

Wittgenstein on Thoughts and Representations

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The thesis defended in this paper is that in the transitional period i.e., in the manuscripts published as Philosophical Remarks, Philosophical Grammar, Wittgenstein's Lectures, 1930-32, Wittgenstein develops a peculiar form of representationalism, which in effect helps to interpret the cryptic passages on "Thought" and "thinking" in the Tractatus.

I

To begin with, I'll quote from *Wittgenstein's Lectures 1930-32* where he states :

"The thought that X is the case is as different from X being the case as is the proposition 'Y is the case'. Both thought and proposition indicate the method of finding out whether X is the case and point to the space" (*Wittgenstein's Lectures 1903-32 pp 5-6*).

This remark establishes the foundation stone of representationalism that thoughts are ontologically independent of external world and of language. Not only that, it shows that thoughts are intentional, i.e, thoughts are always thoughts of objects. Such intentionality is explained by the relation between mental representations and the world. Regarding the relationship between thought that X is the case and the proposition ' X is the case ', he says :

A proposition is an expression of thought. The expression need not be in words. We can substitute a plan for words. Thinking means operating with plans. (*Ibid*, pp 23-24).

Again, in *Philosophical Remarks*

The Thought-processes of an ordinary man consists of a medley of symbols, of which the strictly linguistic perhaps form only a small part. (*Philosophical Remarks 1975, section 5 p. 14*).

The above quotations suggest that the relation between language and thought is asymmetrical i.e., There can be thinking without speaking but there can be no speaking without thinking, as thinking gives life to mere utterances and makes it 'speaking'. He says:

It might be said, in every case what is meant by 'thought' is the living element in the sentence without which it is dead, a mere succession of sounds or series of written shapes. (*Philosophical Grammar 1974 section 65*).

Now it is clear that according to Wittgenstein while signs in themselves lack meaning, thoughts have intrinsic meaning or content and they confer meaning on otherwise lifeless signs. Thus linguistic meaning is derived from thought-content and is of secondary importance.

Regarding the logical status of thinking he says:

Thinking is interpreting a plan.... Understanding a sentence consists of a series of interpretations - one interpretation for each word. This process would be translatable into a sentence so that we could derive the sentence from the process or the process from the sentence. (*Wittgenstein's Lectures 1932-35 p. 54*)

To understand a thought means to be able to translate it according to a general rule. for example playing a piano from a score. (*Wittgenstein's Lectures 1930-32 pp. 43-44*).

Signs are used with the purpose of communicating mental contents. And the meaning of signs are fixed by the interpretation of the language-users. Thus understanding sentences involve interpretation and translation of thought content. In this context it will be useful to mention that Wittgenstein used to believe in two different languages in this period. One is everyday language that we all naturally spoke and a primary language where a comparison with reality is made and which plays the role of verifying propositions with reality. It seems that sentences of ordinary language can be translated into the elements of thought and which can ultimately verify propositions with reality. In this sense one can term it as the language of thought.

In this period Wittgenstein conceived of a language in which someone or the other is the centre and the language is different from our ordinary ones. (*Philosophical remarks section 57, pp. 88-89*). In this language the person who is the centre can represent his own first person psychological experiences as 'There are such and such experiences' but in the case of others, say 'A has such and such experiences', it will be equivalent to 'A is behaving as the centre does when there is such and such experiences'. By conceiving such mono-centred languages Wittgenstein wanted to stress the non-parallelism of first person and third person psychological sentences. Now if the person who is the centre of the language can have the special privilege of expressing only his own psychological experiences, say his thoughts, he might say : 'Only I can talk about my thoughts and as far as other's thoughts are concerned, I have to interpret or translate those in my thoughts'.

Now, Does this account in any sense help to explain the cryptic passages of the Tractatus ? To answer this, we have to look at what he had said in the Tractatus.

II.

In the Tractatus we find two sets of apparently inconsistent remarks. On the one hand he states that thoughts are logical pictures (*T. 3*) of the world. And there is a correspondence between elements of thoughts and elements of reality since a thought can be a logical picture if and only if has in common with reality the pictorial form and the logical form (*T. 3.001 & 3.01*)

Again, a thought gets expressed in a proposition (*T. 3.1*) and a proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world (*T. 3.12*). According to Wittgenstein, this projective relation is effected or grasped in thought as 'the method of projection is to think the sense of a proposition'.

