

KNOWLEDGE AND PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLANATION

In his 'Investigations', Wittgenstein seems to prescribe the ultimate motives for what some people call 'doing philosophy' or more simply 'philosophising'. Some philosophers, thus, got immune finally from the embarrassments raised by the common man. The elaboration of this prescription is covertly spread over hundreds of numerals but the essence seems to lie in this, "We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place."¹ Asked for clarity, this prescription seems to expand into — "The task of the philosopher is not to explain things or, at any rate, facts about the world. The philosopher is supposed only to describe the language he encounters in the world. The rest is the business of the science." Thus with the creation of what we might call a 'water-shed' criterion, the territorial dispute with the sciences is sought to be solved for ever. Questions like 'why there is so-and-so' and 'is there so-and-so' are not answerable within philosophy. The philosopher would simply collect data of language and arrange them, perhaps like an entomologist, as Austin quietly suggests², re-arrange them if not satisfied and so on.

2. Historically, there is much to recommend about this claim. The traditional metaphysician's attempts to explain the world stood on hardly any methodologically convincing ground, although some of his insights remain fascinating even today. The logical positivist, on the other hand, provided a semantic interpretation of the world which is either vacuous (as in the attempts to construct an Ideal Language) or false (as in the Verificationist Theory of Meaning). In spite of all the attempts of looking at language as a 'logical construction' of elementary propositions, the logical task of reducing language to one primitive basis seemed exasperating. Wittgenstein expected hope-fully that—"Even if the world is infinitely complex, so that every fact consists of infinitely many atomic facts and every atomic fact is composed of infinitely many objects, there would still have to be objects and atomic facts."³ This hope is hardly sustained in the "Notebooks" where he looks for a finite set of atomic facts in an actual language-condition — English for

example. Neither the 'points of the visual field' nor 'this watch'⁴ provides grounds for the all possible logical constructions which sufficiently exhaust our thought.

In fact, Wittgenstein perceived quite early the fate of his truth-function theory. There are more things in heaven and earth than the truth-function theory could construct. The alternative was simply to create a philosophical mystification, viz., that even if the logical structure of language, or thought for that matter, cannot be related to some explanatory theory of language, there *are* logical structures so much so that they 'show up' in meaningful discourse. Evidently, it is possible to raise more than one question of criteria on such an analysis. We could ask, for example, what then is a meaningful discourse? Without such criteria the analysis seems to lose its ground. There remains, between the achieved philosophical position and the desired completeness in analysis what we might call an 'Explanatory Gap'. Consider, for example, the first two sentences of the 'Tractatus'—"The world is all that is the case", "the world is the totality of facts, not of things". Read simultaneously, these two lines give a description of the world in terms either of the "totality of facts" or of "all that is the case"—the terms interpreting each other in a cycle. But precisely because of this cycle, the description is not adequate for it refers to a third term, i.e., the 'world'. The cunning addition of the clause 'not of things' in order to make the description non-tautological. And the 'Explanatory Gap' forms immediately. How is it that the world is the totality *not of things*, when 'things' cannot be understood either by 'all that is the case' or by 'totality of facts'? Thus either we presuppose some interpretation of language without explanation or leave the Explanatory gap as it is.

3. With this, the dilemma of the Pre-Investigations philosopher gets partly visible. Philosophers, in trying to wriggle out of their self-contained systems, were looking for a non-philosophical reference to which a philosophical system might adjust itself. By its very nature, the natural order of the physical world did not seem to be a convenient reference-frame for this order itself could be questioned philosophically. The alternative was to refer to language. However, if one starts with the assumption

that the logical structure of language reveals the structure of reality as much as could be revealed anyhow, one must first answer the following questions :

- (a) What is the logical structure of language precisely ?
- (b) How does it correspond with the structure of reality ?

It is not difficult to look at philosophy since Kant, as an endless balancing problem. The answers to the questions above just did not balance each other. The 'Tractatus' plays this weird game to its limit and the 'Investigations' sets to dismantle it altogether.

4. It is possible and perhaps necessary to dwell upon these points at greater length, bringing in other philosophies and their authors.⁵ But the philosophical situation, at least, can now be presented more clearly :

(i) If it is the business of the philosopher to explain or even to describe the world around him, the business is liable to go bankrupt.

(ii) No logical theory of language is possible which could adequately accommodate philosophical speculations.

