

Chapter 30

Wittgenstein: Language-Games and Forms of Life

Key Words: Family resemblance, meaning as use, forms of life, language games, meaning, private language, rule-following.

This chapter discusses the important features of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. As we have seen in the previous chapter, after writing the *TLP*, where he outlined a very peculiar conception of philosophy—which conceived philosophical problems as pseudo problems, which have no solutions—Wittgenstein left philosophy, concluding that all the important issues with regard to philosophy are resolved and there was nothing more to be explored. But later he changed his mind. After engaging himself with many things, including the vocation of a school teacher in Norway, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge and to philosophy in 1929 and till 1935 he entertained very unconventional ideas about philosophy. This period was also a transitional period in his intellectual life. The important concerns of these days include philosophy of mathematics, language and meaning, psychological concepts, and the concept of knowledge.

An important work during this period is *Philosophische Bemerkungen* (English translation *Philosophical Remarks*) written in 1932, but published posthumously in 1964. Afterwards the *Philosophische Grammatik* (English: *Philosophical Grammar*) was written, which questions the view that understanding language is a mental process. The idea of family resemblance which occupies a central place in his later works, particularly the *Philosophical Investigations* makes its first appearance in *Philosophical Grammar*. Another important work during this period is *The Blue Book*, which refers to the theory of meaning as use, which is central to his later philosophy.

View of Language in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy

During his later period, Wittgenstein rejects what constitutes the core of his early view about language; the picturing relationship. Consequently, he also opposes the view that language has only one logic, or there is only one single essence of language. Instead he emphasizes the diverse and multiple ways in which we use language. Accordingly he holds that, meaning does not consist in the picturing relation between

propositions and facts, but in the use of an expression in the multiplicity of practices, which go to make up language.

As mentioned above, according to this later view, we will not be able to discover a single essence of language, as the latter is intrinsically connected with all human activities and behaviour, our practical affairs and relations, personal and public activities, relationship with others and the world. In other words, it is related to the diverse forms of life in which we participate as human beings living in a society. Despite the obvious differences from his early view, the later philosophy shares with the former certain common features concerning the nature of philosophy. In the *Tractates*, Wittgenstein rejected many traditional conceptions about the nature and function of philosophy and held that, philosophy is not a theory or a science. He was of the opinion that philosophy does not propose any theories, nor does it solve any problems, but is only a critique of language. In his later period also he subscribed to some extremely unconventional views about philosophy. Here too he held that philosophical problems are not empirical problems and rejected the possibility of formulating philosophical theories and conceiving it as a science. Here he proposes that, philosophical problems are solved by looking into the workings of our language. He believes that philosophical problems will vanish when the workings of language are properly grasped. His latter view holds that, in philosophy we should not seek to explain but only to *describe*.

Again, his early view of conceiving language as a representation of reality is replaced in favour of a notion that emphasizes on the diversity of uses language has in our life. Here Wittgenstein no longer advocates the idea that language has a universal logical structure. The idea of meaning he advocates in the early thought, which holds that a name stands for an object, and language as a whole is a picture of the world is replaced with the notion that meaning of a word is its use in the language.

Though Wittgenstein continues to preoccupy himself with language, the later view does not conceive language as a field of inquiry in its own right. He now holds that philosophical problems arise when we use language in inappropriate and unusual manners. But here too he believes that much of our confusions and riddles are the result of the misuse of language. One may wonder why there is a breakdown of the machinery of language, as Wittgenstein conceives the ordinary use of language is a domain which does not generate any such problems. Certain other questions like,

“What is language?’, “Does language have an essence?’ and “What is meaning and is it the essence of language?” can also be raised in this context.

The Concept of Meaning

Contrary to the early view, Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* holds that every word is not a name and the object corresponding to the word is not the meaning of the word. Wittgenstein writes:

Let us first discuss *this* point of the argument: that a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it.—It is important to not that the word "meaning" is being used illicitly if it is used to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to the word. That is to confound the meaning; of a name with the *bearer* of the name. When Mr. N. N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say that, for if the name ceased to have meaning it would make no sense to say "Mr. N. N. is dead." [PI: 40]

Wittgenstein now claims that the concept of meaning is related to the public practice of utterance, and all that makes this practice possible. Hence it is not just a logical exercise, which relies on abstract and a priori norms, but a dynamically interactive process which relates individuals with each other and their natural and artificial environments.

