

WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND RELIGION: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract

Philosophers – the lovers of wisdom – are concerned to make the world more and more predictable. It is easy to say but difficult to do as there are countless stumbling blocks in the form of language, propositions, religions and so on. Very often the logical space is lost. To set aside the hindrances a true philosopher does not bother to contrive a new set of vocabularies. He even does not bother to be contradictory, if needed. Ludwig Wittgenstein is observed in two incarnations. He is shown from the Tractarian point of view and from the point of Philosophical Investigations. The two points contradict but in the end the world of Wittgenstein is described. He faced the problem to picture the world in a logical space. He intended to represent the world in terms of showing, not in terms of saying. For this his early philosophy is meticulously empirical. But there was a transition. We cannot be oblivious of this change to understand Wittgenstein. In his later philosophy, he describes the world by ordinary language and he also observes that anything whatever it may be we can describe it through the language game. Being a member of the Vienna circle he also took part in the crusade to free philosophy from being metaphysical. Undoubtedly, Wittgenstein was a logical empiricist. How come that he became a religious at least morally? It was perhaps that there was a religious streak in him for being tutored by Catholic instructions in his childhood and for having an encounter with the question of life and death in the front of the Great War.

Key words: *Formal language, ordinary language, structural relationship, logical form, language game, rules of language, form of life, God, religion.*

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Introduction

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was a twentieth-century Austrian-British philosopher and his whole philosophy of language is a dramatic transition from atomic to holistic theory of meaning. Wittgenstein's conception of religion is more or less dependent on his nature of philosophy or on his conception of language. So before delving deep into his conception of religion it will be helpful for us if we examine the basic tenets of his philosophy of language. Wittgenstein started his philosophical career in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) which is atomistic in nature, and gave emphasis on logical language. Wittgenstein, in this book, contended that the structure of language reveals the structure of the world. His later work in philosophy is *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), which is holistic in nature, and in this publication he is concerned with ordinary language and with the usage of theory of meaning, language game and family resemblance, rule-following and private language, and so on. So, the tenets of his philosophy are, therefore, known as the 'philosophy of early Wittgenstein' and 'the philosophy of later Wittgenstein'.

The purpose of this essay is principally to explore Wittgenstein's conception of religion depending on his philosophy of language. As Wittgenstein's philosophy divided into two parts as early and later, so we have to elaborate this point in two perspectives. At first we can describe religion following the *Tractarian* point of view, then we elaborate it following his later philosophical works particularly *Philosophical Investigations*.

Religion deals with myths, faith, unobservable entity, and so on. As we cannot observe these things so it cannot be described by the logical or formal language. Once, in his early life, Wittgenstein said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (TLP5.6). He also added, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (TLP7). It follows from these statements that which is not empirically observable is not 'showable'. The question therefore follows – could Wittgenstein's philosophy be at all correlated with religion? Interestingly, Wittgenstein once said, "I am not a religious man, but I cannot help

seeing every problem from a religious point of view" (qtd. in Malcolm vii). The writer of the present paper personally feels that if not in his early-life, Wittgenstein in his later-works dealt at length with the concept of religion.

The Early Wittgenstein – *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

The book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* mainly deals with the issues of the principles of symbolism and the relations which are necessary between words and things in any language. The author said that because of our misunderstanding of the everyday or ordinary language the traditional philosophical problems have been raised. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein represents the logical structure of propositions and the nature of logical inference. He showed us the atomistic view about language as well as the world. The world is represented by thought, which is a proposition with sense. Since, world, thought and proposition share the same logical form. Hence, the thoughts and the propositions are the pictures of the facts.

In the first proposition of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says, "The world is all that is the case" (*TLP*: 1). While responding to the question 'what is the case?', Wittgenstein again says that the world is the totality of facts, but not things. The world is determined by facts and by their beings of all facts. These few remarks of *Tractatus* actually give enormous philosophical insights from where one can assume the very philosophical intention of the early Wittgenstein. At the very outset, it can be said that by assuming the world as the totality of facts, Wittgenstein actually deviated from the common sense interpretation. The common sense view of the world is that it is the totality of objects. Even P.F. Strawson, in his critically-acclaimed *Individuals*, remarks that the world is the totality of particulars. Strawson, in fact, conceives particulars in terms of objects. Therefore, special attention should be given on the very remark of early Wittgenstein that the world is the totality of facts.

A few questions need to be addressed here. What was the philosophical objective of early Wittgenstein of making such remark that the world is the totality of facts? Why does he prefer to say that the world is the totality of facts, but not things? Or by making such remark does Wittgenstein actually detach from the commonsensical standpoint?

