

Meaning is use

Wittgenstein says that 'the meaning of a word is its use in language' (PI 43), I believe addresses the problem of universals, because in comparison Realists and Nominalists are preoccupied with the definition, classification and ontological status of things, whilst it is the context in which language is used in human activities that determines meaning.

How therefore is it that we have the ability to use universals (that being what particular things have in common, namely characteristics or qualities), to judge what is the case and to say the right things at the right time?

Nominalists believe that only particular things exist, so either everything is particular or everything is concrete and hence not abstract (non-spatial and non-temporal). Universal terms and names are used like red and chair, but exist nominally merely as concepts attaching to a name. All that things called red and chair have in common are being called red and chair. It is Impossible for numerically distinct things to have numerically one and the same attribute. So a particular red chair has the unique properties of being red and a chair that are particular to that specific thing, although there is an exact similarity between the distinct particular attributes of being red and being a chair that we are acquainted with by our experience of concrete particulars.

One of the benefits of Nominalism is its ontological parsimony, in as much as it doesn't admit to abstract entities. Its competitor Realism believes that abstract entities like universals *really* exist, just as concrete red chairs do. For Plato eternal forms of 'red' and 'chair' exist more perfectly than concrete red chairs, which are but mere imperfect copies of their original timeless forms. Knowledge of the forms, these eternal, extra mental realities are structural elements in the fabric of the world and it is to this reality that language corresponds. Without the guiding structure of the platonic forms what keeps language on track for a Nominalist? Things are just words that we use as crude tools, as we don't believe in abstract entities how can we use the words, truth, beauty, good and of course the words virtue, courage and piety and be a true Nominalist? We can see some similarities between things and we classify them accordingly, but nothing exists in this framework that provides the standards for correctness and this is what is wrong with Nominalism. Rules are arbitrary and parochial relative to a scheme of classification; but it is left to the discretion of the language user to decide on the similarities and differences of things.

For Locke and Hume, all knowledge is derived from experience and what is found in the world are similar things. When we find something in common, we apply the same name to all of them, so all we really know is the linguistic sign that is tied to the object without any consideration for how the sign is used. But, similarity has nothing to do with the nature of something in isolation; giving a paper draft on such a description (by interpreting all words as names) is leaving it unfinished or incomplete, not really fit for purpose.

Wittgenstein compared these similarities as "family resemblances" using games as an example (Olympic Games, ball-games, card-games, PI 66); there must be something in common because they are all called games? But you will not see anything that is common to all (no rigid or essential features that was a key element of the Tractatus), only similarities and relationships. So Wittgenstein has moved from surgical analysis, from breaking propositions down into the most basic and simple objects that we don't experience in day to day life, to clarifying concepts at the level of ordinary language.

So it may look as if what we were doing was Nominalism, by reducing concepts to words, which is where Nominalists focus their attention, whilst ignoring the possibilities of phenomena and the conceptual framework within which they are employed and embedded, the customs and cultures that give sense to their use. For Wittgenstein the speaking of a language is a form of life, there is no a priori limit to how a term is used, language is organic, it grows and changes over time like a city. "Meaning is use" shows how it is that human activity and the various language games that are played dictate how a term is used. It can't be something static and inflexible because language is purposeful; it requires that flexibility to fit into the vastly different contexts that appear and it is open to constant change.

Relations of similarity are the basis to posit universals, there are many things that are 'red' and 'chairs' in the world, once we master the language and grasp the concepts 'red' and 'chair', we can judge when we are in the presence of such things and it is by such practice and being corrected by the community as a whole that we perfect our usage of such terms.

There are at least two criticisms of the 'meaning is use' theory, one being, the vagueness of the notion, because

of the variety of uses of expressions there results a multitude of meanings, but in defence of the theory that is just the way language works, you just can't apply strict rules when there are so many overlapping meanings and uses. Two, someone can use terms correctly without knowing their meaning, for example "amen" (George Pitcher, Wittgenstein, pg 252). In this particular case and from my perspective, with "amen", one just knows when to say it, if I am being respectful and following others use in what might be a solemn occasion, so that is what it really means in that particular situation.

There are of course these contested cases as alluded to and the failure of the Socratic dialogues to conclude what virtue, courage and piety are ably demonstrates that meaning isn't fixed in isolation or in advance of an attribution. Acts of courage are democratically agreed upon, because language takes place out in the open (not hidden in minds) and the infinite combination of states of affairs that may occur determine that meaning and use are always in the process of being decided upon. So it is the inseparable combination of linguistic sign, object and human activity that make up the language game, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm (PI 108).

So in summary for Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is the function of its use in language, learning the meaning of a word is being trained to use it in appropriate ways and understanding the meaning of a word is using it correctly, by following community rules. "Meaning is use" keeps us away from the extremes of Realism and Nominalism and positions firmly in the reality we experience in our day to day lives.