential at the base. For Bradley, meanings are souls without a body; for Wittgenstein, meanings are pure bodies (in the sense of reference) without a soul. Seen in this light, Bradley and the early Wittgenstein appear to be poles apart; the former busy in discovering a communicative system hedged in by reference alone. The dispute revolves round reference-free and reference-bound communication. Whose view is to be accepted? Is Bradley to be accepted in lieu of the early Wittgenstein or

vice versa? The answer to this question can be given only after explicating the nature of linguistic communicative system.

Language Games, Immediacy and Experience

In the later work, the *Philosophical Investigations* (Henceforward P.I.) Wittgenstein looks upon language as a form of life. In other words, he gives up the meaning - reference dichotomy. The entire communicative system is treated by Wittgenstein as a game and apart from meaning and referring, myriad forms of other functions are also visualized. Bradley overlooked the fact that referring function is built into the very fabric of language. As a result, he recommended suicide for thought :

"Thought is relational and discursive and, if it ceases to be this, it commits suicide and yet, if it remains thus, how does it contain immediate presentation ?"⁴

How to understand the expression 'suicide by thought'? From the context, it appears that Bradley is pleading for a non-categorical, non-conceptual mode of understanding. He visualizes a kind of understanding where differentiation and distinction do not exist at all. If a kind of holistic understanding is being pleaded for then it is different from what is known as non-categorical mode of understanding. As a metaphysician, Bradley proposes to see the world without application of categories, thoughts and concepts. What could be the nature of such a world? Bradley's answer is that it is a kind of undifferentiated whole. When all the categories and concepts are suspended what remains is the pure and immediate experience unalloyed by any language and meaning. In this sense, it is unutterable. On the other hand, Wittgenstein in both the works (early and later) argues in support of the view that experience is based upon and bound by language and concepts. In short, experience is linguistic and conceptual in nature. Even in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein advocates this view though it is generally accepted that he develops a kind of mysticism in it. The world and reality are tied down to language and concepts. In the *P.I.* the reality and the world have been construed as forming the ingredients of the form of life. Seen in this light, Wittgenstein comes very close to Kant. Plato eliminated experience from the domain of universals

and concepts. Bradley was highly critical of categories. But it is only Kant and Wittgenstein who point out that human experience and, for that matter, the world cannot be understood without application of categories and concepts.

Now the question is how are language, thought and experience related to one another? How do Bradley and Wittgenstein visualize this relation? Can language and thought depict what is experienced? Bradley's argument is that language and thought are constructions. They are improvised artefacts. Thought is nothing but the totality of concepts, categories, universals and meanings. This is the rationalist position. Wittgenstein, particularly the later one, comes very close to the rationalist position but with a difference. It is this: For the rationalist, there is no world except the pool of concepts or categories. But for Wittgenstein, the world is always found mixed up with concepts. Though Bradley does not accept the innateness of ideas as Descartes and Leibnitz did, yet he recognises some kind of inevitability and inexorability with respect of meanings. Wittgenstein, too, recognises the ambiguity of ideas and meanings. In this respect, Bradley and Wittgenstein are at par with the rationalists but neither of them will agree with the latter's thesis that the world is nothing but concatenation of ideas or meanings. Further, the rationalist will not admit the importance of raw and pure experience unmixed with any concept at all in the manner of Bradley. Rather, for the rationalist, the so-called raw experience is a kind of confused and indistinct concept or meaning.

The empiricists, on the other hand, treat both language and thought as constructions. In this respect, Bradley comes very close to the empiricists. The thesis that knowledge begins with experience is very significant in this context. This means that all ideas, meanings, concepts and categories are later constructions. Though Bradley upholds the ultimacy of immediate experience yet he cannot be regarded as an empiricist for the simple reason that he uses 'experience' in a very different sense. For the empiricist, experience is primary but ideas and meanings get attached to it in due course of time. In a sense, experience works as a progenitor of ideas. But for Bradley, only after all ideas and meanings have been demolished pure experience emerges. In fact, the process gets reversed in case of Bradley. Further, for the empiricist, experience is atomic and

discrete, whereas for Bradley, experience is holistic and totalistic. A kind of pluralism is built into empiricism whereas a kind of monism is built into Bradley's thesis. But the point of affinity between the empiricist and Bradley should not be ignored. It is this : Both Bradley and the empiricist treat experience as purely immediate and undifferentiated.