Different people employ language for different ends. Scientists, poets, politicians, engineers, workers etc. all employ language and conduct their lives through it. Hence it is the instrument of human purposes and needs. The philosopher's concern is with the instrument, with language, where he examines the workings of language. Wittgenstein opposes the possibility of arriving at a unitary account of language, which explains the whole working of a language in terms of a single theoretical model. He attempted something similar during his early period, where he envisaged discovering the essence of language by exploring its logical structure. On the other hand, the later view conceives language as a multiplicity of different activities. It thus opposes a theory of language which was subscribed to by the *Tractatus* and many other mistaken views about language.

The *Philosophical Investigations* discusses many such views of language, which Wittgenstein holds as mistaken in his later period. It begins with a critique on

Augustine's conception of language, which is a commonly held view and which is very close to the *Tractatus's* view. According to this view, the essence of language lies beneath the surface and this hidden essence needs to be discovered by means of the analysis of language. Hence this view holds that there is something like a final analysis of our forms of language. This view also holds that the major function of language is representation of reality. Again since it believes that the learning of a language is done by making associations between words and objects, it is possible to have a private language, as such associations are made privately by each individual. The *PI* opposes all these views and presents a very different idea about the nature and philosophical significance of language. He thus advocated a unique conception of philosophy, which had exerted tremendous influence on the development of 20th century and contemporary European philosophy.

As mentioned above, the *PI* starts with an examination of Augustine's conception of language, where each word's meaning is fixed to an object and one learns language by learning to associate words with things, which are their meanings. Opposing this view, which is closer to his own view held in the *TLP*, Wittgenstein proclaims that language is not one uniform thing, defined in terms of an essence or universal logical structure. Instead, it is a host of different activities, as we use language to do many things in life. Wittgenstein here introduces the simile of games in order to elucidate this aspect. He compares these different activities with different games we play in language. The concept of language-games is introduced in order to account for the multiplicity of uses and the relationship with the different contexts of their uses.

Again, Wittgenstein subscribes to a view which identifies language with an essential human capacity or potential. He says that language belongs as much to our natural history as walking, eating or drinking. It is part of the social behaviour of the species and it evolves like an institution with the various things we do with it. We employ language for different purposes for carrying out the various life activities in different situations and circumstances. Hence the background of human requirements in the natural environment has a vital role in the evolution of Language.

As mentioned above, the approach in the later period is characteristically different from the early philosophy of the *TLP*. Instead of looking for the essence or universal structure of language, Wittgenstein here focuses on its ordinary functioning. He examines how language normally functions in the various contexts in which people actually employ it; for narrating, questioning, describing, preying, expressing gratitude or anger, reporting, affirming or denying etc. we have to examine how people use them in these contexts. "Do not explain, just see how it actually works, as meanings have to be found in its use", says Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's method consists in invoking certain artificial examples of patterns of linguistic activity. For example, he analyses the language of the builder and his assistant, as an elementary model of a working language. The builder makes some utterances which in other contexts need not make any sense. He but perfectly communicates with his assistant, as both of them are conversant in the language game they participate. Both of them know the rules to be followed and they hardly make mistakes. Certain utterances of the builder evoke definite forms of responses in the assistant in a particular context. They both have no doubts about what is stated and what is expected to be done.

Wittgenstein here compares language use with a game. The participants in a conversation are compared to players who perform certain tasks and make certain types of moves based on certain rules that are publically agreed upon. The context in which people use language is crucial here, as the rules as well as the game change according to the context. The things participants do and achieve by engaging in conversation have to be examined and Wittgenstein says that we here come across the immense diversity exhibited by our usages. Wittgenstein adds:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. Here the term "*language-game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. [PI 23]

Language-games

Wittgenstein conceives language by comparing it with a toolbox. In a toolbox there are several tools like the hammer, square and gluepot. Similarly words have a multiplicity of different uses. He gives examples of primitive forms of languages and calls them language-games. We have already cited the example of the language game of the builder and his assistant. He also cites the example of a child learning the usage of words. Such primitive forms of languages are cited in order to remove the mental mist surrounding our ordinary usage of language. In such primitive forms thinking appears less confusing. Wittgenstein points out that these simple primitive forms are not completely different from the complex natural languages, as they are only different in kind. They help us to understand how our language functions.

