

WITTGENSTEIN'S CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE GAMES

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Abstract. By the time Wittgenstein wrote *The Philosophical Investigations* he rejected the three assumptions of his early period namely that language is used for one purpose the presenting of facts, that sentence acquires meaning in one way that is through picturing and that language essentially has a clear and firm structure of the formulae in a logical calculus.

In the later development of his thought Wittgenstein seems to repudiate the earlier notion of the uniformity of language, which would restrict the word to a rigid and demarcated use, a use which would suit all cases. He came to think that language is flexible, subtle and multiform.

Wittgenstein's remarks on "Games and Definitions" could be applied to aesthetics. The nature of art is like that of the nature of games. If we look carefully and see what it is that we called 'art' we will find no common properties but discern strands of similarities. Knowing what art is not discovering some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe and explain those things we call art by virtue of these similarities.

The basic resemblance between these concepts is their open texture. In elucidating them certain (paradigm) cases can be given to which we conveniently apply the word 'art' or game but no exhaustive set of cases can be given. It is so because one can always envisage new cases, which can be added to it.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, published in 1953, Wittgenstein expressed the view: "Our language can be seen as an

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ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new borough with straight regular streets and uniform houses.”¹

The book contains loosely connected paragraphs as Wittgenstein himself says: “it travels over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction.” The book carries many unanswered questions, implicit hints, imaginary dialogues, images, metaphors and epigrams.²

By the time he wrote, *The Philosophical Investigations*, he rejected the three assumptions of his early period namely that language is used for one purpose, the presenting of facts, that sentence acquires meaning in one way that is through picturing and that language essentially has a clear and firm structure of the formulae in a logical calculus.

In the *Tractatus*, he has expressed the view that language is as complex as a living organism. So in order to grasp the meaning and essence of language one must make it clear and lucid. One should make a distinction between surface grammar that is grammar as it appears on the surface and ‘depth grammar’ that is a thorough analysis of complete forms of language as are discovered in factual language.³

In the later development of his thought, Wittgenstein seems to repudiate the earlier notion of the uniformity of language which would restrict the word to a rigid and demarcated use, a use which would suit all cases. He came to think that language is flexible, subtle and multiform. This paradigm for explaining the multiformity of language is discussed in much detail in the Brown Book by Wittgenstein in 1934-35. He makes use of words like ‘bricks’, ‘slabs’ which refer to objects and *prima facie* it looks like logical atomism with its concept that the elements of language reflect data in reality. It happens to be a language game when a builder utters the word ‘slab’ and his assistant brings him the object that is needed. A great deal of training is needed in order to understand that on hearing a certain word one is to carry out a certain task just as a child learns the use of words on the

basis of demonstrative teaching. A kind of rapport is established between the builder and the assistant with, such phrases as 'Five bricks', 'that slab', 'First Slab', 'ten brick' etc.⁴

A counter example can be given of shooting a movie where the director gives command to his team in the following manner:

- Camera
- Lights
- Action

There is no static reflection of things in words, but a total dynamic pattern of words and actions. 'Brick' is not a description, but an order or an appeal. It is in this way that language game that Wittgenstein put forward in his later work and that forms a critique of the logical period.

Words are not names of isolated objects, separate constituents, but part of human actions. Words are like levers that can be used for different purposes one may be used as a crank, as a switch or as a pump handle. If not put to a specific use, they are rods of a similar kind. It is only in their use that they have meaning as levers.⁵

The functioning of words is as varied as the functioning of objects. If one takes the example of tools in a toolbox one finds a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue pot, glue, nails and screws. There is no single use of these tools. It is not even adequate to say that all tools are used to modify something. Wittgenstein thus argues that there are different kinds of use of what one calls symbols, words, and sentences. And this variety is not something fixed.⁶

When one speaks of use one may think of rules which are employed in language. One has learned what a piece of language means by observing what other people do because one knows that people who speak the language will use it in that way. For example, if one teaches someone the meaning of a colour word by showing him samples of the colour, he will understand and will use in new situations as he has been taught.

