

Elucidation in Transition of Wittgenstein's Philosophy

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1. Introduction

Wittgenstein never talked about 'elucidation' in the later period. He used the term only three times even in the *Tractatus*. 'Elucidation' is, however, an important concept for his early philosophy. It is 'elucidation' that he appealed to when he characterized his philosophy in the *Tractatus*. Then, does it mean that elucidation is never important in his later philosophy? I will argue that he carried over some features of elucidation as crucial elements in his transition from the early to the later philosophy.

2. Elucidation in the *Tractatus*

Despite its importance, interpreters of Wittgenstein have been puzzled with his uses of 'elucidation.' It is partly because what he means by elucidations is not clear, partly because his three cases seem inconsistent. 'Elucidation' appears in the following sections in the *Tractatus*:

3.263 The meanings of primitive signs can be explained by means of elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known.

4.112 Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions', but rather in the clarification of propositions. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

Elucidations are propositions that include primitive signs, which are explained by means of elucidations. Max Black is puzzled with this relation between elucidations and primitive signs: only if primitive signs are already known, elucidations are understood while such primitive signs are explained by means of elucidations (Black 1964, 114-5). It is mysterious, according to Black, how speaker and hearer achieve common reference because the meanings of primitive signs are only shown in propositions without explicit explanation. He assumes that Wittgenstein points out a fact concerning mutual understanding in psychology or sociology, and that there can be no philosophical concern. In section 4.112, however, Wittgenstein states that elucidations are essential for philosophy that aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Moreover, in section 6.54, he illustrates his philosophical propositions with elucidations, which are nonsensical, but with which he helps someone see the world aright. Then, how can we have a consistent picture of Wittgenstein's uses of 'elucidation'? P. M. S. Hacker tells us to notice the difference between the first

case and the last two cases (Hacker 1975, 605, fn. 1). On the other hand, James Conant demonstrates a consistent view of Tractarian elucidation by focusing on its nonsensical but therapeutic role (Conant 2000). I shall discuss what Wittgenstein finds common to the uses of 'elucidation' in the three cases.

'Elucidation' is not original to Wittgenstein. He critically takes it over from Gottlob Frege, who committed himself to a program known as logicism. This was an attempt to reduce mathematics to a logical system. In order to accomplish his program of logicism, Frege allows only two ways to introduce terms into the system. One is definition and the other is elucidation. Definition can introduce the logically complex but not the logically simple. Only elucidation can reach something primitive.

Elucidation is given a limited but necessary role in Frege's logicist program. He excludes elucidation from a system because elucidation is not precise. But he claims that it necessarily comes before constructing a system (Frege 1997, 313). Elucidation is carried out in ordinary language, in which precise meanings are not always indicated. Thus, elucidation is not suitable for science. At the beginning of constructing a discipline, however, a scientist needs to have a basis for communication with others. Even though elucidation is not precise enough, it is required for that pragmatic reason. Elucidation sets out a system, but should not belong to the system because of its vagueness. Elucidation relies on someone else's guessing. It is accomplished by "an understanding willing to meet one halfway." (Frege 1969, 254)

Wittgenstein critically takes over 'elucidation' from Frege. Indeed he objects to the fact that Frege considers categorical notions and pieces of logical equipment as indefinables (TLP 4.1272 and 5.4) and claims that only *Names* are primitive signs (TLP 3.202 and 3.26). They still share the idea that elucidation differs from definition and explains the meanings of primitive signs.

While both Frege and Wittgenstein also agree that elucidations are not included within a science, the roles are different. The Fregean elucidations are necessary as a propaedeutic to a science. Since elucidations cannot be precise, they have to rely on someone else's guessing. For Wittgenstein, elucidations are required only when the logic of thought is not clear or is misunderstood. Elucidations are used temporarily and to be thrown away after the logic is understood because they are nonsensical pseudo-propositions.

Thus the whole picture of the Tractarian elucidation can be illustrated with the motif of showing. The task of the Tractarian elucidation is to show what can not be said. In TLP 3.263, the unsayable is the meanings of primitive signs. In order to show the meanings of primitive signs, elucidations talk about the signs. In TLP 4.112, it is emphasized that philosophy is an activity of clarifying thoughts. Philosophy makes the boundary of thoughts clear by talking about the sayable and showing the unsayable. Since the way of clarification essentially includes showing, Wittgenstein believes that propositions in a philosophical work should be elucidations. In TLP 6.54,

quoted above, he explains his propositions in particular, that is, the work of the *Tractatus* itself. The propositions of this work are nonsensical—he attempts to talk about the unsayable, but they are allowed to be used because they serve as an activity of clarification. Not what is said but what is (being) done is essential for philosophy. But again, since his propositions are nonsensical, they are to be thrown away after his readers get the point. Elucidations are used only when you have the intention of showing. Showing is working on someone who does not see what you see; philosophy teaches one to see the world aright. Wittgenstein describes the only correct method of philosophy: to say nothing except what can be said, and to show (*nachweisen*) that someone failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions whenever he wants to say something metaphysical; “he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—this method would be the only strictly correct one” (TLP 6.53).