Bradley's concern with immediate experience is likely to create an impression that the problems of meaning and reference are not problems for him. In short, one might conclude that philosophical problems about language were of no interest to Bradley. If he was interested in anything it were the problems of epistemology and metaphysics. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's central concern was the problem of language and meaning. Seen in this light, Bradley and Wittgenstein appear to be poles apart. But we wish to point out in this connection that in a very significant sense, both Bradley and Wittgenstein were concerned with the problems of meaning and reference. This can be proved from the analysis of various passages occurring in the writings of both the philosophers. Bradley's main contention in *Principles of Logic* (both the volumes) as well as *Appearance and Reality* is that unique reference cannot be secured by language and concepts at all. He maintains that the conventional linguistic devices with the introduction of so-called referring expressions like 'this', 'here', 'now' and etc. cannot serve the purpose. He says:

"It is in vain that we add to the original, an assertion 'this', 'here' and 'now' for they are all universal. They are symbols whose meaning extends to and covers innumerable instances".⁵

So, Bradley recommends abolition of linguistic and conceptual devices for the purpose. But can unique reference be secured without the use of language and concepts? The answer to this question ultimately depends upon what is meant by 'unique reference'. If referring is regarded as a linguistic act, then all references including unique reference can be secured only by language. If 'referring' is regarded as a physical act then holistic experience becomes unnecessary for the simple reason that without using any language one can refer to an object by touching or lifting it. If we use neither language nor physically touch the object, we cannot refer

to it at all. Experience is neither physical nor linguistic. Therefore, the so-called holistic experience cannot serve the purpose for which it has been invoked. In fact, whatever little reference could be secured by the use of concepts, gets blurred when concepts are detached. Holistic experience by virtue of its nature cannot specify things. Rather, it removes all types of distinctions. How can one secure unique reference when all distinctions are removed? Bradley has no answer to it. Further, Bradley overlooked the fact that unique reference is a linguistic act and it is built into the communicative system. Holistic experience might be serving some other purpose but cannot secure unique reference. Plato did not care for any reference at all. He did not wish to soil the meanings with reference. On the other hand, Bradley sacrificed meanings in search for references.

Wittgenstein discovers the missing link, i.e., the linguistic devices of the act of referring. In the *Tractatus*, referring was conceived as something automatic. The truthfunctional analysis of language reveals this type of unique reference. The logical proper names:- the termini of the elementary propositions, directly refer to the objects. So, there was no need on the part of early Wittgenstein to think in terms of holistic experience.

In the later works, particularly in the *P.I.*, the idea of 'context' plays a very crucial role. Context includes very many things. It includes in itself the place, time and even the way one speaks. Bradley did not take note of the context. In fact, his entire analysis was based upon a presupposition that language at the base is context free.

As a result, he even treated the first person autobiographical statements as context-- free. Bradley says:

"I have a toothache--both the I and toothache are mere generalities. The actual toothache is not any other toothache and the actual I is myself as having this very toothache".⁶

Bradley's argument is that no word in language can secure specific reference. Even apparent referring expressions such as 'I' and 'toothache' fail in this respect. Bradley maintains that the

so-called referring expressions are really general in nature. The expression 'I' is used by each one of us. In fact, it cannot be said to have a uniquely referring function. By arguing in this manner, Bradley wishes to demolish all language. As a result, a gap is created between language, thought and experience. On the other hand, the later Wittgenstein wishes to integrate language, thought and experience.

Department of Philosophy
North Eastern Hill University
Mayurbhanj Complex
Nongthymmai
Shillong-793 014
(MEGHALAYA)

N. MALLA

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Contact : The Editor,
Indian Philosophical Quarterly
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University of Poona,
Pune - 411 007