

An Evaluation of the Neo-Thomistic Theory of Signs and Comment 1:27a in Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations'

Abstract:

This paper will examine The Neo-Thomistic theory of signs in light of a specific objection to the referential theory of language found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* 1:27a. In order to examine the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs, I will first examine the historical origin as found in Aristotle's 'On Interpretation'. I will then present the theory of signs as developed by Jacques Maritain, Mortimer Adler, Henry Veatch, and George Klubertanz. Specifically I will explain the notion of a sign, and the different types of signs, including formal, instrumental, naming, and signaling signs. I will then briefly explain Wittgenstein's overall objections to the referential theory of meaning in his 'Philosophical Investigations'. I will then present a more detailed exposition of 1:27a, which looks at exclamations, and shows the problem that exclamations pose for the referential theory of meaning. Finally, I will examine whether or not the specific objection found in 1:27a applies to the Neo-Thomistic theory of meaning as developed by the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs. By demonstrating a certain type of relation between a signaling sign and a naming sign, I will show that the specific objection to the referential theory of meaning found in 1:27a does not apply to the Neo-Thomistic theory of the sign. Instead, the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs is as capable of explaining exclamations as Wittgenstein's theory of language's meaning found in use.

An Evaluation of the Neo-Thomistic Theory of Signs and Comment 1:27a in Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations'

In this paper, I will evaluate the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs in light of the criticisms of the Augustinian theory of meaning in Ludwig Wittgenstein's comment 1:27a in Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations.' In order to evaluate the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs, I will first briefly summarize the basis for a Neo-Thomistic theory of signs as found in Aristotle's 'On Interpretation'. After presenting the historical basis, I will explain the main aspects of a Neo-Thomistic theory of signs as found in the works of Henry Babcock Veatch, George Klubertanz, Jacques Maritain and Mortimer Adler. To explain the theory of signs, I will define what a sign is generally, and specifically I will define the role of formal signs and instrumental signs. In explaining the theory of signs, I will also distinguish between a signaling sign and a designating sign. After explaining the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs, I will briefly summarize the basic theory of meaning found in Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations' (PI) and more closely explain the criticism of the Augustinian/Referential theory of meaning found in comment 1:27a of PI. By examining PI 1:27a, I will present Wittgenstein's argument against the Referential theory of meaning based on the use of exclamations. Finally, I will evaluate the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs in light of PI 1:27a, by determining if the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs is the same thing as a referential theory of meaning. Based on Adler's explanation of the difference between signals and designators, I will conclude that PI 1:27a does not extend to the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs. In the end, I will show that a Neo-Thomistic theory of signs can make sense of exclamations and does not fall prey to Wittgenstein's objection in PI 1:27a.

Aristotle's theory of meaning is presented at the beginning of his work, 'De Interpretatione'. The portion of his theory of meaning that is relevant to this paper is found at the beginning of the book. Aristotle writes,

"Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images."
(De Interpretatione 16a5)

While space will not allow for a full defense of this, as it assumes some epistemological and metaphysical positions that have been challenged and are hotly debated today, it is helpful to present Aristotle's basic explanation as it is the foundation for the later development of the theory of the sign by Neo-Thomists. One cannot find a full explanation of the Neo-Thomists development of the theory of the sign in Aristotle's 'De Interpretatione', but the Neo-Thomists theory does cohere with Aristotle's, and is largely deducible from it. The main point of Aristotle's description that will be developed further in this paper is that words are signs or symbols, and as such direct one to something other than the actual word. To clarify, the meaning of the word is something other than the word. The Neo-Thomistic theory of the sign presented in this paper is a theory that works largely from this basic assumption.

