The semantic ontology in Wittgenstein’s philosophy

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to sketch the place the theory of meaning has in the overall conception of young Wittgenstein, and to derive from that some of its general and central characteristics. The idea of extracting a theory of meaning from the Treatise does take a central stand in this work, since it presupposes an interpretation of the book as a whole.

Key words: semantic ontology, Wittgenstein, logic, meaning, logical form.

The nature of the main work of Wittgenstein’s (Logical-Philosophical Treatise) remains controversial, as it does seem, at least at first sight, it contains a substantial theory of meaning. The treatise outlines the nature of meaning and it analyses the way in which meaning relates to linguistic words. The aim of this article is to sketch the place the theory of meaning has in the overall conception of young Wittgenstein, and to derive from that some of its general and central characteristics. It is not my intention here to enter into the debate surrounding the ‘state of affairs’ or the idea of ineffable insight of Treatise that has been proposed by the so-called New Wittgensteinians. There are a many ways of
reading the book other than the resolute one, that make this possible. Fortunately, for our short purposes it will not be necessary to discuss the various options and decide between them. A central intention of Wittgenstein’s during his entire life was ethics and esthetics. The two modes – ethical and aesthetical – through which reality could be ‘reached’ are in fact ‘one’. This is so since they are both aspects of the mystical: in the first case we contemplate over the world as a whole, while in the second – we contemplate over the objects in the world from the perspective of eternity. The time of his work on the Treatise was no exception. Reports by contemporaries, from philosophy and from other walks of life, the surviving notebooks (1913) that he kept in that period, as well as some of the things he said about 1921 after it was completed, leave no doubt that at that time, as always, ethics and esthetics was of fundamental importance to Wittgenstein. The point of the book is an ethical one. What Wittgenstein wants to do is to safeguard ethics from all kinds of theorising, from logical analysis and metaphysical speculation. Ethics is about what to do. Ethics does not belong in the cognitive realm of thought and reasoning, proof and disproof, ethical views can not be discussed, argued, they can not even be expressed in meaningful language. To show this, rather than merely state it, Wittgenstein needs a theory of meaning and thought from which it follows that ethics falls outside its line. In the preface of Treatise Wittgenstein describes the aim of as ‘to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts.’ The totality of expressions of thoughts is the totality of everything that can meaningfully be expressed. The idea is that once the limits of that are drawn, we can characterise ethics. So the theory of meaning and language offers is there for a specific purpose. This observation is not just relevant for an understanding of the Tractarian project as a whole, it also informs some of the more conspicuous features of the theory itself. Universalism here refers to the task that Wittgenstein sets itself,
to give an account of how language operates in general, not the way any specific language works, but what underlies the possibility of any language to express meaning. Referentialism refers to the ontology and semantics. The central role is played by the picture theory of meaning, according to which the meaning of a sentence is the situation it pictures. This picturing relation has two basic ingredients. The first is the existence of a depicting relation between simple expressions, names, and simple entities, objects. The second is identity of the logical forms of the picturing sentence and the pictured situation. The idea of logical form as the most fundamental structure of both the world and language is central to Wittgenstein’s thinking here: every contingent feature of what makes an actual language meaningful, every contingent characteristic of some situation that is captured in language has to be abstracted away from, if we are to uncover the most fundamental principles that make meaning possible in the first place. At it’s most general level it is the logical form that world and language share that allows the two to enter into the picturing relation. The world is made up of facts that are available. The totality of all facts determines what is available and not available in the world. The facts exist on their own and represent the existence of states of things. The case determines the state of affairs. The states of affairs are the joining of things, and things are constituents of the state of affairs. However, things have the ability to enter into states of affairs. The commonality between states of affairs and possible states of affairs is the object. Although they have entered into a certain state of affairs, the objects have the possibility of entering other states of affairs. The philosopher shows that the states of affairs are not separate entities. They are conditioned by the ability of the thing to be present in the state of affairs. However, things are entities. On the one hand, the thing has a form of independence, this form of independence consists in its ability to encounter different states of things. On the other hand, this same