(iii) Philosophical understanding rests on the understanding of the corresponding natural language but by (ii) no separate understanding of this language is possible. As Wittgenstein puts it, "Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it."⁶

(iv) If one wishes to form a theory of language *and* explain the world in terms of it, one must either keep eternally silent or rest content with 'this', 'here' and 'now'.

Thus comes the water-shed criterion of philosophy :

a. Philosophically at least, there is nothing to be explained about the world — 'the world is what it is', thus sealing the possibility of any explanatory gap.

b. There is no *theory* of language, and there cannot one possibly be. For language is in the world and 'in use'. We could, at most, look for different uses of language and identify and arrange them within usage.

And perhaps an additional condition, viz., that

c. One cannot meaningfully talk about anything else except what is given in usage.

We must note, however, that these criteria are not explicitly stated or enunciated as such but they sum up the failure of the pre-Investigations philosophy and signify the post-Investigations era. As Gellner observes⁷, such a set of conditions are self-supporting and because they are framed in the most general terms they do not require either a separate theory of logic or language—thus making philosophy immune from the charges which a recognizable theory must face.

It emerges also that the linguistic philosopher proposes two different conditions which need not be held together. One rightly, i. e., devoid of empirical content, all philosophy must conform itself to natural language⁸. The other, wrongly, that there cannot be a theory of language separate from the natural language the projected philosophy conforms to. The linguistic philosopher somehow holds that these two conditions are inseparable. Thus, there are no philosophical *theories*; there are only ways of *doing* philosophy. Whatever else the latter expression might mean, it means, at least, that the task of philosophy is not theory-construction.

There are, at least, two ways of resisting this approach. First—to analyse the elements of this approach in such a way as to show this approach to be false. Second—to grant it a try and to see how it works or, at least, tends to work in the face of an important philosophical problem. There is a vast literature on the first line of attack both from outside and within this approach. We would rather take up the second, in the spirit of a field investigator, and see how this approach works in the specific case of the 'Genetic Problem Of Knowledge'. In a nutshell, we would attempt to show that the genetic problem is an important philosophical problem, that a solution to this problem tends to be explanatory in nature, that the linguistic approach fails to address such a problem and that the problem, after all, is not beyond solution otherwise.

5. But what do we mean by the terms 'explanation' and 'description' when we attempt to address a problem like the

genetic problem ? The task had been postponed till this stage so as to allow a kind of semantic pre-disposition towards these terms through various philosophical approaches. But it cannot be delayed any longer.

If we begin, however, with an analysis of the behaviour of the verbs 'to explain' and 'to describe', we are likely to find ourselves in a mess. For not only that the behaviours of 'to explain' and 'to describe' overlap in many usages, they overlap largely with the behaviour of some other verbs, e.g., 'to justify', 'to clarify', 'to interpret', 'to enumerate' and so on. Further, the behaviour of the verbs concerned is so enmeshed with epistemic notions⁹ that an analysis on the above lines might come out to be superfluous with respect to the problem we wish to address.

Nevertheless, it is possible, at least with respect to the term 'explanation', to construe the term as denoting specific methodological devices. For, in more than one cases, the term 'explanation' stands for a clean, straightforward way of analysis. We would consider two such cases and find out where they meet. It could be shown, from internal evidence, that this would approximate the sense of 'explanation' most acceptable to Wittgenstein and relevant for our discussion.

Case — 1 *Scientific Explanation*

The conditions¹⁰ on which a theory is called an explanatory one in the sciences are as follows :

(i) It refers to facts, events, situations (phenomena, in short) in the world.

(ii) Either a pre-established self-consistent method is used to refer to the world or any random reference to the world is arranged in a logical afterthought.

(iii) The theory envisages the world in a way which is not immediately given by the phenomenon itself such that, inspite of (ii), the theory remains ad-hoc unless its consequences are demonstrated to be true in the cases to be covered by the theory.

(iv) A theory is an explanatory theory so long as it provides the necessary and sufficient reasons for the observable regularities in nature to be counted as such.

(v) A theory is in language such that *this* language refers to the world either from a definitional or from a hypothetical standard.

Case — 2 *Explanation with reference to a context (in literature)*

(i) It is about a piece of literature so much so that it refers to a system in which the piece occurs.

(ii) It envisages the piece as a continuity or a break within the system of reference such that the logic of the system is revealed which is not immediately given in the piece concerned.

