

Chapter 29

Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy

Key Words: Picture theory, meaning, proposition, object, state of affairs, metaphysical self, logical structure, semantic analysis, atomic facts, elementary propositions, sense, seeing and showing, surface grammar, depth grammar, transcendental subject, silence.

This chapter addresses certain important aspects of the conceptions of language, meaning and reality and their interrelationships, as discussed in Wittgenstein's early work, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. It will start with an examination of the picture theory of meaning, which exposes the logical structure of language with an analysis of the concepts of word, meaning, sense, logical form and the forms of propositions. It then examines the questions, how do philosophical problems arise and how do we solve them. The *Tractatus* is also concerned about very profound philosophical problems like the nature of the self, which is immortal. It concludes with a notion of silence, which will be examined in this chapter.

Introduction

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein was born on April 26th 1889 in Vienna, Austria. He studied mechanical engineering in Berlin and in 1908 went to Manchester, England to do research in aeronautics. There he became interested in logic, as the study of mathematics, led him to do further explorations into the foundations of mathematics. The most important event in his intellectual life during this period happened when he met Gottlob Frege, who is arguably the founder of modern logic as we understand it today. Frege suggested Wittgenstein to meet Bertrand Russell in Cambridge. Wittgenstein eventually went there and worked with Russell and G.E. Moore, the two great thinkers of 20th century British analytic philosophy, who were also known as the philosophers who have initiated this new way of philosophizing in 20th century Europe.

Wittgenstein, though earned the reputation of being an original thinker at a very early age in Cambridge, was a very different kind of person and entertained very unconventional ideas. In 1914, when the First World War broke out he volunteered for the Austrian army and left his research. By 1922, he has completed writing his first book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which was subsequently published with a preface by Russell. This book incidentally is the only one he published during his lifetime.

After writing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thought that he had solved all the problems of philosophy and hence he decided to leave philosophy. In any case, he was not prepared to take up a conventional university teaching job, as philosophy was for him not an enterprise that would enable one to advance one's knowledge; nor can one teach philosophy, he thought, as there is nothing to be taught by a philosopher. He thus took up the vocation of an elementary school teacher in rural Austria.

Later in 1929, he returned to Cambridge and to philosophy and resumed his investigations into the nature of philosophical problems and their possible solutions. He became professor of philosophy at Cambridge in 1939. During this period he advocated a characteristically different philosophical position from his early work. In 1947, he resigned his professorship in order to concentrate on writing. Wittgenstein died of prostate cancer in Cambridge in April 1951.

The Philosophy of the *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein affirms that the main point of his book is ethical, which according to him, does not belong to the realm of the sayable. Reflecting the spirit of the philosophy of language analysis propagated by Russell, Wittgenstein too problematizes the language-world relationship and explores the problem of meaning. According to him, philosophy is a critique of language. It performs a logical analysis of language, which will bring out the essential logical structure of all linguistic expressions.

In other words, according to Wittgenstein, philosophy tries to identify the essential logical structure of language, a structure which it shares with the world and with our thoughts. In this sense, philosophy sets limits to what can be thought and in doing so what cannot be thought. But this is a task which is very similar to the one advocated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, this is not an easy task, as Wittgenstein says, in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable, which is absurd. Here the philosopher of language turns to the expressions of thoughts, which share with the later a common logical structure. In other words, the limits are drawn in language.

Wittgenstein's examination of language had revealed that the language we use in our day-to-day life has an essentially misleading structure. Language disguises thought, says Wittgenstein, so much so that, like the cloths we wear, which disguises our body, language

too essentially covers thoughts which leads to several misunderstandings. Nevertheless, language is an expression of thought, which need not always be visible from the outset.

The problems of philosophy are posed as a result of the misunderstanding of the logic of language. He thus advances a critique of language—which resembles Kant's critique of thought—that would enable us to see the mistakes we commit. The analysis of language will bring out the real, logical structure of language. It reveals the depth grammar of language, which is different from the surface grammar. While the ordinary structure of language is determined by the syntactical structure, the real structure is discovered by the semantic analysis of language that brings out the essential logical scaffolding of language. The syntactic structure is misleading, as it never reveals the essential word-meaning connection. But the logical analysis of language brings this out. This analysis thus brings out the depth grammar of linguistic expressions as different from the surface grammar and helps avoiding the confusions in language use, which is ultimately responsible for philosophical and metaphysical worries.

The Philosophical Orientation of the *TLP*

The basic philosophical orientation of the *TLP* can be understood by explaining the fundamental approach it adopts while dealing with traditional philosophical and metaphysical problems. The solutions to philosophical problems are suggested by articulating the sense-nonsense distinction. By outlining how philosophy is preoccupied with language and its analysis—as it has been conceived as a critique of language—Wittgenstein demonstrates that philosophy does not and cannot deal with the so called problems of life. He then develops his transcendentalism, primarily by referring to the metaphysical self, which is the limit of the world, and not part of it. His transcendentalism also mentions about the domain of silence, which is an extremely important aspect of his early thought.

