

WITTGENSTIEN'S DUAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE AS REALITY

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Abstract

The outcome of reflections and experiences during Ludwig Wittgenstein's interregnum imbued a remarkable difference between what is historically termed the early and late philosophy of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was no doubt one of the towering figures of the analytic movement in the twentieth century with two remarkably different paths. Interestingly each of paths had great impact in the analytical movement. This essay argues that though Wittgenstein followed different paths, he never lost sight of his contention that language held the key to our understanding and depiction of reality. In other words it is only through constructs of language that we can have a representation of reality. Either as pictures or as game, language helps us in perceiving the world and communicating our perceptions. To this end, this essay explores the singularity of purpose through a critical analysis of the difference between his views in both periods thus enriching understanding.

Keywords: Analytic Movement, Language, Early Wittgenstein, Late Wittgenstein

Introduction

Both periods of Wittgenstein's philosophy had great influence on different schools of analytic philosophy. In the early period the submissions of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* became the modus vivendi of Vienna Circle while the subsequent Ordinary Language School found relevance in the submissions of *Philosophical Investigations*. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein propounded a logical structure of language and the world. He tried to explain that the world was made up of facts that were depicted by pictures which required a structured understanding of language to describe. He argued that every meaningful sentence must have a precise logical structure. Also every atomic sentence is a logical picture of a possible state of affairs, which must, as a result, have exactly the same formal structure as the atomic sentence that depicts it. This culminated in his pictorial language theory.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein rejected this initial views, he contends that there were, in fact, many different languages with many different structures that could meet quite different specific needs. Language was not strictly held together by logical structure, but consisted, in fact, of a multiplicity of simpler substructures or what he calls language games. The usage of the word, therefore, is determined not by a complicated rule or definition but only by a fairly relaxed disposition to include some things and to exclude others. If there is any rule involved at all, it is a trivial one: call *games* only those things that are games. Thus, knowledge of word meaning, and membership in the linguistic community generally, is not a matter of knowing rules but only of sharing dispositions to apply words in something like the way other people do.

What can be observed from these two periods is that Wittgenstein never deviated from the essence of language in understanding and depicting reality but while in the early period he based his understanding of language on a logical structure, in the later period he freed his view from its logic. Language was taken in its ordinary sense and meaning was derived directly from the structure and substructures of language. Understanding language through its logical structure was believed by Wittgenstein to still revel in a metaphysics which was initially intended to avoid.

To point out these views in Wittgenstein's early and later periods this paper is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the views of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* while the second part looks at the differentiations he brought about in *Philosophical Investigations* which Wittgenstein's saw as the problem of the *Tractatus*. A critically analyzes these views with the aim of pointing out the primacy of language in any attempt of analysis of reality is also here done.

The Picture Theory in the *Tractatus*

Language is at the heart of Wittgenstein's philosophy. His effort was to see how best language can be used. This thought is not lost from the preface of *Tractatus* where Russell stated that "the essential business of language is to assert or deny facts."¹ Thus, nothing can be explained except through the medium of language but language while attempting to accomplish its tasks is not free of some problems. According to Russell:

There are various problems as regards language. First, there is the problem what actually occurs in our minds when we use language with the intention of meaning something by it; this problem belongs to psychology. Secondly, there is the problem as to what is the relation subsisting between thoughts, words, or sentences, and that which they refer to or mean; this problem belongs to epistemology. Thirdly, there is the problem of using sentences so as to convey truth rather than falsehood; this belongs to the special sciences dealing with the subject-matter of the sentences in question. Fourthly, there is the question: what relation must one fact (such as a sentence) have to another in order to be *capable* of being a symbol for that other?²

In Russell's opinion the "last is a logical question, and is the one with which Mr. Wittgenstein is concerned. He is concerned with the conditions for *accurate* Symbolism, i.e. for Symbolism in which a sentence 'means' something quite definite."³

Wittgenstein equally goes ahead to aver that most of the problems of traditional philosophy results from the use of language in explaining ideas. He contends that his "book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows... that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood."⁴ Thus to assuage this problem "the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable."⁵ So the problem comes from our expression of thought or our expression of perception or reality. These views no doubt, Wittgenstein owes to Frege and Russell as he notes that he is indebted to Frege's great works and to the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation of my thoughts.

Wittgenstein started with his view that the world was filled with facts. He says "the world is the totality of facts, not of things. The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts. For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case. The facts in logical space are the world."⁶ On these assertions Morris says "Wittgenstein is here proposing a view of the nature of the world which has not been realized until now. He expects this view to be new and striking to many of us, even if he supposes that it will seem obvious enough once we have understood his reasons for it. He is here deliberately opposing himself to a long

tradition of philosophy.⁷

Based on these conclusions, Wittgenstein developed his line of thought up to the point of the pictorial theory. He opined that “a state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things).”⁸ This discussion of the state of affairs is what needs to be logically understood. As he notes:

In logic nothing is accidental: if a thing *can* occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself. . . It would seem to be a sort of accident, if it turned out that a situation would fit a thing that could already exist entirely on its own. If things can occur in states of affairs, this possibility must be in them from the beginning.⁹

According to Ostrow Wittgenstein is not here describing a subject from afar but, rather, referring to the very activity in which he is engaged: the *Tractatus* is itself a logical inquiry, the perspective it adopts is the perspective of logic.¹⁰ This is why we noted earlier that Wittgenstein believed in language for the analysis of reality but in his early thought this language was based on logic which was the result of Frege and Russell’s influence. Ostrow differentiates between scientific inquiry and logical inquiry to buttress the point.

