

TRUTH AND LANGUAGE

A WITTGENSTEINIAN ANALYSIS

1. In this paper an attempt has been made to raise some fundamental questions regarding the concept of truth.

The questions prominently sought to be discussed are as follows:

- I. What does the truth of a statement consist in?
- II. Is agreement of a statement with fact at all meaningful?
- III. Is truth-predication of statements logically superfluous?

For the analysis of these problems we have adopted the Wittgensteinian model as it promises to provide fresh insights into the problem.

2. In our language it is mainly the statements which are said to be either true or false. The statements are made in order to state or report something and to communicate it to others. So in a fact-stating and communicative language statements carry meaning and are also capable of being true or false. In recent years the propositions, held by the logicians as alone capable of being true and false, have been subjected to criticism. W. V. Quine, for instance, has argued that the propositions as the so-called meanings of the sentences are abstract entities, and have been surreptitiously introduced into our discourse as the "shadows of the sentences".¹ According to him, sentences are sufficient to convey meaning and objective information, and, therefore, are alone capable of being true and false. The ordinary language philosophers like Strawson and Austin have been equally insistent on rejecting propositions. They have, however, accepted statements, and not sentences, as the units of language to be predicated as true or false. As Austin has made it clear, statements are 'made' in language to report a situation, and sentences are only 'used' for the purpose.² The same sentence may be used in making different state-

ments as different sentences may be used in expressing the same statement. Thus he comes to the conclusion that the statements as the meanings of the sentences are alone capable of being true and false.

The controversy regarding the relation among propositions, sentences and statements is pointless if we keep in mind that truth-predicates are applicable to the sentences only when these are statements or propositions, conveying some objective reference to a fact or state of affairs. Statements as well as propositions are sentences when they are expressed in language. There cannot, therefore, be propositions or statements which are not expressed linguistically as sentences. However, all sentences are not statements or propositions, since many sentences e.g. interrogative, imperative and exclamatory, etc., do not state anything. So it can at least be concluded that only statements or propositions as having some objective reference to fact or situation are capable of being true and false.

Wittgenstein used both propositions and statements in this sense, but had never accorded, except in the *Tractatus*, any pre-eminent place to propositions and also to statements in our discourse as he realised that what matters in language is not the propositions themselves, but the use of language, or what he called the 'language-game'³. A language-game, according to him, means a set of linguistic practices and conventions, involving a system of language and a form of human behaviour interwoven into each other. Therefore he called language-games and the forms of language they represent 'forms of life'⁴, which means that language is not merely a syntactical structure consisting of propositions, but also a form of human action.

Wittgenstein's 'game model' analysis, moreover, has brought into sharp focus the view that language is a system,⁵ and that it is a system of propositions⁶ 'woven into the fabric of human life. This establishes a holistic view of language replacing the atomistic conception so much espoused by logicians and analysts alike. In the new model language is presented as an organic structure of proposi-

tions. Therefore individual propositions are deemed important only within the system. Again, as Wittgenstein views it, it is only within a language-game or a language-use that statements or propositions originate and that they have their determinate function therein. Language-games therefore provide the point of reference or framework of application to the statements.

3. Now against this backdrop the question as to what the truth of a statement consists in can be discussed. As we have already seen, a statement is always about a situation; that is, it is about the world. It says something about the world, or it represents a state of affairs. Take, for example, the statement "Snow is white"; it states that snow is white, and thus it says something about a situation, snow-being-white. Now this statement is true because actually snow is white. Here, the statement is truly representing or reporting the state of affairs it is designed to represent. The statement would have been false if snow were actually green, and so there would have been no successful representation of the state of affairs.

The truth-claim of the above statement seems very simplistic, as it seems to rely on the simple ground of successful representational function. But how does a statement like the above arise at all? It is not an isolated expression, nor is it a casual reporting of a situation. Even if it were taken to be so, its meaning and function would not be divulged unless we go into the occasion or the operation — conditions in which it originated. That is why we have to look into the 'use' of the statement in our language and life. Or, in other words, we have to find out the language-game in which the statement has been occasioned. No statement is an isolated event, it is a part of a system of statements under-determined by an operating language-game. A statement is assertable only within a language-game, if by the latter we mean the whole set of operational conditions in which a form of language comes into use.

Therefore the truth of a statement cannot be determined by its function of successfully representing a situation.