Wittgenstein thus asserts that philosophy is not a theory, but is an activity. The function of philosophy consists in carrying out a critique of language, which involves an analysis. This analysis will bring out the logical structure of language, which corresponds to the logical structure of our thoughts and the world. There exists a one-to-one correspondence between the three realms of language, thought and the world.

The World, Thought and Language

Tractatus begins with the proposition, “The world is all that is the case”, which is followed by another one, “The world is a totality of facts and not of things.” Wittgenstein’s conception of the world does not exhaust with the physical world we live in and experience. It also deals with the logical possibilities of the states of affair. Reality is constituted out of the world and objects in it and facts and atomic facts. According to him the world is facts in logical space, which is the totality of existent atomic facts. This conception of atomic fact is also a combination of objects in definite ways, each combination is independent of the other. Wittgenstein then affirms that the existence and non-existence of possible and actual atomic facts is the reality.

Thought is described, as the logical picture of the facts and Wittgenstein holds that an atomic fact is thinkable or we can imagine an atomic fact. The world is nothing but a picture of the totality of true thoughts. The thought contains the possibility of the state of affairs, which it thinks and thoughts are expressed through propositions. Wittgenstein calls the sign through which we express the thought a propositional sign and holds that the proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world. Here the notions of logical structure and logical form are important. Language shares with the world and thoughts the same logical form. As mentioned above, there is a one-to-one relationship between the three realms that is brought out in analysis.

The domain of language is more philosophically important and interesting, as in the analysis, which the philosopher performs, language is the focal object. Language is the domain of propositions and according to Wittgenstein, there are fundamentally two types of propositions; those that are true for all possible states of affairs, and those that are pictures of reality. The propositions of logic and pure mathematics, which are called tautologies, belong to the first group and they give no information about the world. On the other hand, the propositions that picture or represent possible states of affair in the world are either true or false. We compare them with reality. They tell us something about the world. They do that with their structure. As mentioned above, they are either true or false. According to Wittgenstein the totality of true propositions constitutes the propositions of natural sciences.

Wittgenstein categorically affirms that apart from these two, there is no other class of propositions. There are no philosophical or metaphysical propositions. He thus views language as the totality of propositions. He says that a proposition is a picture of reality, for I know the state of affairs presented by it, if I understand the proposition. Hence there is a very

intimate relationship between language and reality. He asserts that the picture is linked with reality as it reaches up to it. It is like a scale applied to reality. Every picture should correspond to reality and there are no pictures which are *a priori* true.

The most important feature of a picture or a proposition is its sense. According to Wittgenstein, every picture represents its sense and whether a proposition is true or false is decided on the basis of the agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality. The picture theory of meaning is introduced in this context. According to Wittgenstein, the propositional sign consists in the fact that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way. (*TLP*. 3.14). Hence it exhibits a definite structure and order. In other words, the proposition is not just a mixture of words, just as the musical theme is not a mixture of tones. He argues that only facts can express a sense, a class of names cannot. This also points to the importance of structure.

The proposition is a picture of reality, asserts Wittgenstein. Hence in propositions thoughts can be so expressed that, to the objects of the thoughts correspond the elements of the propositional sign. (*TLP*. 3.2) This affirms the picturing relationship language has with the world. In other words, there is a structural isomorphism between language and world. In language we have names, which stand for the objects in the world. He asserts that the name means the object in the world and the object is the meaning of the word in language. (*TLP*. 3.203) According to Wittgenstein, to the configuration of the simple signs in the propositional sign corresponds the configuration of the objects in the state of affairs. (3.21) A proposition in language is thus a picture of a fact in the world and language can picture facts because it can articulate their structure. Propositions in language do this by articulating how objects are correlated in the world. The elements of picture correspond to the objects in facts. In the proposition there must be exactly as many things distinguishable as there are in the state of affairs, which it represents (4.04). In this way the propositional structure corresponds to the structure of the fact. This structural isomorphism makes the former a picture of the latter.

The picturing relationship of language with the world is central to Wittgenstein's conception of language and philosophy in the *TLP*. The picture, which is a proposition, presents the facts in logical space, which is the existence and non-existence of atomic facts. (*TLP*. 2.11). The following propositions of the *TLP* further affirm the picturing relationship.

2.12 The picture is a model of reality.

- 2.13 To the objects correspond in the picture the elements of the picture.
- 2.131 The elements of the picture stand, in the picture, for the objects.
- 2.14 The picture consists in the fact that its elements are combined with one another in a definite way.
- 2.141 The picture is a fact.
- 2.15 That the elements of the picture are combined with one another in a definite way, represents that the things are so combined with one another.

