

## **Approximation of Meaning and Human Knowledge: An Epistemological Overview**

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The objective of this paper is to probe into the meaning of meaning, validity of meaning and the limitations of human knowledge, in the context of recent trends in literature, social sciences and life sciences. The methodology adopted is largely Poststructuralist and partly linguistic and particularly epistemological.

The researcher proposes three hypotheses:

- a) Language is a system of signs.
- (b) Language is the only medium used to store human knowledge
- (c) The behavioral patterns of the linguistic items affect the organization of whole body of human knowledge and vice versa.

The four thousand years history of 'wise man' on earth has witnessed a lot of progress and today man is supreme among all other living creatures on the earth. We are now in the age of knowledge; Knowledge has become the capital. We see, human beings celebrating their success in every walks of life; but this success is a journey not a destination. The whole human race should look back and ahead whether they are on the right track. Let it be clear that this discourse is not a nihilistic or a skeptic and I fear this document may turn in a blasphemy or an anti-

human treatise, which is not my aim. But I feel there is an urgent need to probe into the meaning of meaning, validity of meaning and the limitations of human knowledge in various forms.

A certain view of the world has been accepted as correct one, if the minute particulars of that view are examined a rather different picture emerges. We can demystify what is received in the name of knowledge. We the human beings claim the truth, reason and knowledge, but that in fact consists of the violent acts of opposition and judgments that subordinate one set of terms and privilege other.

Epistemology, a recent branch of Philosophy deals with the origin, nature and validity of Human knowledge. What I call 'Knowledge' comprises all the disciplines-language, literature, history, politics, psychology, physics, chemistry, biology and their sibling branches. 'The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writings there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meaning' (Barry 35).

Traditionally, we are told that there are four sources of real knowledge.

- (i) Sense: (Five senses) the Knowledge acquired by this source is called empiricism
- (ii) Experience: Positivism
- (iii) Reason: Rationalism
- (iv) Spiritual Vision – Mysticism: Each of these sources can be put under scrutiny or close examination.

The knowledge acquired with the help of these four sources is stored in the form of language. Language is the only medium to store this knowledge. Language is species-specific. We cannot imagine human progress and knowledge without language. Language is a system of signs. A sign is made of signifier and signified. Signifier means a written or spoken word. Signified is

the concept, an abstraction. e.g. R-O-S-E (Spoken or Written) is signifier and what it signifies (a sweet smelling – beautiful – red coloured flower) is signified. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. A sign is sign of another sign. One term in language needs another for its meaning. No word/sign has its meaning individually. Without difference there is no meaning. (man – woman, is – isn't, have – haven't, day – night)

In all human discourses – literary discourse, social discourse, scientific discourse – there is desire for the centre. This centre is at the centre of totality (hypothetic) In fact, the totality has its centre elsewhere. The centre is not the centre. With an invention that centre is displaced or substituted for another centre. The centre cannot remain permanently fixed. This centre is usually one of the terms in the binary oppositions, which are prevalent in all discourses. (e.g. God/man, nature/ man, science/ religion, science/nature, good/bad, day/light, heaven/earth, tiger/lamb). In each pair there is hierarchy and one is privileged and other is unprivileged. Without one other has no meaning. Every text exhibits the presence of a centre. The privileged term is the established meaning. This established meaning can be put under close examination and the result is reversal of meaning. We arrive at a new meaning or a picture.

'Politics is pervasive,  
Language is constitutive,  
Truth is provisional,  
Meaning is contingent,  
Human nature is a myth.' (Barry 36)

We can dismantle the conventional hierarchies in the given system to arrive at an opposite position. Language represents reality. This representation is not total, not adequate. Meaning is no absolute; it is a free play within the system. Meaning is plural, meaning is circular. All theories of knowledge, discussion, research are the plays within this system. As we enquire into the meaning, it recedes further and it is endlessly postponed and endlessly differed. 'Meaning is always an attribute of things, in

the literal sense that meanings are attributed to the things by the human mind, not contained within them.’ (Barry 39)

The smallest unit of written language is a letter of alphabet; English has a set of 26 letters. There is no 27<sup>th</sup> letter. A group of letters in a particular order makes a word. A group of words in a particular order makes a sentence. A group of sentences in a particular order makes a paragraph. A group of paragraphs in a particular order makes a discourse –scientific, literary or social discourse. An individual letter has no meaning but sometimes interpretation can generate meaning. Meaning awaits interpretation, interpretation generates meaning. Let me take some liberty to cite an example – an English word for male sexual organ begin from P – and for female sexual organ begins from letter V-. The initial letters are the pictorial representations of their signifieds. Here interpretation generated iconic meaning.

At the level of word, we speak of denotative/referential Meaning and connotative or emotive meaning. e.g. an elephant’ – ‘a five – toes mammoth mammal’ is denotative meaning and clumsiness and remarkable memory’ is connotative meaning. Scientific and social discourses use denotative/ referential language whereas literary discourses use emotive or connotative language.