The philosophical objective of early Wittgenstein is to picture the world in the form of to be the case or not to be the case. In this regard, he conceived language in terms of proposition and the world or reality in terms of facts and then drew the relationship between proposition and fact by means of his picture theory. That is why, Wittgenstein's picture theory is philosophically known as 'the picture theory of meaning' or 'the picture theory of proposition'. Furthermore, even though Wittgenstein conceived the world as the totality of facts, but from this it does not make sense to say that he did not realise the very fact that the world is the totality of objects. There is no point of denying the fact that the world is the

totality of objects. However, if we assume the world as the totality of objects, then we can only **describe the world**, but we cannot picture the world. Wittgenstein's intention was not to give a mere description of the world or rather to say about the world. His philosophical intention is **to show or to picture** the world in a logical space. He actually wanted to picture the world in terms of **showing**, but not in terms of **saying**. The description of the world may not be in the form of 'to be the case' or 'not to be the case'. But his understanding of the world would always be in the form of 'to be the case or not to be the case'. This is made clear when he conceived language in terms of propositions. According to Wittgenstein, every proposition has its two senses, either the proposition would be true or the proposition would be false. A proposition pictures a fact and a fact in turn makes the proposition as either true or false. That is why, Wittgenstein says, "The facts in logical space are the world" (TLP: 1.13), and also adds, "The world divides into facts" (TLP: 1.2).

In the second proposition of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says, "What is the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs" (TLP: 2). We have already outlined the concept of fact. Here we can say that a fact can further be anatomised in terms of state of affairs. A state of affairs is a combination of objects or things. A thing or an object cannot further be analysed. Thus, from the reality side, we have objects as the ultimate constituents of the world. Wittgenstein claims that when things are combined to form a state of affairs, this would ensure that the possibility of forming a particular state of affairs must be there in them. In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, nothing is accidental. Everything is logical and everything should be conceived in terms of logical space. Every object or thing is independent, but this form of independence is a form of dependence when one thing is connected with other to form a state of affairs. That means to know an object, one has to know all its possible occurrences in state of affairs. As everything is conceived in logical space and logical space incorporates all possibilities, no new possibility will be discovered later. That is why, Wittgenstein has rightly pointed that objects contain the possibility of all situations and the possibility of its occurring in state of affairs is the *form of an object*.

The Austrian-British philosopher has explained his celebrated picture theory in second proposition. In 2.1 of *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says, "We picture facts to ourselves". We picture facts to ourselves in *logical space* and what we picture to ourselves are the existence or non-existence of states of affairs. That is why Wittgenstein claims that a picture is a model of reality. As a picture is a fact and reality is the sum total of positive and negative facts, then there is no point of departing ourselves in claiming that a picture is a model of reality. The question then arises: How does a picture make the reality possible? What are the requirements of making a picture possible? In this regard, Wittgenstein says that *pictorial form* is the possibility of making a picture possible. A pictorial form is kind of unalterable form through which things are related to one another in the same way as the

elements of the picture. Pictorial form thus makes the pictorial relationship or structural isomorphism between the elements of proposition and the elements of fact. In this process a picture touches reality. As every picture, according to Wittgenstein, is a logical one, a picture whose pictorial form is logical form is called a logical picture. Only logical picture can depict the world in logical space. What a picture depicts or represents is called its sense. The agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality constitutes its truth and falsity. That is why, Wittgenstein says that a proposition is either true or false and a fact actually makes the proposition as either true or false. The other important point here is that even though we picture facts to ourselves, but no picture is true a priori.

In the fourth proposition of *Tractatus* Wittgenstein attempts to show how does a proposition attach to a thought. Here Wittgenstein says, "A thought is a proposition with a sense" (TLP: 4). He then claims that the totality of proposition is language. Thus, it can be said in the Wittgensteinian sense that a thought is a language with a sense. Wittgenstein like many other revisionists qualifies language in terms of proposition or in terms of sense. His interpretation of sense is strictly logical in nature. For Wittgenstein many propositions (sentences) found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Accordingly, in such a case we are not in a position to give any answer to questions of this kind, but can regard them as nonsensical. Wittgenstein in this regard claims that 'most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.' Thus, philosophy is a critique of language because the apparent logical form of proposition need not be real one. Thus, what can be said here is that since a thought is a proposition with a sense, the *Tractarian* form of proposition is a system of idealization of language, a revised and refined form of language where the non-referential linguistic entities do not find any place. His understanding of proposition is based on the logical presupposition that it must have a sense. In this regard, Wittgenstein has assumed that a proposition is a picture of reality, i.e. a model of reality because a proposition with a sense pictures a fact. This is how the relationship between language and reality is made possible. Accordingly, it can be said that a gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes, the sound-waves, all stand to one another in the same internal relation of depicting that holds between language and the world. Wittgenstein further contends that to understand a proposition means to know what the case is if it is true. Anybody can understand a proposition if he can understand its constituents. As a proposition is a model of reality, a proposition can be true or false only in virtue of being a picture of reality; only in virtue of representing the existence and non-existence of states of affairs.