The Neo-Thomists surveyed in this paper are all agreed on the general definition of a sign. While there is nothing significantly different about the way Neo-Thomists define a sign and the general usage of the word, some clarification of how they use the word will be helpful for this paper. According to the logician Henry Babcock Veatch in his work, 'Intentional Logic', "A sign... must be of such a nature as to present, or better represent, something other than itself to a knowing power (Intentional Logic 11)." Several things ought to be taken into consideration from this quote. First, signs are significant as signs because they point to something distinct from themselves. According to a Neo-Thomistic understanding of the sign, there is a relation between the sign and whatever is signified. Secondly, as Jacques Maritain has noted in his contribution to the volume, 'Language: An Enquiry into its Meaning and Function', humans are cognizant of the relation between the sign and the signified. (Language: An Enquiry into its Meaning and Function 87)

Signs can be divided into two types within the Neo-Thomistic theory; instrumental and formal. The more pertinent of the two for this paper is the instrumental sign, so I will devote more space in explaining them. Formal signs are that by which something else is known. As Veatch notes, "A formal sign is one whose whole nature and being are simply a representing, or a meaning, or a signifying of something else (Intentional Logic 13)." They are what make knowledge of the relation between the sign and signified possible, while themselves only being known reflexively. A formal sign does not have existence in and of itself but only with respect to what is signified. For instance, the formal sign of a word only exists with respect to the word, not to the sign. While a full defense of formal signs is not available in this paper, a brief one may be helpful for contributing to the purpose of my paper. If formal signs are not admitted into a theory of knowledge and language, a vicious infinite regress ensues. Veatch notes that if one is to have knowledge of ones own ideas, then their knowledge could either be known by an instrumental sign or a formal sign. If the former, then one does not really know their own ideas. Instead one only knows the ideas of their ideas, and so on ad infinitum (15). Admitting formal signs into the theory of language presented prevents this regress, and will henceforth be assumed.

Instrumental signs have a mind independent existence. This does not entail that instrumental signs are *meaningful* in the absence of a mind by pointing to something else mind independently, but instead that in and of themselves they exist. George Klubertanz notes that an instrumental sign has a being or nature and also serves as a sign when it leads a knower to knowledge of something other than the sign (The Philosophy of Human Nature 84). The sign indicating a railroad crossing exists whether I see it or not, but is only meaningful when I am cognizant of it.

Instrumental signs can be further distinguished into natural and conventional signs. Natural instrumental signs, according to Veatch, "point to or represent other things simply in virtue of what they are as natural beings (Intentional Logic 11)." Smoke points to fire because fire is the *cause* of smoke. There is a relation between smoke and fire that is real, because fire causes smoke and smoke is an effect of fire. The reality of the connection between the two is there whether or not a knower sees it and understands the connection. Conventional signs, on the other hand, have an arbitrary relation between the sign and signified. Their significance is not from their own nature, but instead from human convention. Such are words, railroad signs,

traffic lights, and other types found. The relation between a conventional sign and the thing signified is not similar to the relation found between a natural sign and thing signified (Intentional Logic 11).

A final distinction is needed in order to adequately present the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs in light of Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations'. This is the distinction between a sign that is meaningful as a signal and a sign that is meaningful in virtue of the fact that it names, or designates something. As Mortimer Adler has noted in his contribution, 'Some Questions About Language', all natural signs are signaling signs (Some Questions About Language 23). Smoke signals fire and a growling stomach signals hunger. However, not all signs name something else. 'Davis' names the author of this paper, but it does not always signal that I am present. Much work has been done to also distinguish between naming and designating within a Neo-Thomistic theory of signs, but it is not relevant for this present paper and henceforth will not be elaborated upon (Intentional Logic 195-196).

With this summarization of the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs presented, it is now necessary to briefly explain the overall criticism's found in Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations' and a more in depth explanation of his remarks in PI 1:27a. There is widely divergent opinion as to the overall aim of PI, as its writing style is obscure as a whole yet very clear within the multiple points within it. As G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker have noted in their commentary on the work, some view the PI as building upon Wittgenstein's earlier thought in the 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus' and the Blue and Brown books. Others view the PI as a criticism, rebuttal, and rejection of his earlier work as well as the other analysts (Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning 1). It is the latter view that will be assumed in this paper. Wittgenstein's earlier works, especially the 'Tractatus', proposed a theory of meaning that was largely referential or Augustinian in nature (Hereby referred to as 'RTM' for Referential Theory of Meaning). It envisioned a language that was a perfect representation of reality, with a univocal, one-to-one correspondence between word and thing (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 15-17). Due to the many problems brought on by such a theory of language (such as logical positivism), the later Wittgenstein rejected his earlier proposal. In the PI, he proposed a new theory of meaning that sees language's meaning largely found its use instead of a words referent (Philosophical Investigations 20).

