Research on Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language in the Later Period

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Abstract: Wittgenstein puts forward two different theories of language in his philosophical career. This paper discusses the transformation from early Wittgenstein's theory to later Wittgenstein's theory, and analyzes and evaluates the latter. Early Wittgenstein still adopted the western traditional philosophy's mode of thinking , based his theory on ontology and language's image theory, and constructed an ideal artificial language to describe facts in the form of proposition. However, such theories and mode of thinking faced many difficulties and challenges, and the necessity and rationality of constructing an ideal language are questioned. Later Wittgenstein realized the countless ways in which language is used in daily life, and believed that each use of language in life should be regarded as a "language game". Given that, the proposition discussed in the earlier theory is just one of the countless "language games". Therefore, Wittgenstein's early theory seems to oversimplify the use of language. Later Wittgenstein believed that in order to explore the meaning of language, we should not search for the essence from a metaphysical perspective, but should search for the form of human life and the daily use of language. This is the core of notion "meaning is usage". The endless debate of philosophers for thousands of years, therefore, results from the fact that philosophers have been trapped in the dilemma of language and have vainly tried to overcome the upper limit of their mind. Later Wittgenstein thus classify the use of language into misuse and normal use, and reminded human to always reflect on their use of language. Although his theory seems to disobey the traditional mode of thinking of Western philosophy, it should be regarded as a great and valuable idea.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, language games, picture theory of language

1.   Introduction

The western traditional metaphysics represented by Plato is characterized by ontology. Philosophers of language is no exception. Philosophers are constantly searching for the true meaning of language, and searching for the absolute meaning of language beyond time and space. However, such traditional thinking has great limitations and often falls into a thinking dilemma. Earlier Wittgenstein also held similar thoughts to explore the nature of language, construct an ideal language, and describe facts and the world in the form of propositions. However, later Wittgenstein realized the inadequacy and absurdity of this ontology, as well as various dilemmas of the earlier theory. Therefore, he reconsidered philosophy of language and proposed several important ideas, such as "language games", "family resemblance", "meaning is usage" and so on. In doing so, he adopted an

analytical approach that was radically different from traditional philosophy. Specifically, he abandoned the method of constructing conceptual and ideological systems, and through analyzing a large number of real examples of daily uses of language, he combined the meaning of language with daily life forms, and explored principles of language in language games. However, due to the distinction between his philosophy and the traditional philosophical thoughts, the later generations' understanding and evaluation of his philosophy will inevitably be biased. This paper points out the value and inspiration of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and argues that it should be regarded as a great thought.

2. Early Wittgenstein's Theory

2.1. Picture Theory of Language

The foundation of Wittgenstein's earlier theory is based on the reflection and examination of objects, events and facts, and the world. He said, "The world is everything that is the case. The world is a totality of facts, not a totality of things. The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts." [1] Taking "object" as the most basic unit, he constructed an ideal language model that could describe all logic, as well as the world. First, objects constitute the entity of the world and is simple and fixed. The object is simple in that it constitutes the entity of the world, so it cannot be a compound. The latter can be seen by considering the use of objects in language. That is, in a statement or a proposition, the thing/object described by this proposition does not change. What changes is the description of the object in the sentences, that is, the configuration of the object. Wittgenstein argues that objects constitute the substance of the world, namely the unchanging form that must exist, and "The configuration of the objects forms the atomic fact." In other words, the structure of the state of affairs is also being formed by the particular combination of objects. Those happened are the facts, and the totality of the facts is the world. Sagarika Datta argues that Wittgenstein's view of language, that is, the search for the essence of language through ideal language, is essentially related to certain ontological problems, namely, the structure of the world. There are many types of philosophers who have their own philosophical goals. One of the goals is to be able to describe general propositional forms.[2]

Thus, Wittgenstein proposed an image model corresponding to language and the same structure as the state of affairs, that is, the image theory. Its core can be elaborated by borrowing the theory of four causes: the elements of an image (that is, the material causes of an image) correspond to the objects in the words, while the formal causes of an image are the specific ways in which the elements are related. Its ultimate cause is to describe the existence and non-existence of a state of affairs in logical space (the image is therefore a fact), as a yardstick of reality, that is to say, the image's right and wrong (truth value) are based solely on its agreement or disagreement with reality. On this basis, Wittgenstein argues that the logical picture of fact sets the criteria for thought and for thought. Specifically, he believed that the image of the world is the sum total of real thought, and that thought contains all its possibilities, and that no illogical thought or illogical world can be imagined or described. So, how are ideas expressed? Propositions.

Wittgenstein argues that propositions give thought an expression that can be perceived. Such perceived expressions include, but are not limited to, sounds and written marks. It is these symbols that project the possibilities of the situation. Thus, what is expressed is only the possibility of those being projected rather than the projectors themselves. In other words, a proposition does not express its own meaning, but the possibility of its meaning, or rather the form of its meaning.