Wittgenstein repeatedly asserts the diversity of language use depending on the contexts in which we employ them. Unlike his early view which looked for the universal structure of all linguistic expressions, here he emphasizes on diversity and conceives the early approach as an instance of craving for generality. This tendency to search for the common essence of all expressions is a metaphysical concern, as it seeks to identify the common feature of all particulars of the same kind. The metaphysical notion of the general idea originates from this concern.

This metaphysical propensity often construes that the meaning of the word is an image or a thing correlated to that word. This is to associate meaning with an extralinguistic entity, which is either physical or mental. According to this view, words are proper names and we confuse the bearer of the name with the meaning of the name. Wittgenstein reminds us that there is something fundamentally wrong about this craving for generality. He argues that not all meaningful uses of language are meaningful in the same way and not all words are names. To elucidate this point further, he cites the example of the name of a person. We have seen this above. According to Wittgenstein, the thing or person that is the bearer of the name is not the meaning of the name. As he says, when a person named Mr. N.N. dies, we say that, such and such a person had died or the bearer of the name Mr. N.N. died and not the meaning of the expression Mr. N.N. died.

The craving for generality had resulted in many metaphysical confusions and has generated many philosophical problems. For instance, the problems related to abstractions (abstract entities) and mental representation. As a result we assume that there is a separate and hidden realm of reality, where we encounter the meaning of words. Countering this approach, Wittgenstein urges us to look how these words are used in actual language. The idea of language games elucidates this further. Wittgenstein says:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,— but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language". [PI : 65]

There are different things we designate as games. For example, there are board games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games etc. Wittgenstein argues that, if we seek to know what is common to all these different types of games, we have nothing specific to point out. There are some similarities, as in some games we use balls, some are played indoor, some are played individually and some others in groups. For instance, both football and volleyball games use balls. But the ways they are used are different. There are of course some similarities, but there are also important differences between each game. These similarities do not warrant us to identify the "essence" of all games. Wittgenstein characterizes such similarities as family resemblances, indicating that they are comparable to the resemblances between the different members of the same family. Some may have similar noses and some others may have similar foreheads and so on and so forth. But such similarities and resemblances do not warrant us to construe an essence. In Wittgenstein's own words:

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

The diverse ways in which we use it makes it impossible to identify a single essence. It is a rule-governed activity that cannot be defined in exact terms. It lacks exact boundaries and hence the same concept may have a range of different applications in our use. The meaning and significance of linguistic usages depend on the context of life of their application. Here Wittgenstein introduces the notion of "form of life." According to him, every form of life is a context of life where people are bound to each

other and to the life context by means of conventions and rules. The metaphor of game helps us to understand this aspect. Let us take the example of a game of chess. Here simply naming the various pawns is not enough. One has to learn how the figures can move on the chessboard. This is to know about the rules of the game of chess, which actually regulate these movements. The core of Wittgenstein's argument consists in the assertion that meanings are hidden. They are not to be found in any curious unknown territory; in the mind or in a supra-natural realm. Instead, they have to be located in the day-to-day usages. Wittgenstein argues that, like games, the rules of language use are also public, conventional and customary. These rules are regulative mechanism of a community. People follow them, without contemplating about them or raising questions or doubts about their legitimacy. Wittgenstein says that "obeying a rule" is a practice. We learn a rule by following it and by participating in the form of life. Wittgenstein categorically affirms that rules cannot be observed privately, as they presuppose a context of life, which is public.

The Concept of Private Language

Since words acquire meanings in the public activity of using them, language is essentially a public activity. Wittgenstein thus opposes the idea of a private language. The idea of a private language, where a person expresses his inner experiences like feelings, moods etc. which he alone can understand is contested here. The individual words of this language are said to be referring to private sensations, which the person who has them alone can understand.

Countering this view, Wittgenstein asks; how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations? He considers the word "pain", which actually is a private sensation. Now assume that he gives a name to his private sensation, which he alone can relate to the latter. Wittgenstein here reminds that when someone gives a name to his sensation, we should not forget that a great deal of stage- setting in the language is presupposed. Only then the act of naming makes sense. Wittgenstein says that when someone indicates a private sensation he has with a word and notes down this word whenever he has that sensation, that word lacks any meaning. This is because, though a note has a function and therefore, a definite meaning, the note this person makes when he has a private sensation, which no one else understands, has no meaning, because unlike usual notes people make, this note does not have a function

in the public activity of using language. A word, which we use to indicate a sensation, should be intelligible to others as well, and not just to the user alone. The use of a word for that person's sensation stands in need of a justification which everybody understands. It becomes a note only when it is used according to certain rules which are public. In other words, it is the rule-governed act that makes such moves significant and meaningful. Wittgenstein continues:

And it would not help either to say that it need not be a sensation; that when he writes "S", he has something—and that is all that can be said. "Has" and "something" also belong to our common language.—So in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound.—But such a sound is an expression only as it occurs in a particular language-game, which should now be described. [PI: 261]

Wittgenstein underlines that language is a public and socially-governed activity and therefore, a rule governed activity. Linguistic expressions and usages make sense only if they are used in a rule governed manner. This shift to rule-governing act emphasizes the importance of publically shared intersubjective conventions in the formation and evolution of human languages. Wittgenstein here does not discuss the logic of language, as he did in the *TLP*, but instead focuses on the grammar of language that constitutes the norms for meaningful language use. With this emphasis on grammar he highlights the phenomenon of rule-following that humans observe when they communicate with each other in their day to day life.

The Role of Philosophy

Wittgenstein says that the typical philosophical problems that are commonly found in the history of philosophy, are the result of linguistic confusions. They arise when we use language not in the usual sense in which it is used. Wittgenstein says that philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. They originate when language is used in an unusual sense.

But philosophy has a positive and an important role to play as well. Here his view resembles his earlier view, which conceived philosophy as a critique of language and treated its major function as a logical analysis that leads to logical clarification. Here too he says that philosophy helps us to get rid of our confusions and the idea of language analysis is crucial here as well. But here philosophy brings out the

confusions, not by the logical analysis of propositions but by pointing to the reality of language, which consists in its use in ordinary life.

The new approach to language analysis urges to do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. Here too philosophy is not a science and hence does not give rise to theories. It has an entirely different function. Wittgenstein writes:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. One might also give the name "philosophy" to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions.

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. [127]

Hence, philosophical problems are not treated as empirical problems that can be solved adopting a definite methodology. Wittgenstein says that, philosophical problems are solved by looking into the workings of our language. Philosophy makes us recognize those workings of our language, despite of an urge to misunderstand them. He asserts that the problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.[PI: 109]

Quiz

1. Which does Wittgenstein not hold in his later period?
(a) Philosophical problems are solved by looking into the workings of our language
(b) philosophical problems are solved by a logical analysis of language
(c) Philosophical problems will vanish when the workings of language are properly grasped
(d) Philosophy we should not seek to explain but only to *describe*.
2. Which of the following is held by the Augustinian view of language?
(a) Essence of language lies beneath the surface
(b) Meaning of a word is determined by the context in which it is used
(c) Language is not one uniform thing
(d) Language has a universal logical structure.
3. Which of the following does Wittgenstein's later philosophy hold?
(a) Philosophy consists in the logical clarification of language
(b) Philosophy deals with the theories of linguistic understanding
(c) Philosophy explains the nature of the world and language
(d) Philosophy neither explains nor deduces anything but simply puts everything before us.
4. Why did Wittgenstein reject the possibility of private language?
(a) Because we can never express our inner experiences
(b) Because we can never name a private sensation
(c) Because there is no one to one correspondence between word and meaning
(d) Because words acquire meanings in the public activity of using them.
5. The model of language analysis in Wittgenstein's later work emphasizes on:

(a) Philosophical problems are treated as empirical problems (b) The logical analysis of propositions (c) Doing away with all explanation (d) Arriving at a scientific conception of language.

Answer Key

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

References

Books and Articles

1. Hacker, P.M.S. 1996, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*. Blackwell,.
2. Kenny, A., 1973, *Wittgenstein*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
3. Pears, David, 1985, *Wittgenstein, London*: Fontana Press.
4. McGinn, Colin, 1984, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, Oxford: Blackwell.
5. Monk, Ray, 2005, *How to Read Wittgenstein*, New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company.
6. Sluga, Hans D. (ed.). 1996, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*. Cambridge University Press.

Web Resources

1. Biletzki, Anat and Matar, Anat, "Ludwig Wittgenstein", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/wittgenstein/>.
2. British Wittgenstein Society, URL= <http://www.editor.net/BWS/>.
3. The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen (WAB), URL= <http://wab.uib.no/>.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lectures on Philosophy, URL= <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/at/wittgens.htm>.