The issue with the early view of language that Wittgenstein critiques in PI 1:27a is naming. According to the RTM, the meaning of a word is just what the word names. The word 'chair' means the actual item referred to. This is problematic though, because if the meaning of words just is what the words refer to, then many expressions would not have meaning, or at least the meaning typically thought of. He uses the example of exclamations in PI 1:27a. Take the exclamation "Water!" for example. Does that just mean H₂O? Does the expression not have meaning besides what it refers to? The meaning of an expression like "Water!" could not be completely expressed ostensively. One could not point to a body of water, and have that be identical to "Water!" After listing six expressions similar to the first, Wittgenstein mockingly asks, "Are you inclined still to call these words 'names of objects' (PI 20)." The reason he asks the question is that there is more meaning to the expression than just the expressions or a component of the expressions referent.

Baker and Hacker note that these exclamations present a *reductio ad absurdum* of the RTM, and such a *reductio ad absurdum* is reason enough to abandon the RTM (Wittgenstein: *Understanding and Meaning* 161). The argument Wittgenstein is using in this passage against the RTM can best be presented as:

- (1) The meaning of expressions (statements, sentences, words, etc) is *just* what the words in the expressions refer to (RTM)
- (2) Exclamations are expressions
- (3) Therefore, the meaning of exclamations is *just* what the words in exclamations refer to.

Of course, Wittgenstein is making the point that the meaning of exclamations is *not* just what the words refer to or name. They are meaningful not in so far as they name, because they clearly do either *more* than name or do *not* name at all (i.e.: “No!”). A philosophy of language that can’t explain them or reduces their meaning to something other than what common sense attests against is a philosophy of language that is best abandoned. So his final argument against the RTM as derived from PI 1:27a is as follows:

- (1) If the meaning of an expression is always just what the words in the expression refer to (RTM), then words do not have meaning beyond their referents.
- (2) But words used in exclamations have meaning beyond their referents
- (3) Therefore, the meaning of expressions is not always just what the words in the expression refer to.
- (4) If the meaning of an expression is not always just what the words in the expression refer to, then the RTM is not a valid or complete theory of meaning
- (5) Therefore, the RTM is not a valid or complete theory of meaning.

As such, PI 1:27a presents one more defeater in a powerful compilation of arguments against the RTM and the earlier attempts to present a logically accurate language. In the process, Wittgenstein attempts to present a theory of meaning that can explain exclamations. His new theory of meaning states that meaning is usually found in the use of a word.

While Wittgenstein does a masterful job at refuting the RTM, the question remains; do his criticisms also apply to the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs? *Prima facie*, it would seem so, for the meaning of a word within a Neo-Thomistic theory of meaning is what the word signifies. Words are conventional signs, and as such have meaning only insofar as there is a relation between the word and what is signified by the word. Natural signs differ from conventional words by them having significance in and of themselves, such as smoke being significant as smoke and in relation to the fire that causes it. As words lack the significance in and of themselves that a natural sign has, it would appear that words fall prey to Wittgenstein’s criticisms.

A closer examination is necessary to answer the above question. I will begin with Mortimer Adler’s explanation of the three ways there can be a relation of meaning between two things, X and Y:

- (i) When X and Y are both words
- (ii) When X is a word and Y is something other than a word
- (iii) When neither X nor Y are words (Some Questions about Language 20-21).

The two relations of meaning relevant to PI 1:27a are (ii) and (iii). As presented in the beginning of this paper, (ii) can be either a signaling or a designating (naming) relationship between X and Y. (iii) can only be a signaling relationship, which is either natural or conventional. For example, (iii) would be a natural signaling relationship with X being smoke and Y being a fire. (iii) would be a conventional signaling relationship if X was an alarm and Y was a broken window. Both (ii) and (iii) are pertinent to PI 1:27a because of the possible meanings of the expressions Wittgenstein lists, which I believe can be classified as signaling relationships.