For a logical inquiry, as Wittgenstein conceives of it, would appear to be essentially different from a scientific investigation. While a scientific investigation seeks to determine what is the case, logic deals only with the possibility of what is the case. The limits of logic are the limits of the possible. This suggests not only that it can make no sense to speak of anything beyond logic but also that it makes no sense to speak of new domains within logic, of logical discoveries. The full expanse of logic must, in some sense, already be present to us.¹¹

Reality is meant to be interpreted logically but this reality is made up of state of affairs that represent fact, but how do we come about these facts? Wittgenstein talks of pictures.

We picture facts to ourselves. A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and non-existence of states of affairs. A picture is a model of reality. In a picture objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them. In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects. What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way. A picture is a fact.¹²

Of this picture theory, Nordman notes that . . . what is important to Wittgenstein is that facts can be expressed in speech, and we do so by producing particular configurations of words that share a logical form with configurations of objects and that can therefore picture them, agree with them.¹³ He thus contends that:

Instead of telling a story about the failure to express the absolute, and instead of listening silently while others fail to give meaning, the *Tractatus* uses the picture theory of language to show “that we cannot express what we want to express.” Or perhaps one should say that the discovery of the picture theory showed Wittgenstein that we cannot remain confident about being able to express in speech any sense whatsoever.¹⁴

Ostrow equally comments that “the introduction of the picture represents the *Tractatus*’ shift from ontology to the concern with language, the concern that occupies the text from that point on.”¹⁵ Similarly, it is undeniable that the notion of the picture is meant to shed light on the proposition.¹⁶

Wittgenstein begins his discussion of the notion of a proposition and its pictorial nature by saying that “a proposition is the expression, perceptible by the senses, of a thought, where a thought is

itself a logical picture of facts”¹⁷. A thought is itself a fact, and its constituents correspond to the constituents of the proposition expressing it.

A propositional sign is conceived by Wittgenstein as the *material* element through which the sense of a proposition is expressed. Wittgenstein insists on the idea that a propositional sign is a fact. This is its crucial characteristic (and not, for instance, its being composed of words). As Wittgenstein puts it: propositional sign is not in itself a picture. It is a fact, and not every fact is a picture,¹⁸ Fact (a propositional sign) acquires a *pictorial structure* when it *represents* another fact, when the arrangement of its elements is the same as the arrangement of the elements in the pictured situation. The essence of a propositional sign Wittgenstein says is very clearly seen if we imagine one composed of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, and books) instead of written signs. Then the spatial arrangement of these things will express the sense of the proposition.¹⁹

Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* had as the basis of his postulation the functioning of language. He then linked his idea of propositions back to his basis of language. Whatever could not be said or understood within the realm of language was nothing to him. Hartnack noted that “language, according to one traditional notion, consists of words, and each word possesses a meaning in so far as it stands for something. One learns a language, on this view, by learning what each word refers to; words are names, and to know a language is to know what all the words denote. Hence a word which did not denote anything would not be word at all; it will be a mere sound; it would be meaningless”.²⁰ It is perhaps from this conception of language that Wittgenstein generated his idea on language whereby everything that can be thought must be within the scope of language. Thus the limits of language mean the limit of my world. Wittgenstein links propositions to language noting that:

The totality of propositions is language. Man possesses the ability to construct languages capable of expressing every sense, without having any idea how each word has meaning or what its meaning is—just as people speak without knowing how the individual sounds are produced. Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it. It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is.²¹

In philosophy propositions Wittgenstein believes are wrongly used. He writes that most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.²² He states further that:

Propositions represent the existence and non-existence of states of affairs. The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science. Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. 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.²³

Rejecting metaphysical propositions and other traditional philosophical mode of philosophizing Wittgenstein proposes the correct method:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs

in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one.²⁴

And in the last line he submits that what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.²⁵ Nordmann thus concludes that the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* clarifies the business of logic, it proposes the picture theory of language, details the internal relation between representation and reality, offers a philosophy of science, and includes reflections on ethics, aesthetics, and the will.²⁶ McManus also opines that the *Tractatus* elucidates a conception of what it is for thought to be intelligible and for language to be meaningful; Wittgenstein demonstrates how thought, language, and the world that they represent must be for that conception to make sense, but with the ultimate purpose of showing us that it doesn't, as well as why we come to think that it does.²⁷