So, how exactly is a proposition defined? Wittgenstein refers to all signs used for expression as propositional signs. In conjunction with the projection mentioned in the previous paragraph, a proposition is "the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world." Thus, Wittgenstein

discusses propositional signs. According to Wittgenstein, "Objects I can only name. Signs represent them. I can only speak of them. I cannot assert them. A proposition can only say how a thing is, not what it is." [1] Propositional signs represent or are about facts. The elements of a propositional sign correspond to the object of thought, that is, the described thing that exists in space (e.g The table). Thus, Wittgenstein drew a boundary between what language can and cannot do: human must not name an object, for example, what "table" is; They can only describe one object, for example, "The table is yellow."

2.2. Objections against Theory of Language

However, the construction of artificial language based on image theory faces many objections. First, the necessity of constructing such an ideal language is questioned. Early Wittgenstein's theory of images was based on the assumption that the structure of words corresponds to the that of the world. This means that in order to successfully construct an artificial language, it is necessary to know clearly both what the structure of words and the structure of the world are, so as to know whether they indeed correspond to each other. However, as it is mentioned in the previous section, the purpose of constructing an artificial language is to find a perfect way to explicitly describe the world. Obviously, if the structure of the world has already been known, then there is no need to construct an ideal language to help describe the world. In addition to that, the original intention of constructing ideal language is to solve the problem that "philosophers are misled by the confusion of everyday language, which causes philosophical confusion". One question, however, is that philosophers may be misled not by that the structure of language falsely correspond to that of the world, but by the complexity of this correspondence. Therefore, when they are already misled by overly complex relationships, they must fail to see clearly the structure of the world. That is to say, to develop an ideal language that is in advance any language that is used in human beings' everyday lives would be ineffective. A more reasonable idea and approach might be "everyday language is perfect" and "philosophical confusion can be solved by studying the use of everyday language." [3]

In addition to the necessity of an ideal language, the assumptions on which it is based are equally questioned. As mentioned earlier, the presupposition of an artificial language is that the logical structure of the language corresponds to the logical structure of the world. This shows that, first of all, both language and facts (the world being the totality of facts) must be structured by a certain logic. The former is well established, while the latter is simply impossible to prove. The assertion that facts have a logical form, and that they are the same as the logical form of language, is hypothetical and requires verification. What's more, although it might be certain that language has a logical structure, this structure simply cannot be unified, given that there are so many different languages and syntax that are constantly changing as the constant change in human's way of life. Since the logical form of language cannot be unified, and it is doubtful whether facts have a logical form, what is the point of developing an ideal artificial language?

According to Li Guoshan, Wittgenstein elaborated his philosophy of logic in his earlier work Theory of Logical Philosophy, and its core idea is: logical propositions are tautologies. This logic philosophy has been widely concerned for its novelty and simplicity, and has a great influence. Wittgenstein himself, in his later philosophical research, quickly realized the problems existing in the early logic philosophy and made a self-criticism. The logical positivists absorbed the thought results of this logical philosophy and developed the much-criticized conventionalist logical philosophy. [4]

3.   Wittgenstein's later Theory

3.1.   Language games

In his later work Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein first objected the Augustinian image theory of language and ontology which confuse the referents with the meaning of language. Specifically, Wittgenstein illustrates examples such as numbers that have no actual referents but are undoubtedly meaningful. These words do not have "meaning" in ontological terms. It can be seen that Augustine's image theory oversimplifies language, and it is difficult to make a convincing explanation for various language uses. Later Wittgenstein proposed an concept of "language games". Unlike games, which are entertaining in a broad sense, language games tend to describe language as a human activity. For example, a construction worker says the name of a material, and another find the corresponding material. A teacher says a word, and students repeat. These can be called language games. In fact, language games include all the activities in real life that involve language. Although Wittgenstein does not give a more explicit definition of language game (perhaps an unnecessary definition), the difference between this notion and the image theory is clear. First of all, artificial language supported by image theory aims to describe the world, while language game is primarily a daily activity related to human behaviors. Secondly, image theory presupposes the one-to-one correspondence between language and facts, as if they intersect at numerous points. Language games show that language and reality are intertwined and difficult to separate. Finally, language games develop, extend and evolve, just as human language does. Image theory and ontology, on the other hand, falsely assume that language and the world are a priori and therefore unchanged no matter what. [5]

Given the numerous types of human activity, the number of language games is infinite. What, then, is the relationship between language games? Wittgenstein argues that language games have nothing in common, just as the various ways to use language. Therefore, any attempt to find out the nature of language is futile. However, there are similarities between different language games. Based on such characteristics, Wittgenstein put forward the concept of "family resemblance" to describe the relationship between language games in a metaphorical way. Wittgenstein believed that there were a criss-crossing of features (e.g. skeleton, looks, eye color, footwork, temperament, and so on) shared by some with each other but none of which are found in all family members and that these similarities were also overlapping. "I say 'games' to form a family. For example, all kinds of numbers also form a family. Why do human call something a number? Well, maybe it's directly related to what they've been calling numbers and that makes it indirectly related to something else that they also call numbers. Our concept of expanding numbers is like that of twisting two fibers together when twisting a thread. The strength of this thread does not lie in any single fiber of the entire thread, but in the overlapping of multiple fibers."