3. Ostensive Teaching As Elucidation

When Wittgenstein restarted philosophy at the beginning of the early thirties, he was developing a new and deeper thought about elucidation:

If I explain the meaning of a word 'A' to someone by pointing to something and saying 'This is A', then this expression may be meant in two different ways. Either it is itself a proposition already, in which case it can only be understood once the meaning of 'A' is known, i.e. I must now leave it to chance whether he takes it as I meant it or not. Or the sentence is a definition. (PR, sec. 6)

The first case is quite similar to the Tractarian elucidation. Whether or not an elucidation can be understood depends on the previous knowledge of the person to whom you are talking. The second case, however, is not a definition in the Tractarian sense. It is another characteristic of elucidation even though he calls it a definition. He continues:

Or the sentence is a definition. Suppose I have said to someone 'A is ill', but he doesn't know who I mean by 'A', and I now point at a man, saying 'This is A'. Here the expression is a definition, but this can only be understood if he has already gathered what kind of object it is through his understanding of the grammar of the proposition 'A is ill'. But this means that any kind of explanation of a language presupposes a language already. And in a certain sense, the use of language is something that cannot be taught, i.e. I cannot use language to teach it in the way in which language could be used to teach someone to play the piano. —And that of course is just another way of saying: I cannot use language to get outside language.

Wittgenstein later calls the second case *ostensive teaching*. The characteristic of the second case is what the early Wittgenstein implied in his Tractarian elucidation but he was unaware of it at that early date. Wittgenstein has not yet reached an answer in the passage above. But he recognizes that in the *Tractatus* he did not think enough about how he can show the unsayable. The early Wittgenstein may have implicitly believed that, when someone does not know the meaning of a Name, we can make him know the meaning by showing him the object. But now in the early thirties he suspects that showing the object may not fix the meaning. The example of the difficulty of teaching suggests that the function of showing in elucidation is not certain. His consideration of the difficulty of teaching came to dominate his discussions in the later period. The case of

ostensive definition or teaching is a major example of them.

4. *Übersicht* As an Elucidating Method

According to G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein found a new method of philosophy in the early thirties (PO, 113-4). He did not fully explain what it was. He merely said that he was not teaching new facts but telling what you already know. Telling those things, he tried to have students get a synopsis of them in order to remove their intellectual discomfort; he wanted to teach (or show) how to get a synopsis of trivial things.

The original German word of 'synopsis' is *Übersicht*. There is no one appropriate word in English and it is not easy to understand *Übersicht* as a method. The interpreters claim, however, that the notion of *Übersicht* is prominent in all Wittgenstein's later philosophy and is of paramount importance (Baker and Hacker 1983, 296).

Wittgenstein's discussion on *Übersicht* appears in his objection to Frazer's attempt to explain primitive rituals in terms of scientific, historical or causal explanation. The problem with the scientific explanation, according to Wittgenstein, is that it makes the magical and religious views of primitive people look like errors (PO, 119). For example, Frazer explains that a savage stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him. Frazer finds stupidity in their way of thinking. But it is only because he attempts to explain rituals from his own scientific view. Wittgenstein gives an example of someone who kisses the picture of his beloved. This is not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object but it rather aims at satisfaction. In the same way, rituals are not instrumental but symbolic or expressive.

Wittgenstein claims that every explanation is only a hypothesis. It is one of many different ways of seeing collected facts. He wrote:

“And so the chorus points to a secret law” one feels like saying to Frazer's collection of facts. I *can* represent this law, this idea, by means of an evolutionary hypothesis, or also, analogously to the schema of a plant, by means of the schema of a religious ceremony, but also by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a '*perspicuous*' representation.

The concept of perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It denotes the form of our representation, the way we see things. (PO, 133)

Scientific explanations have an assumption, like 'progress' or 'evolution' as a secret law. Facts are explained by means of progress or evolution. Wittgenstein does not deny the possibility of an explanation. There are different approaches to the collected facts, for example, morphological representation, which Goethe had, and perspicuous representation, which Wittgenstein recommends us to have. Then, how can perspicuous representation be an alternative to see strange forms of life?

Perspicuous representation is made by the arrangement of factual contents alone, without adding any explanation to it. Then, how can we have a clear view by arranging the facts? Wittgenstein's answer is that we can find connecting links between the facts. By finding the links between the seemingly isolated facts, we understand them.

Wittgenstein holds *Übersicht* as a philosophical method in the *Philosophical Investigations*. He describes many different language games as examples in the *Investigations* and expects readers to command a clear view of them. "The [philosophical] problems are solved, not giving new information, but by arranging what we have already known" (PI, sec. 109). Wittgenstein encourages us to find a link among trivial things in order that we can see the world differently and that we can be freed from pictures that we are held captive. How to show/teach the way out of a current dominant situation is the main concern of his philosophy, as he wrote, "What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (PI, sec. 309).

5. Conclusion

The Later Wittgenstein never used the term 'elucidation.' As we have seen, some features of Tractarian elucidation are crucial in his later philosophy. Elucidation is one of keys to understand not only his early philosophy but also the development and consistency of his philosophy.

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