Interestingly enough a bull may charge at a red flag and rats may be trained to react in one way to red lights and in other way to blue lights but neither the bull nor the rats know what red is. In other words, neither of them has the concept of red or has the concept of colour.⁷

It may be pointed out that there has to be an agreement in one's reactions and this makes communication possible. People take note of the fact whether their reactions tally and this need considerable comprehension. It is on account of one's agreement in our reactions that makes possible for one to teach anything and for someone to understand anything. Thus, the consensus of reactions is in this sense prior to language.⁸

A central theme of *Wittgenstein's Investigations* rests on the concept of meaning. Wittgenstein asserts that to use the same word is not meant to have the same meaning. The meaning of a Bishop in a game of chess is not attained by finding out the material of which the piece is made. One must follow the moves that can be made with the Bishop and the rules it is governed by 'Bishop' is not the name of a piece of ivory, but a function within a context of rules.

A counter example can be given of a game like long tennis in which the word 'love' has nothing to do with the emotion but is used as zero.

There is still one more theme which may one mentioned in this regard and which has been emphasized by writers such as Miss Anscombe. Intention may be defined variously. It may signify motive disposition, decision, prediction, desire, purpose etc. The grammar suggests that intend functions as an auxiliary than as a verb, something is needed to complete it. It is like a variable which may be filled in by the object of intention.⁹

As far as Wittgenstein's views are concerned he enquires if intention were a feeling like a tickle, or a group of many feelings that can be remembered or repeated to some one else. He rejects the idea that intention is any sort of feeling.

Ewing is of the view that there is a hidden circularity as regards the meaning of the term intention. For example, 'X is good' implies that one ought to have a favourable attitude towards it. But favourable includes the notion of good thus yielding "X is good" means one ought to have a good attitude towards it.

Ross is of the view that certain acts are self-evidently good when one has attained a sufficient mental maturity. But maturity contradicts the notion of self-evidence and includes the notion of good.

Wittgenstein regards intention as a concern for something to take place in future. But it may be pointed out that it is the total past, present and future situations which are important in determining intentions and thus intention become defeasible.¹⁰

Melden is of the view that intention includes the whole history of an event. In intending one must take into account:

- (a) circumstances,
- (b) further avowals and disavowals made,
- (c) further actions,
- (d) feelings betrayed, and
- (e) interests exhibited etc.

Thus, intention is not a single occurrence and so cannot be a cause.¹¹

An intention may be regarded as a pattern of behaviour. Melden thinks that a pattern which arranges the chaos of events provides one with a better understanding of an agent. Miss Anscombe claims that to give a motive is to regard action as one of the possible patterns of behaviour. Wittgenstein envisaged intention — as a pattern of behaviour we construct and observe and not an internal state which acts in a causal manner.

If intention is based on Wittgenstein's notion that the meaning of a word is its use in a language game, it may be said that intention gains meaning both from the language and context

in which it is used. Stuart Hamshire, following Wittgenstein, asserts that if at the age of ten one takes a lifetime vow in religious faith it is bound to be unrealistic because it ignores future particulars and actual situations.¹²

Reverting to our theme that the forms and uses of language are flexible and numerous it may be added that words are used in giving commands describing things, expressing wishes in play-acting, translating, telling stories in inquiring, thanking, cursing, greeting praying etc. Thus, there is no set of definite rules, no one pattern to be laid, and no single explanation to be given.

It is misconceived that since they are all uses of language there must be something in common. Wittgenstein in the Blue Books speaks of our craving for generality which is generated because of our tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly assume under a general term. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggested a solution which is made explicit in his use of the example of games. We are led to think that there is something in common to all games and this common property is the justification for applying the general term 'game' to many kind of games. There is, a matter of fact, some likeness or similarity, some common features which they all share.¹³

He talks about games like board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games and so on. It will be superfluous to say that there is something in common in them or they would not be called games. There is nothing in common to them but similarities and relationships by virtue of which they are all termed games. If one looks carefully at board games or card games one finds many correspondences but many points eliminated and others added. There are games in which there is no amusement but a lot of patience and concentration is needed. There is not always winning or losing in a game when a child throws his ball and catches it again. There is great deal of ingenuity and luck in games like chess but there is a difference between ingenuity in chess and that in tennis. Games like ring-a-ring-a-roses and taking an instance from our Indian context of a

game like flying a kite where there is an element of amusement but still a lot of concentration is required.

If one takes the example of books and tries to find out the common features they share one will fail. A given set of books may not be on the same subject or written by the same author or published by the same firm and yet they are all called books. It is not because what one is looking for lies deeply hidden, but because it is too obvious to the seen.

