

## Wittgenstein and Anti-Realism

James D. Collins  
M.I.T.

Philosophy in the twentieth century has been characterized by its attempt to give an account of the meaning of both words and sentences of language. The goal of such effort is to render philosophical questions and their proposed answers as clear and precise as possible. In this way it is believed that many philosophical difficulties may be resolved. It is in this tradition that we find Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. Whatever else this work may be, it is certainly a major work in the philosophy of language. In this paper I will examine this philosophy of language and suggest that it may be interpreted as an early example of what recently has been called an 'anti-realist' theory of meaning.'

What I propose to examine are Wittgenstein's arguments against certain kinds of theories of meaning which may all be called 'realist' theories of meaning. These arguments all rest upon Wittgenstein's conceptions of language games and his famous dictum that "meaning is use."<sup>2</sup> After presenting what I take to be Wittgenstein's position regarding these matters I will try to show that Wittgenstein 'offers' an alternate theory of meaning which is satisfactory with respect to his objections to previous theories of meaning. Finally, I will try and bring out certain consequences of these arguments.

First I want to consider Wittgenstein's rejection of 'realist' theories of meaning. By 'realist' I do not mean the traditional 'realism' of the realist/nominalist debate or realist/phenomenalist debate. Rather, by 'realist' I mean the recent characterization of Dummett's which makes 'realism' a feature of a theory of meaning for a language.' Realism in this sense is a view that accepts the principle of bivalence; that is, it is the view that every sentence of the language is either true or false with no third possibility. More importantly, this principle holds independently of us. What this says is that an independent reality (whatever it may be like) renders our sentences determinately true or false. Examples of such theories are the philosophies of language of

Russell, Frege and, of course, Wittgenstein's Tractatus.<sup>4</sup> Generally, referential theories of meaning are 'realist' in the above sense. They give an account of the meanings of the primitive terms of the language by equating a term's meaning with its referent. The meanings of 'atomic' sentences are given by their agreement or disagreement with states of affairs; i.e. whether certain predicates are 'true of' the terms. Once the basic sentences' truth-values are specified (thus fixing their meanings) the remainder of the sentences' meanings may be explained by showing how their truth-values are determined by their structure. This is done with a recursive definition that specifies for each logical form of sentence the way in which its component sentences' truth-values determine the truth-value of the whole. This may be done using truth tables for non-quantificational languages and some notion such as satisfaction by all sequences or truth under all interpretations for quantificational languages. Take, for example, the sentence 'John is happy and wise'. We can specify the meaning of this sentence by first noting that the meaning of 'John' is John and that both 'John is wise' and 'John is happy' are true. That is, each atomic sentence agrees with the actual state of affairs. Finally the entire conjunction is true since each conjunct is true. In this way we can (it is claimed) understand the meaning of the sentence in question.

Wittgenstein rejects all such accounts of meaning. Broadly speaking, his reason for rejecting these realist theories is that they do not take the use of language into account. Wittgenstein sees the actual use of terms and sentences as at least a necessary component of their meaning.

We can, I think, distinguish two aspects of 'use' which are central to Wittgenstein's rejection of realist theories of meaning. The first of these is brought out in the notion of a language game.<sup>5</sup> Language games are best introduced by example. Take the sentence 'The broom is broken'. How are we to determine the meaning of this sentence? Realist theories of meaning will straightforwardly analyse this as consisting of a term 'the broom' and a predicate 'is broken'. The meaning of 'the broom' is the broom and 'is broken' is predicated of the broom. If this agrees with reality the sentence is true; if not, then it is false. The use of the sentence plays no part in any of this and for this reason Wittgenstein rejects the analysis.

How can we use the above sentence? To use the examples mentioned by Wittgenstein, I can use it to 'describe the appearance of an object', to report on a situation, to speculate about a situation, to form an hypothesis, as a line in a fictional story, as the punch-line of a joke and many other uses.<sup>6</sup> By considering these varied uses one sees that the meaning of

the sentence will change depending upon the use it is put to. That is, the language game being played is a central factor in how the sentence is to be understood. Suppose that the sentence 'the broom is broken' was used as a warning not to use the broom. The realist account which amounts to describing a 'picture' of a broken broom will absolutely fail to convey the meaning as a warning. Once the sentence is understood as a warning, the realist account may give the necessary additional information needed to express the sentence's meaning, but not before. Realist, truth-condition, theories of meaning don't recognize the distinctions of meaning that different language games impose on language.