3.2.   Life form

The notion of "life form" refers to the sequence of verbal and non-verbal behaviors that human regard as recurring in lives. Wittgenstein further discusses the connection between language games and life forms. He noted, first of all, that the use of language in life is not limited to naming things and talking about them. For example, exclamation, cry, refusal, and command cannot be simply classified as "the name of the object." Second, when one ostensively defines a proper name, such as a person's name or the name of a color, he might be confused by the use of language. This is because that an ostensive definition has various meanings in different contexts. Wittgenstein said: "And he might equally well take the name of a person, of which I give an ostensive definition, as that of a colour, of a race...... That is to say: an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in every

case." The above is not only an objection to the ideal language grounded on the image theory, but it also provides support for Wittgenstein's later theory. Aware of the countless functions and uses of language in life, he therefore proposed the pragmatics, that is, the use of language is its meaning. The earlier thought that language describes the state of affairs is only one of the countless uses of language.

To be more specific, Wittgenstein uses the example of chess. When a person has never learned the rules of chess, "This piece is king" is of no help to him, because he cannot learn anything about the use of this piece from the title "king". However, when a person has fully mastered all the rules of chess, when he is placed in front of the shape of the piece he is not familiar with, "this piece is the king" explains the use of the piece. Thus, the meaning of a chess piece is not in its shape or its corresponding name, but in its use in the game. Such examples show the core of pragmatics, meaning as usage. First, the notion of "meaning is usage" denies any inquiry into the meaning of language. Asking the meaning of language assumes that there seems to be some a priori meanings of language. This combination has been shown above to be an oversimplification of language. On the contrary, "meaning as usage" advocates looking for the use of words in different situations. Second, just as the use of a piece in a chess game is determined by conventional rules rather than something outside the game, meaning as use seems to emphasize that the use of words in life is tied to human customs and culture, rather than tools, and that their use lies in their relationship to the outside world. In other words, in order to avoid any philosophical misunderstanding, "usage" emphasizes the most natural and universal use of language in daily life after the exclusion of "philosophical thoughts". Jiang Shiqiang believes that the context of Wittgenstein in the later period is also the context of "life form". In Wittgenstein's view, context is integrated into "life form". Though what the "life form" refers to is currently unclear, but there is no doubt that Wittgenstein's "life form" is the most relevant to his context. According to Jiang Shiqiang, the context of Wittgenstein's later work is not to provide meaning but to provide the scope of meaning, which lies not in the scientific explanation of semantics but in the philosophical investigation of pragmatics. Contemporary thoughts regards context as the contextual information of a language, and then consider the context as the meaning of language. [6]

4.   Conclusion

Later Wittgenstein's philosophy refuted ontology and reanalyzed philosophical language from a non-ontological perspective. Specifically, later Wittgenstein realized that the use of language in everyday life was not limited to the description of propositions as he had thought earlier. Therefore, instead of drawing boundaries and emphasizing the logical form of language in the earlier period, he advocated language as a form of life in the later period. Although it is impossible to define the form of life, Wittgenstein's overall point is clear: language is intertwined with human life. Our daily use of language can be seen as a large number of language games with "family similarities", and the meaning of language changes as humans develop. Therefore, philosophers should not try to find the essence behind language, but should pay attention to the different uses of language in different situations. In other words, Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of language is the use of language. [7]

Later Wittgenstein's theory can be regarded as one of the distinctive philosophical theory as his objection against ontology and his methodology seem to contradict traditional philosophy that aims to uncover the truth by developing systematic theories. Therefore, people may be inclined to regard him as a destroyer of philosophical systems. Nevertheless, later Wittgenstein seems to realize fundamental problems of philosophy, hence endeavoring to solve it. For thousands of years, countless philosophers held different thoughts, believing that they comprehend the truth and thus developing multiple ideologies that are sometimes incompatible. Philosophers seem to be trapped in the

confusion caused by language by their endless pursuit of truth that is believed to exist outside the reality (as suggested by Plato's cave allegory). Wittgenstein contends stopping this endless pursuit and argues that the fundamental cause is the misuse of language. And this is what makes his philosophy insightful and valuable. He distinguish the normal use of language from the misuse by illustrating a number of examples of daily use of language. He inspires people to reflect on their use of language and the rationality of developing conceptual ideologies. Therefore, Wittgenstein's later philosophy indeed provide valuable and insightful discovery of language.

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