In the fifth proposition, Wittgenstein introduces the truth-function of elementary propositions. A proposition can be analysed into elementary proposition and the truth-value of a proposition is determined on the basis of the truth-value of elementary

propositions. But an elementary proposition cannot be further analysed into elementary propositions. Therefore, an elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself. Therefore one elementary proposition cannot be deduced from another. To say that one elementary proposition follows from another is to say that the later says more than the former and the former says less than the latter. But this would not be the case. According to Wittgenstein every proposition is the result of truth-operation on elementary propositions and the sense of a truth-function of proposition is a function of the sense of proposition.

Thus, the correct method of philosophy according to Wittgenstein is to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. proposition of natural science. Therefore, one must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright. In this direction Wittgenstein ends up his book by citing his last, that is, the seventh proposition by saying, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (*TLP*: 7). So, it can be said that Wittgenstein understands language in terms of propositions and propositions are constituted out of logical names having the *constant denotational or referential status* in the strict logical sense. In fact, after the completion of this book, Wittgenstein himself declared that all traditional back-logs, philosophical muddles have been solved with the publication of this book.

The early Wittgenstein and Religion:

In the twentieth century there was a revolution in Philosophy. Linguistic philosophers, grammarians, lexicographers tried to bring a revolution; their aim was to free philosophy from the domination of metaphysics and directed its interest towards language. They have the scientific background, they revolt and philosophy was turned into linguistic philosophy which may be called linguistic turn in philosophy. Being the twentieth century philosopher and having the scientific background Wittgenstein tried to show the relationship between language and reality by his picture theory of meaning. He was the philosopher who can be considered as the founder of the analytic philosophical tradition. As conceiving ambiguity in ordinary language, Wittgenstein at the very outset of his *Tractatus* constructed a logical language which is atomistic in nature. According to early Wittgenstein, language is the sum total of propositions which would be constituted by names. Names are the atomic form of language, which cannot farther be analysed into names. A name denotes an object. Names along with relational term would constitute elementary propositions and from elementary propositions we have propositions and thereby language. Wittgenstein tries to show the relationship between language and reality in terms of the relationship between proposition and fact by his picture theory. For him, a proposition pictures a fact. A fact is something which makes a proposition as either true or false. That is why Wittgenstein says that the world is the totality of facts, but not things. Names are the ultimate constituents of the proposition or language and objects are the

ultimate constituents of facts or reality. Thus, it is clear that *Tractatus* form of language is atomistic in nature through which Wittgenstein logically analysed the relationship between language and reality through his picture theory of meaning and thereby solve all the traditional philosophical puzzles. However, religious language does not refer to observable, empirical facts. The religious objects go beyond the limits of language. This type of language is also like the metaphysical language. God is not perceivable in our empirical world. Although religion makes itself manifest, it cannot be talked about. So, following early Wittgenstein we can say that for him religion is non-scientific, meaningless and nonsensical.

The Later Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*

The *Philosophical Investigations* is a transition or deviation from *Tractatus*. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein addresses a different kind of language, which is holistic in nature. Instead of ideal language, here Wittgenstein introduces natural or ordinary language. Natural or ordinary language is holistic in the sense that in such a language a massive participation of the members of our society or community is made possible. Here Wittgenstein tells us that ordinary language is alright. The meaning of ordinary language is determined by the common participation of the members of our community or society. Ordinary language is therefore relevant as a philosophical method of language which is attached to our form of life. Here Wittgenstein tells us, "Don't ask for meaning, ask for the use" (qtd. in Wisdom 258).

So, the philosopher demonstrates a different direction in his later work. We observe that there are two principle differences between his early and later works. At the early stage, in *Tractatus*, he said that the structure of language determines the structure of reality. However, in *Philosophical Investigations* he opined that our language determines our view about reality. Secondly, he said in the *Tractatus*, there has uniformity in the structure of language, but in the *Philosophical Investigations* he said that language has no common essence. Instead of seeking the meaning of the proposition in terms of truth and falsity, Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* said about the use of language.