Wittgenstein maintains that there is no better expression to describe these characteristics than 'family resemblances'. There are various resemblances between the members of a family: build, gait, features, colour of eyes, eyebrows, temperament etc and these points overlap and criss-cross in the same way as features of games. This can be compared to the idea that properties are ingredients of the things which have the properties for example that beauty is an ingredient of all beautiful objects as alcohol is of beer or wine.¹⁴

The nominalist talks of resemblances until he acknowledges that resemblance is unintelligible except as resemblance in a respect and to specify the respect in which objects resemble one another it to indicate a quality or property. The realist talks of properties and qualities and points to the resemblances between the objects that are characterized by such and such a property or quality.

Wittgenstein is neither a realist nor a nominalist. He affirms at one and the same time the realist claim that there is an objective justification for the application of the word 'game' to games and the nominalist claim that there is no element that is common to all games. Further more the question if resemblances or properties are ultimate is a perverse question if it is meant to have a simple single answer.¹⁵

Thus, language is safeguarded from this 'craving for generality' which occurs because of the misconception that there is something common to all the entities which we associate with a general term.

It is also misunderstood that language is something unique, isolated and quite on its own. Making use of language is not among the ordinary things we do like eating, drinking, playing, walking etc. To think of language is to think of a form of life, so the understanding of language must bring in to something non-linguistic. One must take into account as to what people are, they want, and do. For example, there is no such thing as giving and obeying orders. The orders have to be about something, they have meaning within a social context and this is a form of life.¹⁶

Form of life has been interpreted by J. F. M. Hunter in an article entitled, "Forms of life" in *Wittgensteins' Philosophical Investigations*. Professor Hunter has explained it thus:

1. "A form of life is the same as a language game and calling a language game a form of life is saying that it is something formalized or standardized in our life, that is one of life's form."
2. "A form of life is a sort of package of mutually related tendencies to behave in various ways: to have certain facial expressions and to make certain gestures, to do certain things like count apples or help people and to say certain things."
3. "To say that something is a form of life is to say that it is a way of life, or a mode manner, fashion or style of life, that it has something important to do with the class structure, the values, the religion, the type of industry and commerce and of recreation that characterize a group of people."¹⁷

To put it differently it may be said that any action which is established as belonging to a group and which has a common meaning shared in by the members of that group is a form of life. It covers all social or cultural behaviour in so far as it is meaningful. This pattern of meaningful behaviour is distinguished on the one hand from behaviour which does not carry such meaning for example physical or biological happenings and on the other hand from individual behaviour, which though meaningful in some sense is not an established group meaning. It

may be added that what Wittgenstein call forms of life are what social philosophers call social facts or “institutional facts”. But it is important to remember that established patterns of action are not static. Wittgenstein illustrates this with an example. If one takes up the criminal code of a country one cannot make out from the code in what manner the inhabitants of that country deal with a thief, for it is not a book of social anthropology. The rules proceed from the decision people make to implement the rules.¹⁸

As far as the Wittgenstein's example of shopping for five red apples goes, we have one meaningful activity or form of life carried out by three language games — in this case counting, identifying colours, and picking out objects. One can imagine the three games functioning by other different forms of life for example awarding five red apples, painting a picture of five red apples and teaching arithmetic with the help of five red apples.

There is deeper sense of the form of life and this is expressed in persuasion sympathy, hope, expectation expressions of incitements etc. This touches on a further question to which Wittgenstein alluded in the *Tractatus*, survival after death. What Wittgenstein calls the mystical and the unsayable now pervades speech so much so that speech becomes inter-woven with action and attitude of life, and yet able to give expression to the question of the soul.

In other words, one believes in after life and hope for reward if one adheres to a particular form of life and refuses to accept it if one adheres to another form of life. It may be added that there are five references to forms of life in the *Philosophical Investigations* and these are interwoven with language. It is so because speaking language is a part of a form of life.¹⁹

Wittgenstein's remarks on “Games and Definitions” could be applied to aesthetics. Morris Weitz in his article “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” propounds the view that Wittgenstein was extra ordinarily gifted with artistic ability. He could design a house, mould a statue, conduct an orchestra or write an imaginary dialogue.

The function of words are diverse, so much so that even a single word like beauty has a multiplicity of uses and this multiplicity is not predetermined or fixed. We should therefore admire the “open texture” of language affirming that a word has an indefinite variety of meanings and that new and unprecedented meanings will take birth as the contexts of life alter.