(iii) It also interprets or clarifies the given piece not necessarily from a definitional standard but in such a way that the interpretation sets the terms of reference for the entire system to be revealed.

(iv) A literary piece is fully explained when any further occurrence of its terms of reference helps maintain the logical order of the system.

Covering both the cases, it follows that

a. An explanatory theory must refer to something outside the envisaged theory.

b. This 'something outside' must have its own logical order. Thus there cannot be an explanatory theory of chaos.

c. There should be devices within the theory such that the theory could be checked and re-checked with respect to b above. And d. In view of c, any explanatory theory is falsifiable.

The claim of a 'description' is, however, less ambitious.¹¹ Although one finds uses of 'to describe' which approximate the uses of 'to explain', as in the case in which a speaker *describes* the beauties of a poem, the status of a description is generally theoretically non-committing. An inspector describes a situation while a police-officer forms his own explanation. In this sense, at least, a description is a pre-condition for an explanation. But this need not always be so in the sense that not every description lays the basis for an explanation. A 'descriptive roll' in a population survey or in an election procedure just lists the entries in

some order, not necessarily specifying the logic of this ordering;¹² therefore not necessarily explaining the order of entries in the list.

A very interesting usage of 'to describe' is encountered in mathematical discourse. If I tie a peice of stone with a string and swing it around my head, we would say—'the stone describes a circle'. To the person who is familiar with the notion of a circle, this sentence really means—'the stone runs along a circular path'. To the uninitiated, however, this gives an explanation of the term 'circle', e. g., 'If a straight line is swung around a fixed point, the outermost point of the straight line (in a complete swing) traverses a path which we call a circle'. If, in this sense, a description amounts to the presentation of data *and* its full analysis, then the Wittgensteinian dictum¹³ is contradictory. It is, however, the separation of meaning involved—between 'to explain' and 'to describe'—which is of real interest, amounting to the eparation of philosophical programme.

6. The 'Genetic problem of Knowledge', in the words of Russell, could be stated as follows: "How comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do know?"¹⁴ Expanding the meanings of the terms 'human beings' and 'world', Chomsky puts the problem as "The study of the interaction between a particular, biologically-given, complex system—the human mind—and the physical and social world."¹⁵ Our purpose here is neither to answer Russell's question nor to exhaust the study proposed by Chomsky. We would rather engage ourselves in trying to characterize the philosophical programme which attacks such a genetic problem.

Inspite of certain semantic difficulties involved in these statements of the problem, it is easy to realize that this primarily is the problem which constitutes the traditional Rationalist-Empiricist debate. Although the majority of the Anglo-Saxon philosophers have lined up behind different variants of Empiricism, it cannot however, be proclaimed that the debate is over. Given this historical backdrop, a die-hard linguistic philosopher would simply refuse to recognise *this* problem as a philosophical one. The answer to this problem lies, he would suggest, in simply

turning your head away. It could be contested however, whether such flexible heads be allowed of philosophers. Nevertheless, we can proceed to speculate upon his line of defence :

a. The history of the problem suggests, not sufficiently but plausibly enough, that the problem, stated in this form, cannot be solved.

b. The problem, stated in this form, is not a problem of philosophy, in the sense that it is not a problem of knowledge but rather a problem regarding the acquisition of knowledge.

c. Following b, the problem consists of elements the study of which is outside the scope of philosophy. Elaborating on this point, we could say that the problem concerns Empirical Psychology or some such subject like psycho-genetics or Mannheim-fashioned 'Sociology of Knowledge' or Educational Sociology or even that portion of biology that deals with Cortical structures etc., but certainly not philosophy.

d. There is no philosophically relevant 'Genetic Problem of Knowledge' for the problem, as we face it in linguistic usage, does not allow any assumptions about the problem of knowledge

It seems immediately clear that such a line of defence derives closely from what we have already denoted as the 'water-shed' criterion. The linguistic philosopher recognizes quite early that to accept the genetic problem (in the stated form) is to concede too much. What a possible answer to this problem requires is an explanation. Any analysis of the process of interaction between the human mind and the physical and social world implies the formulation of a theory which covers : First, the regularities of the human mind; Second, the regularities of the physical and social world; Third, a system which links these two regularities together. Hence the proposed theory fulfills all the criterion of Explanation as laid down in (5) above. Evidently, the requirements for such a theory are hard to find in any science, not to speak of philosophy. The other plausible argument would be that none of the explanatory theories, concerning the first two regularities above, are yet to be presented in a rigorously acceptable form and it is not impossible to imagine that they would never be accepted as such. If their acceptance is a *pre-condition* for a knowledge-theory, then the latter is a vogue.