On the other hand Wittgenstein remarks 'A propositional sign applied and thought out is a thought' (*T. 3.5*) and A thought is a proposition with a sense (*T. 4*). Again, in the *Notebooks* he says :

Now it is becoming clear why I thought that thinking and language were the same. For a thought too is, of course a logical picture of the proposition and therefore it just is a kind of proposition. (*Wittgenstein L. Notebooks 1914-16 appendix III, p. 130*).

Not only that, in *T. 6.31*, he says that 'there is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas'. And finally in *T. 5.61*, 'We cannot think what we cannot think and what we cannot think, we cannot say it either.'

At this stage we find these remarks baffling; since on the one hand, a proposition is an expression of thoughts; and in a sense thoughts are pictures of propositions, on the other hand a thought is a proposition, thinking and language are the same; and the notion of a thinking subject is an illusion.

How can one reconcile these ideas ? Several Wittgenstein scholars attempt to interpret thoughts as psychological (They rely mainly on a letter written by Wittgenstein to Russell in 1919) while ignoring the second set of remarks. And others highlight the linguistic interpretation giving scant attention to the psychological aspects of thinking.

As far as the Tractatus is concerned, there is no clue how to interpret these passages satisfactorily. So I think if we take the help of what he had said in the transitional period then the reading of these cryptic passages will be much more

enlightening. Keeping all our earlier discussions in mind we can interpret these passages in the following way :

The first set of remarks where Wittgenstein depicts thoughts as logical pictures can easily be interpreted from the point of view of representationalism. Here thoughts are represented as ontologically independent of the external world and of language. Thoughts are intentional too, for the objects of thought correspond to the elements of language and of the world.

Regarding the constituent elements of thought, Wittgenstein writes :

I do not know what the constituents of a thought are, but I know that it must have such constituents which correspond to the words of language. Again the kind of relation of the constituents of thought and of the pictured fact is irrelevant. It would be a matter of psychology to find out ; (Wittgenstein L. : Notebooks 1914-1916, appendix III p. 130)

This suggests that it would be quite misleading to treat a spoken or a written sentence as a thought. It seems that thought and written and spoken language are not identical though they do have corresponding parallel structures. When he says : 'A thought is a proposition with a sense', he probably means that thought gives sense to proposition. Hence the proposition with sense is nothing other than thought. Again, a sentence without application or thought is simply marks on paper. Only when it is endowed with 'sense' given by thought, it becomes an expression of thought.

Hence in our interpretation, at the elementary level picturing reality involves a correlation between three different sorts of elements each of which enters into combinations :

1. Linguistic elements i.e., names which combine to form sentences.
2. Psychical elements which combine to form thoughts.
3. Non linguistic elements (objects) which combine to form states of affairs.

In order that a sentence depicts a possible state of affairs, the elements of the sentence must correspond to the elements in the state of affairs on the one hand and to the psychical elements which compose thoughts on the other.

Hence, I picture the world forming thoughts about it , employing psychical elements, which are mine in the sense that they belong to the contents of my mind. These are related to those spoken or written signs I use and to objects in the world. Thus it is I who set up the relation between objects in the world and psychical elements of my thoughts and thus become the centre of language. If we accept this interpretation, then 'I have thoughts' is equivalent to 'there are thoughts', where there is no reference to my self.

Thus it goes perfectly well with the Tractarian remark that there is no thinking subject and 'A thought that p' is equivalent to ' "p" says that p'. Here the subject is the centre of the language and of the world. But he is not a part of the world nor is he in the world. Hence his thoughts will be represented as 'there are thoughts', where there is no reference to the subject.

Coming to the interpretation of *T. 5.61*, we suggest that thoughts are limited by the totality of psychological elements which corresponds to the totality of linguistic elements. Thus the limits of thought and those of language coincide and 'what we can not think we can not say it either'. For in order to utter any proposition 'p', we must be able to think the sense of 'p' i.e., the elements of 'p' will have to be connected with elements of the thought that p.

Thus if we bring in what Wittgenstein had written in the transitional period, the interpretation of these cryptic passages of the Tractatus becomes much more enlightening.

Literatur

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