The Structure of Proposition and Picturing

Wittgenstein holds that a proposition about a complex stands in internal relation to the proposition about its constituent part. This affirms the picturing relationship language has with reality. A proposition, which is a picture, stands for a fact or a state of affairs in logical space. Wittgenstein affirms that the picture contains the possibility of the state of affairs which it represents (2.203). All pictures may not agree with what is the case in reality. One may assert that the cat is on the table, while the cat actually is on the mat. Yet it is a picture, as the proposition, “the cat is on the mat” is a possible state of affair. It is a picture, and therefore, a sensible proposition, but a false one. On the basis of a proposition’s agreement with reality we judge it as either true or false, either right or wrong. (2.21)

Propositions are linguistic expressions that have sense. The sense of a proposition depends on the state of affair it actually or possibly represents. In other words, the sense of a proposition consists in the picturing relationship it has with the world. Hence we may say that a picture or proposition represents its sense. (2.221)

The picture theory not only elucidates the nature and structure of propositions which are pictures of reality, but also enlightens us about the limits of language. Wittgenstein says that a proposition presents the existence and non-existence of atomic facts (4.1). Here Wittgenstein holds that not all propositions are true, or not all propositions represent actual state of affair in the world. But some of them represent actual facts and hence are true. Wittgenstein adds that, the totality of true propositions constitute the totality of the natural sciences (4.11). All sensible propositions are therefore, either true or false, depending on whether they correspond to actual state of affairs or not. All those propositions that fail to picture a fact in the world are neither true nor false, but are nonsensical.

This enlightens us about the limits of language. Wittgenstein says that the limits of my language mean the limits of my world (5.6). All those propositions that are neither tautologies nor pictures of the world are nonsensical. The so called metaphysical propositions are examples. For instance, when we say, “God is omnipresent”, we do not assert any fact in the world, as the constituents of the statement do not correspond to any objects in the world and hence their constitution does not articulate anything meaningfully. They neither represent the world nor do they articulate any necessary truths. It is not possible to think about anything that contradicts the laws of logic. He argues that, “to present in language anything which “contradicts logic” is as impossible as in geometry to present by its co-ordinates a figure which contradicts the laws of space; or to give the co-ordinates of a point which does not exist.(3.032)

Limits of the World: The Transcendental

One section of the *TLP* is dedicated to the logical and structural relationship between language and reality. It deals with what can be said. But *TLP* is also concerned with what cannot be said. This realm of the unsayable is rather more important than what is sayable. Wittgenstein says that there are things that cannot be said but only be shown. The metaphysical subject is such an entity. This subject is different from the empirical self, which is a part of the world. This subject does not belong to the world but it is the limit of the world. He says that the “I” occurs in philosophy through the fact that the “world is my world”. The philosophical I is not the man, asserts Wittgenstein, it is not the human body or the human soul which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit—not a part of the world.

The role of philosophy is also peculiar. Wittgenstein says that philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. According to him, the word “philosophy” must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences. He maintains that the object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. (*TLP*. 4.112). It is not a theory but an activity. For him a typical philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations and hence the result of philosophy is not a number of “philosophical propositions”. It rather makes those propositions clear. It should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.

This logical clarification of language ultimately suggests that philosophy has no role to play in developing theories of any sort that deal with the ultimate nature of things and their essential relationships. It affirms that philosophy cannot deal with those issues. Nor can it

address the problems of life. The logical analysis reveals that ultimately the so-called problems of life are not genuine problems and hence it is not possible to find answers to them. This is not to deny the significance and value to things that are not empirical (as the logical positivists did it). Wittgenstein only says that philosophy, as a critique of language cannot say anything about it.

After providing such elucidations about the nature and function of philosophy, Wittgenstein says that, philosophy is not intended to solve the problems of life. Nor can it do that. It only shows that they are not genuine problems that can have solutions.

Quiz

1. According to Wittgenstein, the main point of his book *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* is?
[a] Logical [b] Ethical [c] Linguistic [d] Syntactical.
2. Philosophy, which is a critique of language, brings out of linguistic expressions.
[a] Grammatical structure [b] Semantic content [c] Logical structure [d] Real ideas that lie behind.
3. The problems of philosophy are posed as a result of
[a] Our metaphysical propensities [b] The misunderstanding of the syntactical structure of language [c] The unintelligibility of linguistic expressions [d] The misunderstanding of the logic of language.
4. What is philosophy according to Wittgenstein?
[a] An activity of language analysis [b] An analysis of reality [c] A theory of the world and language [d] A doctrine of the self.
5. According to Wittgenstein, an object is the?
[a] Sense of the word [b] Meaning of the word [c] Component of the world [d] Essence of the word.

Answer Key

1. [b]
2. [c]
3. [d]
4. [a]
5. [b]

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