Thus it is not difficult to argue in favour of the linguistic philosopher, especially with reference to c above. To maintain *this* is not to maintain, however, that a 'Problem of Knowledge' and the problem of 'Acquisition of Knowledge' are intrinsically separate and also that a 'Genetic Problem of Knowledge' is logically vacuous. A fuller discussion of this is beyond the scope of the present essay.

But are the difficulties facing a 'genetic problem of knowledge' really so insurmountable? How, for example, would a linguistic philosopher address himself to a problem of knowledge, stated in any convenient form? He would probably suggest a formulation of the following sort: 'What do we mean (or, more vaguely, what do we do) when we say, 'I know such-and-such'? Presumably, he would still refuse to answer this problem unless we clarify the phrase 'such-and-such', such as 'I know you', 'I know car-driving', 'I know mathematics', 'I know Chinese', 'I know Jazz', 'I know that it is going to rain' etc. He would, in all probability, attend to all and more such knowledge-claims separately and tend to lay down the criterion of usage separately for each one of them. It is an open question where such an analysis would lead us to if we are interested in nothing less than the knowledge-process itself.

7. Two points, at least, tend to emerge: One — that a philosophical address to the knowledge-question is vacuous without taking into account the actual knowledge-sentences as given in a natural language¹⁸. Two — that a surface description of the occurrences of knowledge-sentences in itself does not answer the question regarding the 'Genetic Problem of Knowledge'.

However, whenever we admit the paradigmatic role of language, we also get an important clue. Looking closely into the three-stage analysis required for knowledge (see 6 above), and accommodating this analysis with our admission about the preeminence of natural language, the problem seems to narrow down to a more manageable form. If language *is* the product of the interaction of human mind with the external world (and possibly yet remains separated, in some sense, from both of them), then neither do we require a separate theory of mind nor a separate theory of the 'physical and social world' in order to

understand the interaction. Nor do we have to look for a third system incorporating the separate systems of 'mind' and the 'world'. Language, it seems, serves all the purpose. The requirement evidently is that we form a *theory of language*, which the linguistic philosopher denies of his own account.

8. The task of forming a theory of natural language, which would in effect serve the purpose of an explanatory theory is certainly enormously difficult but it is not a logical impossibility. Wittgenstein somehow felt overawed by the fact that a proposition cannot be used to state its own logical form, thereby coming to the obviously fallacious conclusion that the logical form of the statements cannot ultimately be stated. As Mundle puts it, "Because a sentence cannot be used to state *its own* logical form it does not follow that the logical form of the statement it is used to make cannot be stated by means of other sentences or non-verbal symbols."¹⁷

Consider, for example, the case in point, i. e., the knowledge-sentences in English. Assuming that there are six surface-structures known (a. I know car-driving; b. I know John; c. I know German; d. He knows me; and so on), one could endeavour to give a full syntactic analysis of each :

English

sentences syntax level (si) Level (sii)

a. S_1 S_{11} S_{111}

b. S_2 S_{22} S_{222} so on, to... $S_{iii}...$

c. S_3 S_{33} S_{333}

d. S_4 S_{44} S_{444}

e. S_5 S_{55}

f. S_6

Suppose we arrange the given types of sentences in an order (say b is closure in meaning to a, c is to b, and so on) based on the understanding of the native speaker and are able to form primary syntactic structures (level S_i) for each of them. Suppose further that we are able to form syntactic structures (of the order S_{ii}) from which a pair each of the S_i structures are produced—(for example, the structure S_{11} produces structures S_1 and S_2)—by means of recognizable rules. Suppose we continue in this fashion until we reach the one, final structure ($S_{iii}...$ level) which produces its preceding structures by means of recognizable rules.

We can attempt to restrict these rules in such a way as to make them context-sensitive such that after repeated application on some initial elements only those sentences are produced which a native speaker recognizes to be knowledge-sentences.

Alternatively, one could start by giving a full semantic analysis of each of the surface-sentences much in the fashion of the linguistic philosopher, formalize these analyses with the help of suitable symbols and proceed as above, only this time we look for sufficient semantic rules. Finally we could compare the final semantic level with the final syntactic level such as would enable us to pass from one to the other.