The second argument against realist theories of meaning that involves the 'meaning is use' thesis focuses upon the public nature of linguistic usage. When we specify the meaning of, say, a sentence we must be providing information that is both learnable and manifestable; that is usable. If we suppose that the meaning of some utterance was such that it was not learnable then it immediately becomes impossible for that utterance to play a part in any language game, for how could anyone come to know how to use it? Not only does the meaning of the utterance have to be learnable, it also must be manifestable. Suppose that someone was informed about the meaning of some expression in a language that he doesn't understand. Suppose also that this meaning is not manifestable in any way by the recipient of the information. What could possibly count as constituting his understanding? Nothing he does or could do would be different whether he knows the meaning or not. To know the meaning of an expression is to know how to do something; to be able to use the sentence.

These requirements of learnability and manifestability of meaning are what Wittgenstein has partly in mind with the 'meaning is use' slogan. And it is precisely on these points that the realist theories of meaning fail. In particular, it is their realist aspect that causes this failure.

In a realist theory of meaning the principle of bivalence allows one to establish and assert as true every instance of the schema 'Either A or not A'. This schema is known as the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM). Although bivalence and LEM are often taken to be the same thing, this is not accurate. While the principle of bivalence does entail the LEM, since one can assert 'A' when given that A is true and 'Not A' when A is false (thus in either case 'A or Not A' follows), the LEM does not entail bivalence. A necessary condition for the entailment of the principle of bivalence from the LEM is the ability to assert "A is true" from 'A' and "A is false" from 'Not A', but neither inference is correct unless bivalence is already accepted. Thus,

because bivalence entails the LEM, an attack on the LEM is also an attack on bivalence.

The importance of the principle of bivalence lies in the fact that it allows one to assert the LEM independently of the speakers of the language; that is, one may assert any instance of the LEM without knowing which of the disjuncts is in fact true. It is the universal holding of the LEM that provides one good case for rejecting any realist theory of meaning.

"Either he has such an image in his mind or he does not." Here we have an instance of the LEM and it is true under a realist theory of meaning. If I understand the meaning of this sentence how do I manifest my knowledge? By being able (in principle) to determine that one of the disjuncts is true. Fine, but suppose that neither of the disjuncts is effectively decidable (as in this example). That is to say that the criteria for the determination of the truth of the disjuncts is not public or testable. How can I manifest the knowledge of the sentence's meaning? What can I do that reveals that I know the meaning? It is not enough that I say that I know the meaning, for how could I be wrong? The requirement of public meaning is a requirement that my knowledge claim can be shown to be mistaken. But in this case this possibility is ruled out. Consequently, I must do more than say that I know the meaning of the sentence; I must be able to do something. Since, in a case like this example, no such manifestation of knowledge can be forthcoming, one is not entitled to claim an understanding of the sentence's meaning. But if one does not know the meaning of a sentence one cannot assert that sentence. Thus we must conclude that 'Either he has such an image in his mind or he does not' is neither true nor false if we want to require that the knowledge of a sentence's meaning (truth-conditions) be manifestable.

Briefly, for the realist to know the meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions under which it would be true. But to know this amounts to knowing when it is correct to assert the sentence. Since some sentences do not admit of such knowledge, one cannot say that they are true nor know their meaning. A similar argument goes through for purported falsehoods that are undecidable.

What Wittgenstein's arguments do, then, is deny the principle of bivalence; for it entails the truth of the LEM in every case, but for some sentences the LEM is not true (which isn't to say that it is false). If the LEM is not true, then the principle of bivalence is not true either. The key to his argument is that meanings must be public; i.e. one must be able to manifest knowledge of meaning if one has such knowledge at all. So, when we combine the two lines of argument we get the following view of the realist theories of meaning: (1) they are incapable of determining the language game

being played for a particular utterance of a sentence and hence not yielding the correct meaning of the sentence in that game; (2) even within a predetermined language game the realist theories of meaning yield contradictions, the LEM is both true and not true. It is not hard to see why Wittgenstein wants to reject any such realist theory of meaning.