form of autonomy is limited because it is related to the states of things. By entering into certain states, it becomes a „form of insolvency“ (Wittgenstein 1960: 52; 2.0122). The function of names is to represent the simplest objects in the world, and the way names are linked in a sentence shows how the objects in question relate to each other. From this situation it becomes clear that the way in which the names of simple objects in the world are linked in a sentence cannot be named. Knowledge of an object is only a knowledge of its intrinsic properties that determine the totality of its ability to be present in the state of affairs. Wittgenstein then concludes that „if all objects are given, then all possible states of affairs are given“ (Wittgenstein 1960: 52; 2.0124). The philosopher situates all things in a „space of possible states of affairs.“ This is the logical space of the treatise, on which the possibility of some knowledge of things depends. For example: „the field of vision should not be red, but it should have some color: it has, so to speak, should have color space around it. The tone must have some height, the subject of touch, some firmness, etc.” (ibid.: 53; 2.0131). Once connected in configuration, objects exercise one of the possibilities inherent in them, but their form remains a condition for the possibility of the structure of the state of affairs (see Wittgenstein 1960: 53; 2.033). In order for things to participate in elementary states, they must already be embedded in them, that is, every opportunity must lie in the nature of the object (ibid.: 52; 2.0121; 2.0123). Shortly afterwards, Wittgenstein added that „the possibility of his being in the state of affairs is the form of the object“ (ibid.: 53; 2.0141) and the form is „the possibility of the structure“ (ibid.: 53; 2.033). The totality of all facts is the world, and the figurative theory of language answers the question of what we can know about it. The picture theory is the basis of the relation language-world, propositions-states of affairs. In it, the same basic principles are postulated regarding the image. The image form is an opportunity for the structure of
the image, which is the way of connecting its elements (ibid.: 55; 2.15). The elements of the image must correspond fully to the elements of the state of affairs. Names of things necessarily refer to some parts of reality - objects. In the world, we have objects with their form, where logic is a condition for the possibility of states of affairs happening. On the other hand is the state of affairs in a language whose form of expression cannot be expressed but merely displayed. The common thing that every image, of whatever form, must have with reality in order to be able to - correctly or incorrectly - depict it is a logical form, ie. the form of reality (ibid.: 73; 4.12). Because propositions cannot represent the commonality they have to with reality - the logical form - the form remains only able to be shown. The contingent true character of a proposition is only possible by the fact that it has the same logical form with what it portrays - with reality. As the case determines the state of affairs, the proposition acquire true or false value by chance. The proposition is true if there is a state of affairs it describes. If the state of affairs that describes the proposition does not exist, then the proposition is false. Likewise, the depicting relation that puts names and objects in a one-to-one relationship is devoid of any descriptive content, simple because such content would be contingent and hence would make the meaningfulness itself a contingent matter as well. More important properties of objects and names in the Tractarian system is that they display variation in ‘form’, another term used in a technical sense, viz., to indicate the possible configurations in which they may enter. Both names and objects may differ among themselves in the combinations with other names and objects they may engage in, because the world is everything that is the case. The realm of the meaningful coincides with the totality of the contingent, then ethics is excluded, since whatever ethical value is, it is necessary. With ethics a number of other domains of the necessary, such as logic, mathematics and science, fall outside the realm of the
meaningful as well. These Wittgenstein deals with successively in the last part of the Treatise, explaining in each case why what looks necessary and meaningful in fact is not. Logic, being the transcendental scaffolding of world and language that makes the meaningful possible, is ‘ineffable’ in that it can not be meaningfully described, but is shown by meaningful description of contingent situations. Mathematics does the same. Ethics is also dubbed ‘transcendental’ and is also ineffable, but it is shown, not through language, but through action. Such a necessary and a priori distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless requires a theory of meaning that is itself necessary and a priori. This means that it has to hold not just for some particular language. Nor is it sufficient to characterise the meaningful for all natural languages. The goal it aims to achieve, requires that it be completely general, that it hold for any conceivable form of language, any possible form of symbolic expression. When young Wittgenstein mentions ‘language’ it means all logically possible forms of symbolic expression; when it refers to ‘world’ it indicates any logically possible configuration of situations; and when it mentions ‘meaning’ it abstracts away from any contingent features that make particular expressions mean particular things. Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning is thus transcendental in the broad sense of dealing with ‘conditions of possibility’. Constructing meaning in terms of the picturing relation, it comprises an ontology, a theory of linguistic structure. These three elements consist of a reconstruction of the fundamental properties of the world, of language and of their interconnection, that are needed for any concrete language to mean any concrete situation. Recall that this ‘critical’ task itself derives from another one, that of securing the ineffability of ethics. Thus, it appears that the ontological and linguistic theories that Wittgenstein offers are derived from this fundamental starting point, and hence, give us an account, not of the world or of language directly, but of
what they have to be like for meaningful expression to be possible in such a way that ethics remains outside its reach.

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