However weird and crazy this procedure might seem to be, there seems to be nothing intrinsically impossible about it. The programme sketched above is embarrassingly simplistic but it could be modified in a number of ways. Other equally plausible programmes could be worked out. The recent advances in Transformational Grammar surely point towards such a possibility.

A number of crucial difficulties, however, suggest themselves immediately :

(a) A sentence is a knowledge-sentence only at the semantic level. A syntactic level is, in this sense, void of knowledge-claim. Thus, 'I know John' and 'I love John' have identical syntactic structures.

(b) A knowledge-sentence (a sentence in which the term 'Know' or any of its variants occur in the principal verb-phrase) is not always a knowledge-claim and vice-versa.

(c) It is possible to know this syntactic system which is supposed to generate knowledge-sentences. How to account for *this* knowledge or rather meta-knowledge?

We could try to avoid such difficulties by :

(i) Introducing the knowledge-element, e. g., the verb 'to know' at the proper stage of sentence-generation so as to render the desired semantic interpretation possible.

(ii) Restricting our analysis, for the time being, only to those knowledge-sentences which the native speaker recognizes to be a knowledge-claim.

(iii) Interpreting the knowledge of the syntactic system as already analysed by the system itself, i. e., the system is self-analysed.

Given that we somehow manage to formulate a theory of language such that knowledge-sentences could be accounted for such as they are, we could legitimately claim that *this* theory of language is the Explanatory Theory of Knowledge such that it fulfills all the criteria for an explanation as laid down above. Interpreted properly, this theory, in turn, could explain how the mind works when we *know* something to be the case or otherwise. It is also possible that such interpretations could be checked against similar developments in other disciplines, e. g., Cognitive Psychology and modified or reconstructed accordingly.

9. If the programme, however, fails to click, we would be hard pressed for certain gloomy consequences. It would mean, in effect, that the knowledge-question cannot be handled properly within the philosophical devices alone. The vast and rapid developments on the study of our cognitive capacities in disciplines outside philosophy demand a rejection of the trivialities which the philosophers had been practising for the last three decades. If we fail to catch up with these developments exclusively on *philosophical* grounds, we would have two courses open, none of them being too happy ones. Either that we fall back on trivialities or that we surrender the possible solution of the problem to other disciplines—as ‘Physics departed from philosophy centuries ago’.

Nirmalangshu Mukherji

NOTES

1. L. Wittgenstein : *Philosophical Investigations* (PI)—Sect. 109
2. J. L. Austin : *Philosophical Papers*—‘Performative Utterances’
3. L. Wittgenstein : *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*—4.2211
4. L. Wittgenstein : *Notebooks*—pp. 45, pp. 60
5. Especially, Russell’s *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Quine’s *Word and Object*, Hintikka’s *Knowledge and Belief*.

6. L. Wittgenstein : *Tractatus*—4.002
7. E. Gellner : *Words and Things*—Chapters I and III
8. I am thankful to Noam Chomsky for pointing out, in an informal letter, that this could be interpreted as a rather strong claim. There are, he argues, other important situations (e. g., in the debate on the 'seeing' of a triangle) where the knowledge-problem is not *immediately* related to language. It is, however, an open question whether there could be a knowledge-claim without a corresponding knowledge-sentence. Evidently, Chomsky's argument could be pursued even if there were none. But then it would be hard to keep the problem within the bounds of philosophy as we understand it today.
9. See, for a treatment on this point, K. Lehrer : *Knowledge*—pp. 165
10. For a formal treatment of the conditions, see C. Hempel : 'Studies in the Logic of Explanation' in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*, pp. 245—pp. 290. This is a rather informal description of Hempel's model with some additions and omissions.
11. Wittgenstein's own clarification, however, is no guide—"What we call 'descriptions' are instruments for particular uses" - PI, 291
12. One could object that even if the 'logic' concerned is not *specified*, it is implicit for those who understand a population survey. In an Explanation, however, this 'logic' is specified without which, under our analysis, it could not be counted as such. That makes all the difference.
13. See 1 above
14. B. Russell : *Human knowledge : Its scope and limits*—quoted by N. Chomsky in *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 13
15. N. Chomsky : *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*—p.13
16. For a discussion on this point, see 8 above.
17. C. W. K. Mundle : *A Critique of Linguistic Philosophy*—p. 178