A great deal follows from this. Much of the so-called private language argument comes from the rejection of the principle of bivalence, for it is then no longer legitimate to assert sentences like 'Either he is in pain or he is not whether we can tell or not'. Other areas of philosophy are affected as well. We get hints about the philosophy of mathematics in Wittgenstein's examples about the sequence '777' occurring in the expansion of pi. Namely, mathematical arguments such as 'Either 777 occurs or it does not. If it does, then C. If not, then C. Therefore, C.' would no longer be valid. It appears to follow as well that quantification over undecidable domains would also be disallowed. Generally, any philosophical position that presupposes a world independent of language (i.e. of us) cannot be acceptable. The rejection of realist theories of meaning also suggests a new job for philosophy (perhaps the only one). When philosophical problems arise the philosopher probably is invoking a realist theory of meaning. By 'breaking' this 'fly-bottle' with this anti-realist argument one resolves a great many philosophical problems.

Having considered Wittgenstein's negative theses about certain theories of meaning I want to move on to see if there is a positive side to the philosophy of language presented in the Investigations. I want to suggest that although he clearly does not offer any such theory of meaning explicitly, Wittgenstein's criticisms of realist theories of meaning implicitly contain the basic elements of an adequate (on his own grounds) theory of meaning which one could call 'anti-realist'.

Recall that Wittgenstein's arguments against realist theories of meaning fell into two groups. There were the arguments concerning the inability of these theories to handle different language games. And there were the arguments which rule out any theory invoking the principle of bivalence. Let us look at each group separately.

When one sets out to give a theory of meaning for a language one clearly wants one for the entire language; since it is impossible to isolate a fragment of language for study. Thus, when we construe the realist theories of language as theories for the entire language we run afoul of the fact that a given sentence may be used for a variety of purposes. Consequently, the meaning of the sentence will vary from language game to language game. The realist theories, however,

did not capture this variation in meaning since they specified meaning strictly in terms of reference and truth-value.

Is there any way to reformulate these realist theories so that they can work for the entire language? One proposal that seems quite natural to make is to have some part of the theory of meaning itself determine the language game within which the utterance is made and then appropriately transform the sentence into another sentence which, when analysed in terms of reference and truth-value, gives the meaning of the original utterance. This is, in fact, what recent theories of meaning propose to do. The idea is due to Dummett.<sup>10</sup> This fragment of the theory of meaning he calls the theory of force and it consists of three parts: (1) A component that spots the mode of utterance, the type of speech act performed, done along the lines of work by Strawson, Grice, Searle and others; (2) a syntactic theory that spots grammatical moods; (3) a transformational component which takes the utterance along with the mode and mood and transforms it into a related indicative sentence which is then subjected to a meaning analysis in the old way. Of course no such theory of force yet exists, but work is being done by a variety of people and there seems to be no Wittgensteinian objection to such a theory in principle. Or is there?

Suppose there are infinitely many language games. That is to say that a given sentence may be used in infinitely many ways, in infinitely many speech acts all of which are different. How could the theory of force possibly be able to spot them all? It would have to be an infinite theory and as such would hardly count as a theory. Thus, it may appear that no theory of meaning can be given. But Wittgenstein has a type of argument that seems to suggest otherwise.

When one speaks of 'infinitely many' language games what does one mean? Surely Wittgenstein would not accept the view that language as a whole is equivalent to an actual infinity of language/games. For him the 'infinity' of language games would consist in always being able to construct another language game. The idea is like that expressed in his 'no last house on the street' example. Just because you can construct another one doesn't mean that there isn't a last one. Given this view of infinity, the proposed objection vanishes. Language as a whole consists in a finite number of language games. Thus the theory of force may be finite with a distinct set of operations for each speech act and grammatical mood. True, one could then construct a new speech act, but then we could just add a new clause to the theory. "Do not say: 'There isn't a "last" (clause.)' That is just as if you choose to say: 'There isn't a last house on this road; one can always build an additional one.'" Thus we appear to

have met the first of Wittgenstein's objections to a realist theory of meaning. What about the second?