What dictionaries give is the standard central meaning of the word for example: Meaning:

*Meaning: What is meant; Significance*

*Meant: What it meant*

*Mean: Signify*

*Significance: being significant*

*Significant: Conveying the meaning*

The circle is complete – we end where we began. Bag is small sac-sac is big bag – town is small city – city is big town. ‘Words

that is to say, are unmotivated signs meaning that there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates.' (Krishnaswamy 41)

At the level of sentence, we speak of contextual meaning. An utterance gets a meaning in a particular context e.g. "Not, now!" If said by a mother to her son demanding ice-cream. If said by a shopkeeper to a customer, means something else and if said by a wife to a husband means something else. 'One should never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation but only in the context of a sentence.' (Wittgenstein 23)

Some sentences claim universal truths e. g. "The sky is blue. The sun rises in the east. The earth is round." All statements are approximations. They are not exact, acute. 'All philosophy is a critique of language.' (Frege 310)

The meaning of a literary discourse is open ended. It is an incomplete circle of meaning. Each attempt to read is an attempt to complete that circle. A host of approaches and methods can be applied to reach the meaning of a literary discourse e. g. moral, philosophical, historical biographical, sociological, expressive, objective, psychological, feminist, Marxist, formalistic, etc. No method can complete the circle of meaning. For example.

Tiger, tiger burning bright,  
In the forest of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

This poem can be read in various contexts and we arrive at very different meanings. Here is a strange meaning – the poet has eaten the meat of tiger and it is burning bright in the forest of stomach. The same thought can be developed further. Meaning is strange, but acceptable. Rhyme and versification restrict the meaning. 'Philosophy of language continues to take seriously the special place language plays in our lives as an object and source

of knowledge, as an interface between minds and as an anchor between experience and reality.' (Lepore 09)

There are two levels of explorations by human beings. All human research, endeavour and exploration is at two levels – Micro level and Macro level. At micro level it begins from atom – tissue – proton-electron – neutron –stem cell – Genetics Human Genome project and nanotechnology. At macro level it begins from the religion – Homer – Ptolemy – Copernicus – Modern astronomy – Aerospace and the work of research organisations like NASA etc.

- These explorations suffer from the problem of perspective. Human knowledge is organised from the human centered perspective. Let us take help of the binary opposition slow/fast or big small.
- What is a lake/pond for a man is an ocean for an ant."

Then can I conclude-

- Can we predict a galaxy, within an atom?
- May a galaxy be an atom from other perspective?

We count all the events around us – in terms of beginning and end. The beginning of something is an end of something, the end of something is a beginning of something. Can we reach that 'Something'?

What we claim today to be truth and reason is truth only within a particular system and under particular circumstances.

Let's turn to Ethics.....

Ethics: On what Principle do I judge things good or bad?

Ethics divided the world into two-parts: Good and bad e.g. God/Satan, heaven/hell, social work / crime, murder, vegetarian food/Non-vegetarian food, patriotism / terrorism.

If we survey through all the scriptures, we come to know that – It is not God who created man but man who created God. We find human qualities in God.

What doctors do is called social service. We can call it interfering in the affairs of God. God wants them to be diseased then why they meddle with His affairs? Do they consider themselves men appointed by God?

I cite a paragraph from an ethical/moral discourse – as a case study:

“Be vegetarian for your own health’s sake,

One can get more protein through pulses, soya bean, milk products, groundnut etc.

Sometime back in Britain mad cow disease spread among non-vegetarians only. Even in India there was rear of bird. flu disease among non-vegetarians God has made human anatomy for vegetarian food. Killing animals is a sin.

In this way you will be saving many animals/ birds from being butchered.

This discourse has a binary oppositions vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Vegetarian is a privileged term. But we can reverse this establishment:

Vegetarian are more sinful – : A hen/a goat feeds hundred people and one non-vegetarian eats hundred plants of fenugreek”

Science and religion both say a plant is a species. If killing dumb animals is sinful, killing dumb and immovable plants and trees is more sinful. What farmers do at the end of season –Harvesting is a beheading, open massacre. Each of the discourses has a central hypothesis. That hypothesis works as centre. With the passage of time that centre is replaced/ substituted by some other centre. Science never solves a problem without creating ten more. Modern Biology has the evolution theory as its central hypothesis. The evolution theory itself has undergone the process of evolution. Until 18<sup>th</sup> century it was generally believed

that each group of organisms was divinely created. Similarly, Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity (1905) is the central hypothesis for modern physics. The recent trends show shifting of this centre also.

In Chemistry too – at some time in our history, Aristotle's Four Elements' were truth, reason, intellect,' He was substituted by Robert Boyle Cavendish → Dalton's atomic theory → Modern chemistry has the central hypothesis – Rutherford's, Thomson's atomic theory. Water is  $H_2O$ , Hydrogen two parts, Oxygen one but there is also a third thing, that makes it water and nobody knows what that is – (D.H. Lawrence' The third thing')

Utilitarian Disciplines include applied sciences and social sciences. Are we more happy than our forefathers. Statistics is all approximations. It deals with average – mean, mode and median. If my one step is on ice and other in fire, can it be average 50°C?

Grammarians' observations are approximate. They do not meet each and every native speaker and formulate their rules. In Geography, Big bang theory is the central hypothesis. The cause of big bang is unknown. If we come to know the cause of big-bang, can't we ask for the cause of cause? Other Approximations in Geography are rainfall, temperature, humidity population, classifications.

To conclude, truth is truth under certain conditions of time and space. Let me recall here the myth of Sisyphus from Albert Camus. Sisyphus was a character in Greek mythology. He was punished by the Gods for some misdeed. This punishment was to roll up a big stone towards the top of a mountain from its bottom. He used to roll up the stone, then it rolled down automatically. Again he took the stone to the top and it rolled down. The task was endless, I fear all human endeavour may turn in the task of Sisyphus. Hence it needs to be examined closely on time. 'Of more importance is the fact that any

explanation that we offer of how people learn from art invariably assumes some or other theory of Knowledge. What we need to do is to determine what sort of epistemology would best enable us to explain how people acquire not just beliefs, but understanding, insight and knowledge from art.' (Aesthetics 120).

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