The exclamations that Wittgenstein lists in PI 1:27a which are mentioned earlier in this paper are listed without specifying a context for each one. To clarify where I believe Adler's theory of the relation of meaning intersects with PI 1:27a, I will propose a few sample contexts for the first exclamation ("Water!"):

1. A child is thirsty and is demanding water from a parent
2. A man in the desert who has not had a drink in three days sees a pond
3. A flash flood has erupted and someone wants to warn villagers of the flood
4. A child sees the ocean for the first time
5. A cup spills on the floor

Any of these scenarios present what is first and foremost a signaling relation between the exclamation "Water!" and the situation the expression is exclaimed. I will assume the first scenario to show how Adler's theory makes sense of exclamations. Clearly in the exclamation, "Water!", the meaning of the expression is not identical with a cup of water that a child expects. Instead, there is more to the expression than the cup. Also, the meaning of the expression cannot be *less* than or completely *other* than a cup of water either. In this situation, "Water!" is a signal that the child is in need or desires water. It is a signal in a similar way that a baby's cry signals its thirst for formula, and is less similar but still like a stomach pain signals hunger.

There is more to the relation of meaning between the situation above and the exclamation though. While "Water!" certainly signals a child's thirst, the relation between the expression and the situation cannot be sufficiently explained as a signaling relation. Neither the word 'water' nor the expression "Water!" are natural signals of thirst. Instead, 'water' is a conventional sign which contributes to the composition of the exclamation. Instead, the meaning of the expression can only have signaling significance if the relation of signaling is consequent upon another relation of designation. The word 'water' can be used to signal thirst and a desire for water if and only if the word 'water' first names or designates water. As Adler notes (albeit not using gender neutral language), "His (The hearer of an expression) interpretation of them (expressions) as signals is consequent upon his understanding of them as designators (Some Questions about Language 23)." Maritain's point that

humans are cognizant of the relation between sign and signified supports this relation of designation to signaling being possible with conventional signs. A parent would not know to bring a child a glass of water unless 'water' first named water and the exclamation built upon the word assumed the designating relation. The parent could not know that "Water!" signaled thirst unless the parent was cognizant of the relation between the signs and the signified. The child could not use the expression as a signal either unless the child was first cognizant of the relation.

From this understanding of the relations of meaning, I propose that words or sets of words that are used as signals in expressions can be reduced to words that are used to designate things. I do not claim the reverse, that words used as signals can be deduced from words as names. Further, I do claim that a word used as a signal being reduced to a word as designative means that a word as a signal is completely or solely explainable in light of the word or words being designative. Instead, I am talking about a reduction in which if the word reduced does not have designative significance, it surely cannot have signaling significance (The exception is syncategorematic terms, which space will not allow for me to explore in this paper). From this understanding of the relation of signaling to designation, it seems that PI 1:27a does not apply to the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs.

In this paper, I examined the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs in light of Wittgenstein's criticisms of the RTM in PI. I evaluated it by first presenting the historical basis for the theory of signs in Aristotle's 'De Interpretatione'. I then elaborated upon the definitions of the sign, the instrumental sign, the conventional and natural sign, and the difference between naming and signaling as presented by the Neo-Thomists Veatch, Maritain, Klubertanz and Adler. After presenting the Neo-Thomistic theory of the sign, I gave the general scope of criticisms of the RTM found in Wittgenstein's PI and the specific objections to the RTM found in PI 1:27a. I then examined the exclamations of PI 1:27a in light of the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs and especially as elaborated upon by Adler. By showing the how a meaningful relation of signaling is consequent upon a relation of designating when the sign is a conventional sign, I was able to show that the exclamations in PI 1:27a do not pose a problem for the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs. Instead, the Neo-Thomistic theory of signs is as capable of explaining exclamations as Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as use.

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