As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein gives the example of game. If one asks what a game is, one picks out sample games and describes them. However, knowing what a game is not providing some definition or theory but being able to recognize and explain games and to decide which among imaginary and new examples would or would not be called ‘games’.

The nature of art is like that of the nature of games. If we look carefully and see what it is that we called ‘art’ we will find no common properties but discern strands of similarities. Knowing what art is not discovering some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe and explain those things we call art by virtue of these similarities.

The basic resemblance between these concepts is their open texture. In elucidating them certain (paradigm) cases can be given to which we conveniently apply the word ‘art’ or game but no exhaustive set of cases can be given. It is so because one can always envisage new cases which can be added to it.

A concept is open if its conditions of application are emendable that is if a situation or case can be imagined or secured which would expand the use of the concept to cover this or to close the concept and invent a new case to deal with the new case. If necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept can be stated, the concept is a closed one. It happens in logic and mathematics where concepts are clearly defined.

‘Art’ is one open concept. New conditions give rise to new art forms which will demand decisions on the part of professional critics whether the concept should be expanded or not. Aestheticians present similar conditions but never sufficient ones for the correct application of the concept. With ‘art’ its conditions of application can never be exhausted or enumerated since new

cases can always be created by artists or even nature. This is true of every sub-concept of art: tragedy, comedy, painting, opera etc.

What Morris Weitz is arguing is that the very fine and subtle character of art, its changes and novel creations make it impossible to ensure any set of defining properties. To choose to close the concept is to infringe the possibility of creativity in the arts.²⁰

It may be said that Wittgenstein in his rejection of philosophical theorizing in the sense of constructing definitions of philosophical entities has provided contemporary aesthetics with a starting point for future progress.

After an exposition and analysis of Wittgenstein's Philosophy one finds oneself, hesitatingly though, to quote Goethe's remark that if all the ideas he had got from other people were taken away from his writings there would be nothing left. It is indeed true that if all that Wittgenstein had to offer were attributed to their source he would be an unoriginal philosopher exceptionally gifted but in no way creative. However, this is not quite the case, he did have the fecundity of mind to enrich the ideas of other people.²¹

In all intellectual honesty, Wittgenstein acknowledged in a note now published in the volume entitled *Culture and Value* (pp. 18-19), "I think there is some truth in my idea that I really think reproductively. I don't believe I have ever invented a line of thinking, I have always taken over from some one else. I have simply straight away seized on it with enthusiasm for my work of clarification. This is how Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus Loos, Weininger and Splenger Sraffa have influenced me."²²

The influence of Schopenhauer on the later philosophy of Wittgenstein is evident from the fact that he borrowed the doctrines about language from Schopenhauer. Wittgenstein explains meaning in terms of human actions, intentions and purposes and through them in terms of patterns of interest and behaviour and finally in terms of ways of life.

Engel affirms that the influence is sometimes specific and determinate as the direct borrowing of a key term family resemblance which plays a vital role in Wittgenstein's philosophy and which Schopenhauer uses a number of times in his philosophy. Engel further adds 'forms of life' which Schopenhauer has taken from Kant and which Goethe had also used when talking about Kant's philosophy. As for the key term 'paradigm' used by Wittgenstein it is Schopenhauer's much loved and much quoted term.²³

If it is pre-supposed that Wittgenstein out of vanity didn't give any sources to his work, it is only half-truth. He delved deep into the thought of others so much so that it became the fibre of his being. What he gathered from the thought of others was so firmly assimilated into his own philosophy that it became genuinely his own. This is combined with his own aphoristic and condensed style of prose composition which made his ideas highly original.

Wittgenstein style of writing is very enigmatic and it is typical of him that he never says that this is what he is doing. He just does it he pre-supposes, comments on, or argues with, revises or rejects utterances of Schopenhauer but does not mention it.

In the light of all this it is no wonder that the philosophy of Wittgenstein was to a large extent an attempt to revise and correct Schopenhauer.

It may be added that Wittgenstein went out of his way to draw his reader's attention to his own forerunners, his way of opening a dialogue on any important subject is to trace the development of the concept by his predecessors in the history of thought with ample quotation and full attribution. This approach in no way undermines our appreciation of his work or lowers our sense of distinctiveness of his philosophical personality.²⁴

However, it may be pointed out that despite the electric character of Wittgenstein's philosophy, the technique of linguistic analysis engineered by him changed the very character and conception of philosophy. Later Wittgenstein, denies that philosophy and especially metaphysical philosophy does or can

study the nature of ultimate reality. Philosophy also does not study those problems which are as yet unamenable to scientific treatment. It also is not simply the most general of the sciences. The prescriptive or ethical role classically assigned to philosophy is also basically questionable. It is not the job of philosophy to discover how we ought to live. Wittgenstein has also stubbornly opposed to any assimilation of philosophy to science.