The Turn and the Retractions of the *Investigations*

Wittgenstein was clear and direct about his intentions in the *Philosophical Investigations*. He stated that after a while when he had occasion to re-read his first book (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and to explain its ideas to someone it suddenly seemed to him that he should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of the old way of thinking. I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book.²⁸ Commenting on this contention of Wittgenstein Marie McGinn notes that:

It is important that Wittgenstein does not speak here of seeing his later work in the right light only 'by contrast with' his early work, but 'by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking'. The idea that the later work should be seen 'against the background' of Wittgenstein's early philosophy suggests that we should not see the former as an outright rejection of the latter. Rather, it suggests that we shall understand the later work better if we see it as something that develops out of, or has its roots in, the early work.²⁹

Hacker equally notes the collapse of the journey of *Tractatus* when he says that as the logical theory of the *Tractatus* collapsed, so too did the metaphysics. It was wrong to say that the world consists of facts rather than of things. Rather, a description of the world consists of statements of facts, not of an enumeration of things. But the statement of a fact just is a true statement. One cannot point *at*, but only point *out*, a fact. And to point out a fact just is to point out that things are thus and so, that is, to make a true assertion.³⁰

Wittgenstein introducing his new conception of language said "think of the tools in a tool – box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw–driver, a rule, a glue–pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these object."³¹ With this, he submits that "a word is not a name; a word can be used as a name, but it can be used in numerous other ways as well".³²

This led to the introduction of the concept of language-games. He says "... And there is also a language–game of inventing a name for something, and hence of saying, this is ..., and then using the new name."³³ There is also the ability to name something that has no bearer in the language-game. In this language-game he says "a name is also used in the absence of its bearer. But we can imagine a language – game with names in which they are used only in the presence of the bearer, and so could always be replaced by a demonstrative pronoun and the gesture of pointing".³⁴ But if they would be several language–games just like there are several games then something must connect them and this he calls "*family resemblances*".

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than family resemblances for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. And I shall say: games form a family.³⁵

Wittgenstein thereafter clearly nullifies his picture theory saying “a picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably”.³⁶ He says further that; when a philosopher use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition”, “name” – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word over actually used in this way in the language–game which is its original home? What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.³⁷ This everyday use implies the ordinary sense of language. Mulhall attests that a primary factor that made the idea of a language-game appealing is its stark contrast with the calculus model that dominated the *Tractatus*. It provided a powerful analogy which offered a normative (i.e. rule-governed) activity to compare with language and its use.³⁸

McGinn also contends that Wittgenstein’s urge to explain language’s representational powers leads him into postulating an idealized machinery of fully analysed, elementary propositions, lying behind the surface of our ordinary language, which he insists must be there even though we do not yet perceive it.³⁹ In the same vein Sluga writes that the task of philosophy is to gain a perspicuous view of those multiple uses and thereby to dissolve philosophical and metaphysical puzzles. These puzzles were the result of insufficient attention to the working of language and could be resolved only by carefully retracing the linguistic steps by which they had been reached. Wittgenstein thus came to think of philosophy as a descriptive, analytic, and ultimately *therapeutic practice*.⁴⁰

In essence, Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* gave a new understanding to the whole idea of analysis of reality with language. He took a different route from the logical one and talked about language in the ordinary sense of every day usage. Language is important in any form of communication irrespective of the differences in the early and late Wittgenstein. Hacker points out some of these differences to include that:

- Where the *Tractatus* strove for a sublime insight into the language-independent essences of things, the *Investigations* proceeded by a quiet weighing of linguistic facts in order to disentangle knots in our understanding.
- The *Tractatus* was possessed by a vision of the crystalline purity of the logical forms of thought, language, and the world, the *Investigations* was imbued with a sharpened awareness of the motley of language, the deceptive forms of which lead us into confusion.
- The *Tractatus* advocated conceptual geology, hoping to disclose the ineffable essences of things by depth analysis of language, the *Investigations* practiced conceptual topography, aiming to dissolve philosophical problems by a patient description of familiar linguistic facts.
- The *Tractatus* was the culmination of a tradition in western philosophy. The *Investigations* is virtually without precedent in the history of thought.⁴¹

Pointing out a similarity between the early and late stages Biletzki and Manat note that in both cases philosophy serves, first, as critique of language. It is through analyzing language's illusive power that the philosopher can expose the traps of meaningless philosophical formulations. This means that what was formerly thought of as a philosophical problem may now dissolve and this

simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.⁴²

Conclusion

Wittgenstein thus becomes influential both in his early and late philosophical periods. He asserted the importance of clarifying our use of language in philosophy and everyday communication of our feelings and reality. Misrepresentations and misunderstandings in language are the causes of most of the problems in philosophy and our interactions. Thoughts and perceptions are of no relevance if they cannot be effectively communicated. The basic medium of communication is language hence language becomes invaluable. Wittgenstein's emphasis on language made him develop from a logical understanding to an ordinary understanding. But from either perspective language is essential.

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