According to Wittgenstein, the task of Philosophy is to clarify language. Philosophical puzzles arise because of the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of language. So, the function of philosophy is to teach the correct usage of language. Whatever the malady, it is the job of philosophy to clear up the puzzle, to cure the ills of the understanding (Pitcher 196). He has once remarked, "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday usage.... when philosophers use words - 'Knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name', and try to grasp the essence of the word, we must always ask: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday" (*Philosophical Investigations*,

Sections 39, 40 – 41). The solution of the puzzles is to be obtained by the examination of our ordinary use of language. He was of against revision, he criticizes those philosophers who want to revise ordinary language and want to form the vocabulary of ideal language. He says that ordinary language is all right. Ordinary language has multiple uses. But the philosophical problems, misconceptions arise due to the misapplication of the rules of ordinary language. Later Wittgenstein comments that if picturing were to be the basic function of language, then the so-called metaphysical sentences were meaningless because this type of sentences cannot picture the fact of the world. He said, "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*Philosophical* 116). Later Wittgenstein does not support to revise language or its syntax. For him, the meaning of a sentence should be determined by the rules of language. Language is always a part of a form of life. Language can be used differently in different situations. For example, describing objects, playing, solving riddles, guessing, telling jokes, asking questions etc. There are different ways of using language, he has called it language games. So, here the meaning of language is not determined by its reference but it is determined through its use, it is determined by the rules of use. It can be said that, there need not be any rule, which can determine language irrespective of human needs and purposes. Here the term 'use' means the role it plays in a language game. For him, language is a social function; it is used to communicate each other in a society. So, it cannot be employed for private use. Language has meaning through the concept of language game. The term, 'language game', he says, "is meant to bring into prominence the fact that speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (*Philosophical*, Section 23, 11). We can say that a language game guides us to attain an appropriate use of language. Language has multifarious uses, so there are different types of language games. The relationship between language and game can be expressed by the analogy of family resemblance. In a family we know that some brothers and sisters of a family have the same eyebrow, or eye, others have the same nose, and some others have the same hair. As like a game there is also criss-cross relationship. Similarities and dissimilarities are there. Both in *The Blue and Brown Book* and *Philosophical Investigations* he says that language forms a family, the members of it share family resemblances.

Following Wittgenstein we can say that the ordinary language is associated with our form of life. The religious practices, rituals, the daily exchange of greetings, these are all the form of life. So, language is not a personal or private property, it is used for exchanging our thoughts, feelings, emotions etc., it is a public property. Malcolm, in this regard, says, "It seems clear to me, however, that Wittgenstein in saying that the concept of following a rule is 'essentially social' in the sense that it can have its roots only in setting where there is a people, with common life and common language" (*Wittgenstein: On* 23). Form of life is

connected with the language game and the meaning of language is determined by the use or the practice of language.

The Later Wittgenstein and Religion:

Following Wittgenstein's lectures on religious belief we can say that according to him religion is language game and practice. In this respect, I think that his religious concepts fit with his later philosophy. In his religious lecture he raises the question how we can know whether a believer believes on the Last Judgement. Wittgenstein argues "Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has no proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary ground for belief but rather by regulating for in all his life" (Barrett 53). Belief is not based on any scientific ground and it cannot be refuted by any counter-evidence. Wittgenstein argues that in a religious discourse we use such religious expressions differently; we cannot relate it with the empirical world. These statements are something different as the statements that we use them in science. Religious statements are not unreasonable, but science and religion describe the same thing by their different criterion of meaning. God does not reveal himself in the world, but we believe in God. God or any spiritual object cannot correlate with reality. However, religion and its linguistic activities can be regarded as language games which are also a form of life. It is religious practice and anyone can engage in it. The religious concepts and the trueness or falseness of it depends on the context of dependent agreement. A religious discourse exists with an own criterion of meaning, its trueness depends on the agreement among the believers.

Conclusion:

After examining Wittgenstein's early and later philosophy and his conception of religion we can come to the conclusion that at his early life he was concerned about structural or formal language. However, in his later philosophy he opined that our language determines our view of reality. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein affirms a uniform structure of language that can be disclosed only by logical clarification, but in the *Philosophical Investigations* he admits that language has no common structure or essence, this is ordinary language that we can use it in our day-to-day life. So, according to his early philosophy, language is ineffable to reach up to the religious objects or the spiritual things. On the other hand, following his later philosophy we can say that religious languages are language games or forms of life. Its meaning can be disclosed by the believers of religion through its religious pictures.

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