The basic thesis of later Wittgenstein is that philosophical problems arise out of the confusion of grammar and logic of various types of statements. For example, the grammar of material-object words and names of abstract entities is very similar. The subject/predicate sentences have the same form but they are used in countless different ways. Declarative sentences share the same mood, but we must not let this blind us to the differences between various kinds of such sentences and their roles in language. They can be logically diametrically opposite to one another. When we confuse a statement like "The flower is yellow", with a statement like "The Reality is spiritual", metaphysical problems and paradoxes are generated. The "yellow" does not qualify the flower the way "spiritual" qualifies the Reality. The first predicate is descriptive while the second predicate is interpretative. Furthermore, we do not know exactly as to what "Reality" and "spiritual" are. However, by ascribing spirituality to Reality, we shall be ending up with idealism-materialism debate, thus generating a first-rate philosophical paradox.

Similarly, the language embeds countless pictures, which can lead to deep philosophical puzzlement. For example, the mind-body problem may be generated by the "inner/outer" picture embedded in the language. We may picture "time", as a flowing river or blowing wind and then ask as to whether time is pure duration or a series of successive points. The simple grammatical pronoun "I" may be projected on reality to yield the doctrine of the soul.

If we assimilate philosophy to science, great philosophical difficulties can be cultivated. According to Wittgenstein, the archetype of explanation and intellectual progress that has been

provided in the last five centuries by science can play havoc when applied to philosophy. For it inclines us to search for explanations instead of describing grammatical conventions, to construct ideal languages instead of describing our own, to conceive of metaphysics as a super physics instead of searching for the roots of metaphysical paradoxes in linguistic confusion.

It is the contention of later Wittgenstein that grand philosophical systems can finally be traced to linguistic confusion. Idealism and materialism, theism and pantheism, monism and pluralism, etc., can be shown to be controversies generated by linguistic confusion. We can also trace them to pictures embedded in our language.

The traditional conception of philosophy viewed the subject as the mother of all sciences or the most fundamental and profound inquiry into the nature of reality etc. However, the later Wittgenstein maintains that philosophy is a product of linguistic confusion. It is to these confusions that endless and baffling questions of philosophy can be traced to. The illusions of philosophy are rooted in deep features of our language. These deep and complex features of language determine our thought and orientate our approach of looking at them.

Later Wittgenstein recommends a thorough analysis of language to determine the sources of our philosophical troubles. Wittgenstein deems different methods as different therapies with a view to liberating the philosopher from deep and pervasive puzzlement. According to Later Wittgenstein, the philosophical problems do not have a solution like mathematical questions or scientific queries. Assimilating philosophical problems to either mathematical propositions or scientific theories smacks of highest methodological confusion. We have to understand the genesis of philosophical problems in the all-pervading linguistic confusion, when we understand that philosophical problems are not real problems but products of linguistic confusion. When we understand the origin and development of philosophical problems, our itch for asking philosophical questions dies down. Philosophy is a battle of human intelligence against the bewitchment of language. Philosophy traps us into muddles felt

as problems. The job of linguistic analysis is to liberate the philosopher from the traps language designs for us.

The early Wittgenstein also advocated the therapeutic conception of philosophy. The atomistic analysis of early Wittgenstein was also addressed to showing that philosophical problems were nonsensical and hence did not really exist. The later Wittgenstein also thought that the job of analysis was therapeutic. However, his view of how it ought to be accomplished changed radically.

The early and later Wittgenstein in between them signify a great disjunction or rupture — the early Wittgenstein being essentially a modern philosopher in the Cartesian–Lockean–Kantian tradition, advocating or espousing a realist, objectivist, representationalist account of the world and therefore operating within the world-view and value-system of Modern Europe, and later Wittgenstein being one of the first categorical initiators of Euro-American Postmodern turnaround. In the *Tractatus*, he is a modernist at its methodological best, his logical atomist analysis representing the pinnacle of realist-objectivist predilections or orientations of Modern Europe and in the *Investigations* he negotiates the twists and turns of anti-realist and anti-objectivist account of language, of truth and of meaning.

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