A Criterion of Meaning in Science & Religion

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Abstract

In this paper, a modest attempt has been made to expound and evaluate the criterion of meaning and its relevance in the domains of philosophy of science and the philosophy of religion. The need for a medium of communication which is referred to as a "language" is equally felt in the domains of science, religion, aesthetics, and morality. No single theory of meaning can universally apply to all the domains of life. Hence, there remains the problem of finding and applying one criterion of the meaning of language. Language is very much elastic, and it can be used in many ways. Hence, it leads to diversified functions of words both in science & religion. Adumbrated views regarding the criterion of meaning gather momentum as a key concept in philosophies of science and religion.

Keywords: Criterion, meaning, language, demarcation, assertions, science, religion.

Language Games

The problem in connection with the criterion of 'Meaning' in the domains of the philosophy of "Science" and the philosophy of "religion" arises out of sheer flexibi lity of meaning. Moreover, the language of "Science" and the language of "religion" both being the language of some sort of the other raised the problem.

The need for a medium of communication is generally referred to as "language" which is equally felt in the domains of science, religion, ascetics, morality, and so on- in different walks of life.

There are different "language games" that shall be taken into consideration while analyzing the 'meaning', for no single theory of meaning can apply to all the "language

games". Hence, there remains the problem of finding and applying one criterion of meaning to different contexts. The universalizability of the criterion of meaning thus becomes an important issue.

Wittgenstein's Doctrine of the theory of "meaning" can be applied to different "language games". The referential theory of meaning applies to certain language games (e.g., describes, naming, etc.) but not to others (e.g., promises, commands, and requests). This is due to what Wittgenstein points out as the diversity of functions of the words. The context in which a word is used will determine the meaning of the word, and for each different context in which the same word is used, the meaning of the word may change accordingly. So, there cannot be a single all-abiding formula to cover every case. (Wittgenstein 189). According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word assumes the ability of a reader to use it.

To treat meaning as universally dependable, indiscriminately applicable, and uniformly available is to generate a variety of confusion and misunderstanding. Philosophy as a critique of language seeks justifiability and communicability to establish the 'truth value of the meaning (Ayer 36)

The "Meaning" of a statement "lies in the method of its verification" (Wilson 4) and the forerunners of testability believe that the meaningfulness of an assertion is dependent on the circumstances or situation which would make it false. "The position leads to the fact that to be meaningful, a statement needs to be either verified at least in principle or falsified by a possible state of an affair" (Carnap 83).

To understand what the scientist is operating on, one must try to understand the typicality of the functions of the language of science and the same is with any other branches of knowledge. Whereas religious language is truly bound to the religious experiences of the religious community as the scientific language is linked with the scientific operations of that community.

The scientists and the religious persons do not understand each other not because they are speaking "different languages". They both speak one formal language (e.g., Hindi, Marathi, English, French, German, etc) or another. They do not understand each other just because their vocabularies are different. They differ in contextualizing the meaning. It leads agree to with Wittgenstein that a word or even a sentence has meaning only because of the "rule" of the "game" being played (Wittgenstein 166). Meaning always banks both upon the context and ability of the user and it is uniformly applicable to both science and religion.

Criterion of Meaning

Wittgenstein's Doctrine of the theory of "meaning" seems to be restrictive. The cases of the analytic statements, non-assertive sentences, statements about one's own experiences, value statements, and metaphysical statements are distinctive. So, the only area in which the criterion of meaning could hold plausible is the case of empirical statements made in daily life and science (Hospers 203) The criterion of meaning is narrow in its range of application, and on the other hand, it is evolutionary and wielded with an ability to embrace all kinds of expressions.

It is a fact that "where there is transcendentalism, there will also be scepticism" (206). But then, this does not necessitate total eschewal of metaphysics and espousal of only usual empirical statements in ordinary life and science. The consequence is that this position of unwarranted eschewal and one-sided espousal becomes unfair to a major part of our life's activities. Bambrough rightly points out that:

"Philosophy consists in the assembling of reminders, and one cannot remind somebody of something unless he already knows it. The pursuit of wisdom, the search for vision, largely consists, as Plato well knew, in the attempt to achieve revision, recollection and anamnesis" (Bambrough 90)

Due to the possibility of multiple criteria of meaning about any language, whatsoever, be it ordinary, scientific, religious, technical, or others and due to 'context-variation' in the application of the same criterion to different domains, much logical discrepancy occurs. In the light of the above, testability could not be regarded as a criterion of meaning.

It is not the 'truth –value' (truth and testability) of language expression but rather the justifiability and communicability that generate viable 'meaning' for philosophy. Whereas science relies on justifiability and testability of assumptions based on the truth value of experiments to generate the 'meaning'.

Conclusion

Religious truth is beyond the theories of science, and it rests upon faith. The religious assertions are "significant articles of faith" (Mitchell 183) and hence they are immune to time and space. On the contrary scientific truth solely believe in the objectivity of an experiment and they are immune to belief and disbelief.

We must acknowledge our debts to philosophers and scientists for drawing the faithfulness and objectivity of meaning in philosophies of religion and science respectively. Despite limitations, "meaning" gets criteriological value. We may disagree with the criterion of meaning propagated by Wittgenstein. But it is quite evident that the application of the criterion of meaning has posed a great challenge to the meaningfulness of religious assertions and scientific assumptions.

Views brooded in this paper, the criterion of "meaning" gathers ample momentum as a key- concept in philosophies of science and religion.

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