The first of Wittgenstein's objections really contained its own solution. 'The theory doesn't do such and so'. So, one adds on to the theory to make it do 'such and so'. The second objection is more profound, however. It is not that the principle of bivalence fails to deal with certain features of language. Rather, it is that the principle is incoherent given certain other of Wittgenstein's other theses; i.e. the 'use' criteria of meaning. Here the examples of undecidable sentences are so clear that I see no way of saving the principle of bivalence and hence realism must be given up. Does this destroy the chances for a theory of meaning? No, and again the answer comes from Dummett. Replace the referential/truth-conditions theory with a theory based upon assertibility.<sup>12</sup> The semantics would in many respects resemble that of the realist theory. One would specify the meanings of terms by showing how one would come to recognize the referent. One then would specify the meanings of the atomic sentences by showing how to verify and falsify them. And finally one would give a recursive specification of the truth-values of complex sentences in terms of their components. For example, 'If A then B' would be explained as 'given a verification of A one can construct a verification of B'. In this way one can have a systematic theory of meaning that meets the requirements of 'meaning is use' in that knowledge of the meaning of any sentence would be manifestable in terms of verification. Of course certain sentences would remain neither true nor false and consequently their meanings would remain incomplete. Such a theory already exists for an important fragment of language. This is the intuitionistic logic that underlies intuitionistic mathematics. Verification here consists in proof. Although none of the details are to be found in the Investigations, I am inclined to think that they would be readily accepted by Wittgenstein since they do seem to take care of the use criteria. (It is also interesting to note that it was the intuitionist Brouwer who inspired Wittgenstein to return to philosophy in the 1930's).

We now seem to have constructed a theory of meaning for language that meets both of Wittgenstein's objections to certain theories of meaning. It accounts for the various uses of a sentence within language and it also keeps meaningful sentences in line with the requirement of public manifestability. But this theory was gained at some cost. We were forced to abandon 'realism'. We can no longer speak about an independent reality rendering our sentences true and false regardless of our ability to recognize it. If sentences may be neither true nor false then it cannot be the world that they neither agree nor disagree with. It is we

through our language who bring the world into reality. Wittgenstein doesn't speak in precisely this way, but clearly he is in agreement here. For him, "grammar tells what kind of object anything is"<sup>11</sup> "One ought to ask, not what (a's) are . . . , but how the word 'a' is used."<sup>12</sup> This 'constructed' world remains objective, however, since language is objective and public. Hence, for speakers of a language, reality will remain objectively constant across speakers.

I hope to have shown that one can reasonably take Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations to be the forerunner of recent anti-realist theories of meaning, notably the theory of Michael Dummett. Given the nature of the Investigations, however, I fear that this interpretation may not be entirely consistent with Wittgenstein's expressed positions in the Investigations. But then this may not be verifiable.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Many of the ideas I present in this paper I owe to the work of Michael Dummett. His ideas on the philosophy of language will be found throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup>Philosophical Investigations, §43.

<sup>3</sup>Almost all of Dummett's work discusses realism/anti-realism. But a good place to start would be "Realism" in Truth and Other Enigmas.

<sup>4</sup>Tractatus, 2.21 for example.

<sup>5</sup>P. I. §§ 1-37 for example.

<sup>6</sup>P. I., § 23.

<sup>7</sup>P. I., §§ 190, § 692 are fairly explicit.

<sup>8</sup>P. I., §§ 51-369 for the discussion of the LEM.

<sup>9</sup>P. I., §§ 352, § 516.

<sup>10</sup>See Platts' Introduction to Reference, Truth and Reality for a nice brief account of the theory of force and of recent theory of meaning in general.

<sup>11</sup>P. I., § 29.

<sup>12</sup>See Dummett's Elements of Intuitionism for a very complete account of an 'assertability conditions' theory of meaning for mathematics. See also "Truth" in



Truth and Other Enigmas. Many of his other papers and books contain similar discussions.

<sup>13</sup>P.I., § 373.

<sup>14</sup>P.I., § 370.

### Bibliography

Dummett, Michael, Elements of Intuitionism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

Dummett, Michael, Truth and Other Enigmas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Platts, Mark, ed., Reference, Truth and Reality (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Philosophical Investigations (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1958).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).