Its successful representation of a state of affairs is relative to the kind of use or operational methods laid down for it. Without going into these conditions, we cannot pronounce the judgment that truth-claim of a statement is guaranteed by its successful representational function. As it is obvious, the truth-claim of a statement is related to the kind of framework of operation, brought into action in the making of the statement. Since the statement is not frame-work-free, it has to be conceded that its entire function of representing a situation will be dependent on the modes of operation of the framework. That is to say, the truth-conditions of the statement must be guaranteed by the operational conditions of the framework itself. These operational conditions themselves are what may be called the assertion-conditions of the statements, since the very possibility of a statement being made is determined by the language-use or language-game operating. Wittgenstein writes,

The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.⁷

This obliquely refers to the fact that truth-claim of statements is dependent on the system of language.

Let us analyse the statement 'Snow is white' on these lines. This statement operates within a language-game involving our system of colour-language. Therefore it is meaningful only in our Colour-language-game. This language-game, according to our method of analysis, provides the assertion-conditions of the above statement and so also its truth-conditions. Take the statement as S and the language-game as LC (C—stands for colour). Then S is true, because it is assertable in LC. That is, St ('t' for true) because it is LCSa ('a' for assertable). In other words, St is a function of LCSa. The truth-conditions are thus made dependent on the assertion-conditions of the statement.

Now the question may be raised: Are the assertion-conditions sufficient to guarantee the truth-conditions of a statement? The answer is: The assertion-conditions are the necessary, if not the sufficient, grounds of the truth of

a statement. In order that a statement be true, it must, first of all, be asserted in a language-game, and must conform to the operation-rules of the game. The operation-rules themselves are responsible for the intelligibility of the statement, and the form of life associated with it is the ultimate frame of reference, which must guarantee the asserted move of the statement. Wittgenstein says,

The *truth* of my statements is the test of my *understanding* of these statements.⁸

That is to say: if I make false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them.⁹

Wittgenstein makes it quite clear that the very fact that a statement is intelligible or possible in a language-game shows that it must be true.

4. Thus the truth-conditions of the statements are controlled by their semantical conditions. But the semantical conditions apparently are not themselves sufficient to guarantee truth of statements, because the statements have reference to the world, which is itself an important component of a truth-claim. This truth-component needs analysis as it has been a source of puzzle for philosophers. Now the question arises: how shall we take this reference to the world at all? Austin and Quine, for example, have unquestioningly accepted this reference to the world as the tacit mode of operation of any fact-stating language. Austin writes that "when a statement is true, there is, of course, a state of affairs which makes it true".¹⁰ But what can we mean by "makes true" here? Does it mean that a state of affairs makes a statement true, because it was not so earlier? Then how can a statement which was not true earlier be made true later? So it is better that we do not use the phrase 'make true'.

The whole difficulty has been due to the unquestioned view that there stands a gulf between statement or proposition and state of affairs or fact it represents. This is a myth perpetuated by the empiricists. Now, to be precise, what is a state of affairs or fact which the statement represents?

The state of affairs itself is not a non-linguistic situation because, if it were so, it would not be intelligible and so referable even. That is why the state of affairs has to be linguistically interpreted and made to conform to the representational symbolism. The state of affairs is "propositionalised"¹¹ here. As a result, the proposition and the state of affairs do not stand apart, but are identical. Therefore it is misleading to say that a statement 'represents' a state of affairs and that its truth lies in the statement's being in 'agreement' with the latter. As Wittgenstein has pointed out, the whole idea of 'agreement' is out of place here. He writes,

The reason why the use of the expression "true or false" has something misleading about it is that it is like saying "it tallies with the facts or it doesn't", and the very thing that is in question is what "tallying" is here.¹²

In Wittgenstein's method of analysis the concept of reality of world has undergone a drastic change. According to him, reality or the world does not stand apart from language, because reality is itself as it is found in our language-game. That is, reality is itself a move¹³ in our language-game and is known as it is presented therein. So there cannot be any extra-linguistic reality, since such a concept is totally unintelligible and so nonsense.

Now if the world is itself a move in the language-game, that is, if the state of affairs is itself a proposition, there cannot be any sensible talk of agreement of language and reality, or of proposition and fact. There is logical identity between the two, and so we can conclude that the factual component of a truth-claim is non-different from its semantic component. As we have already seen, the assertion-conditions of a statement are necessary for the statement being true; now we see that the assertion-conditions themselves are sufficient to guarantee the factual conditions of the statement. This being so we see no difference between the assertion-conditions or the semantical conditions and the factual conditions or the non-linguistic conditions of a truth-

claim. It is in this identity that the truth of a statement lies. This identity is the only agreement possible. Wittgenstein writes,

What does this agreement consist in if not in the fact that what is evidence in these language-games speaks for our proposition?¹⁴

That is, the very fact that our language-game speaks for a proposition, and nothing goes against it, suffices to establish that the proposition is true. This indirectly speaks for the identity of the semantic and the factual grounds of the truth of statements in our language.

