

The Tractarian Test of Intelligibility

Seminar 9

PHIL2120 Topics in Analytic Philosophy

23 November 2012

Admin

Required reading for this seminar:

Soames, Ch 11

New Schedule:

30 November: Logical Positivism on Necessity and A prioricity (Ch 12, Ch 13 sections 1-3)

7 December: The Rise and Fall of the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning (Ch 13 sections 4-6)

14 December: No seminar

Essay

- Essay 2 is due 8 Jan 5pm, submit by email to danm@hku.hk
- Essay questions handed out next week

Wittgenstein's logical atomism

- All particulars are made up of atomic particulars (that is, particulars that have no proper parts)
- Atomic facts are made up of fundamental properties and atomic particulars
- There are no complex facts

Wittgenstein's logically perfect language

Let L^* be a language such that:

- i) L^* contains a logically proper name for each atomic particular,
- ii) L^* contains a predicate for each fundamental property and relation, and
- iii) L^* does not contain any other logically proper names or predicates
- iv) L^* contains ' \sim ' (symbolising negation), '&' (symbolising infinitary conjunction), and ' \vee ' (symbolising infinitary disjunction)

Wittgenstein's logically perfect language (cont)

Suppose the sentences of L^* are the following:

- i) If F expresses a n -place property, and a_1, \dots, a_n are names, then $Fa_1 \dots a_n$ is an atomic sentence
- ii) If A_1, A_2, \dots are sentences, then $\&\{A_1, A_2, \dots\}$ is a sentence
- iii) If A_1, A_2, \dots are sentences, then $\vee\{A_1, A_2, \dots\}$ is a sentence
- iv) There are no other sentences in L^*

Note 1: L^* is the same as Russell's logically perfect language L except that i) it contains infinitary conjunction and disjunction operator expressions rather than binary ones, and ii) it does not contain quantifiers or variables.

Note 2: Wittgenstein used a slightly different language

Meaning

Each meaningful sentence in natural language can be symbolised by a sentence in L^* .

Hence: Each meaningful English sentence can be symbolised by a sentence built up wholly out of atomic sentences, ' \sim ', '&' and 'V'.

Truth

If S is an atomic sentence in L^* then:

S is true iff S corresponds to an atomic fact

If S is a complex sentence in L^* , then the truth value of S is determined by the truth though the of atomic sentences as follows:

- i) $\sim A$ is true iff A is not true
- ii) $\&\{A_1, \dots\}$ is true iff A_1, \dots are all true
- iii) $\vee\{A_1, \dots\}$ is true iff at least one of A_1, \dots is true

General sentences

How can English sentences like 'Everything is F' and 'Something is G' be symbolised in L^* ?

Answer:

- i) 'Everything is F' is symbolised as ' $\{Fa \mid a \text{ is a name in } L^*\}$ ', and
- ii) 'Something is F' is symbolised as ' $\exists\{Fa \mid a \text{ is a name in } L^*\}$ ',

Tautologies and Contradictions

Def: A sentence in L^* is a **tautology** iff it is **true** under every assignment of truth values to its constituent atomic sentences

Def: A sentence in L^* is a **contradiction** iff it is **false** under every assignment of truth values to its constituent atomic sentences

A prioricity

Def: A sentence is knowable a priori iff it can be known by reason only (that is, it can be known with a justification that does not rely on experience)

Paradigm examples of a priori knowable truths:

- i) Logical truths
- ii) Mathematical truths
- iii) Analytic truths such as 'All bachelors are unmarried'

Three types of meaningful sentence

Suppose S is a meaningful sentence. Then, according to Wittgenstein, when symbolised in L^* , S is either:

- a) A tautology (and necessarily true, and a priori knowable)
- b) A contradiction (and necessarily false, and a priori knowable to be false), or
- c) Neither a tautology or a contradiction (and contingent, and knowable only on the basis of experience)

Wittgenstein's test for intelligibility

Suppose S is a sentence in English.

If S is

- a) not a tautology (when symbolised in L^*)
- b) not a contradiction (when symbolised in L^*), and
- c) not contingent

Then S is meaningless.

Def: S is contingent iff it is both possibly true and possibly false

Difficulties in applying the test

- We don't know what the atomic particulars and fundamental properties are, and hence we do not know what language L^* is
- Even if we did know what language L^* was, we don't know what a correct symbolisation of an English sentence into L^* is (since, as Wittgenstein says, the logical form of natural language sentences is hidden from us)

Consequence of these difficulties

- Wittgenstein's test is not a definite or unequivocal one
- Nevertheless Wittgenstein and others thought that it could be used to draw powerful philosophical conclusions

Ethics and value

Consider the following value sentences:

a) Happiness is good

b) Causing pain unnecessarily is wrong

These sentences aren't contingent: they aren't true in some possible worlds, but false in others.

Wittgenstein held that they also can't be symbolised as tautologies or contradictions in L^* , and hence that they are meaningless.

Philosophical problems dissolved

According to the Tractatus, there are no meaningful moral sentences, and hence no genuine moral questions or problems.

To think otherwise is to be confused about language

Slogan: The philosophical analysis of language does not **solve** philosophical problems of value, it **dissolves** them!

The importance of moral considerations

That moral sentences are meaningless does not entail that they are unimportant

Wittgenstein held that:

i) It is meaningful sentences that are unimportant

ii) What is important is how one live one's life, and what attitude one takes to the world, but it is impossible to say anything meaningful about these things!

The importance of moral considerations (cont)

Excellence in the art of living is the most important thing in life, but it is not the result of learning truths about reality

Simple illustration (Soames): two people H and U know exactly the same facts, but H is happy while U is unhappy

More meaninglessness

Wittgenstein also held that his intelligibility test show that:

- i) Sentences about how mental states and languages represents the world are meaningless

Example: 'John believes that the earth is round'

- ii) Philosophical theses are meaningless

Example: 'We do not know that we have hands'

The proper aim of philosophy

Philosophy cannot discover new facts.

Hence philosophers should not aim at the discovery of new facts

Instead philosophers should aim at clarifying our beliefs and thoughts.

What about the Tractatus?

The Tractatus is full of sentences that purport to be neither

i) Contingent claims about how the world happens to be which are justified by experience, or

ii) tautologies.

Therefore: by Wittgenstein's intelligibility test, the Tractatus is meaningless!

Wittgenstein's response

Yes the Tractatus is meaningful. Nevertheless reading the Tractatus allows us to clarify and elucidate our thoughts and avoid conceptual errors caused by language.

Wittgenstein: 6.54 “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me and eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

Soames's preferred response

The Tractatus is as a whole self-defeating, despite its illuminating insights on many points.

The Tractarian system must be rejected, and we should strive to find ways of preserving its insights while avoiding its clear inadequacies.