The conclusion that truth lies in the identity between the assertion-conditions and factual conditions of a statement may appear absurd to those who do not see any such identity between the two and who advocate a divorce between language and reality. Quine, for instance, does not accept the present conclusion, and holds, on the contrary, that truth hinges on reality and that "the truth-predicate serves, as it were, to point through the sentence to the reality; it serves as a reminder that though sentences are mentioned, reality it still the whole point."¹⁵ This theory is based on the belief that language is divorced from reality. Quine believes that language is inessential to reality and language-use is meant for 'Semantic ascent' which is a temporary retreat from the world to the language.¹⁶ Truth-predication, according to him, is the process of cancellation of this temporary retreat,¹⁷ and an affirmation of the non-linguistic world. The analysis of truth in Quine hinges on the ill-conceived theory that language is only conditionally related to the world and truth-predication is really a cancellation of this conditional relation. In Wittgenstein's model of analysis, however, the reverse is true as here language is inextricably involved in reality and truth-predication is an affirmation of the logical identity between language and reality. By saying that a statement is true, we do not affirm an extra-linguistic world, but affirm that the world is really a world as constituted in our language sharing identical structure with the latter.

5. Wittgenstein's analysis has so far shown that truth is an essential property of statements because it is guaranteed by the semantical conditions or internal modes of operation of language-games. So the question of truth is an internal question of language to be decided by the availability of the operational modes of the framework of reference. So it cannot be discussed as an external question to language so evidenced in Quine and Austin. We have so far discussed Quine's theory showing that in his approach truth-predicates are only an external device of asserting reality. Austin, however, in a different way comes to a similar conclusion when he says that truth-predication is a conventional method of characterising statements referring to an objective world. Besides, according to him, language is only conventionally related to the world without having any essential relation to it, since any conventional notation may be appointed for a description of a situation.¹⁸ Both Quine and Austin have come to the view that truth-predicates are logically not so important as are the statements themselves which have, again, the limited purpose of pointing to the world. It is the world which determines and also conditions the necessity of statements as well as their truth-predication. If this is so, then is truth-predication ultimately not logically superfluous? Of course, Austin himself does not accept the 'logical superfluity' view of Strawson according to whom truth-predication adds nothing to the statement itself.¹⁹ However, he believes truth-predication is not totally superfluous as it at least grants or confirms the statement. But what does such a confirmation at all achieve? It achieves, as Austin says, the purpose of describing "the rather boring, yet satisfactory relation between words and world"²⁰ which genuinely occurs. This, however, does not refute our point that ultimately such a description is logically dispensable and so superfluous.

Wittgenstein also comes to the 'logical superfluity' view though in an altogether different way. According to him, truth-predication is logically superfluous not because it is cancellatory or conventional but because truth is one of the essential conditions of a statement being assertable and

intelligible in language. So truth is a necessary feature of our statements which we can understand at all. Wittgenstein always held that our intelligible language consists of true statements. In the *Tractatus* he had held that our science and knowledge consist of true propositions.²¹ He believed that falsity is an anathema of language, since false statements cancel even the grounds of intelligibility of statements. A false statement is ruled out by our language-games. Wittgenstein, however, equates falsity with negation and so admits of negation or falsity only as a possible mode of cancelling a truth-claim. But negation is not logically fundamental²² as it can be explained by positive assertions themselves. (Compare the *Tractatus* view that negative facts are explicable by the existing state of affairs.²³) So negation is not admitted into language-games except as a possible limit of the assertions of the statements.

In view of these observations it can be seen that truth-predication of statements is logically superfluous if truth is internally guaranteed by the language-games. The addition of the predicate "is true" to a statement is redundant and is logically dispensable. Wittgenstein writes,

Is there a truth here which *I know*? —

I cannot depart from this judgment without toppling all other judgments with it?²⁴

That is to say, truth is so fundamental to a statement that we cannot deny it without denying a host of other statements. And if so, where is the warrant for reasserting that the statement is true?

To sum up: Wittgenstein arrives at two major theses in the analysis of truth viz.

- (i) He decidedly comes to the conclusion that truth-predication is logically dispensable. (This explains his silence over the problem throughout his writings, and his brisk handling of it in his last writing, namely, *On Certainty*.)
- (ii) He shows that we can better understand truth only by investigating the foundations of our lan-

guage which have to be described and not justified. These non-justifiable foundations of our language lie in the forms of life of man, and they can alone guarantee the truth of the statements, because they provide the necessary conditions for there being true statements in language. It is only in this context that analysis of truth will be relevant and fruitful.

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