

Wittgenstein on ‘The Realm of Ineffable’

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Abstract

The paper attempts to delve into the distinction Wittgenstein makes between factual discourse and moral thoughts. It can be linked with the basic distinction made between facts and values, which have been a debatable issue over the centuries from pre-Socrates to analytic period. In order to accumulate new knowledge about the essence of world we require metaphysical investigation. Metaphysical inquiry is to do with ‘what is real’ or ‘what is the essence of reality’. Traditionally, philosophers have been emphasizing on the theory building activities in metaphysics that shows how the world comes to be. Wittgenstein rejects this traditional approach of metaphysics. For him, it is nothing more than building castles in the air. The shift is in the philosophical emphasis from metaphysics to clarification of language.

Key words: Wittgenstein, language, logic, world

I

Wittgenstein, in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1961) starts from the problem of understanding the logic of language and explicates the relation between language, thought and the world. The aim of the book is claimed as to draw the limits of thought by drawing the limits of language. Philosophy is limited here as a critical enquiry into the working of language. By attaining this clarity of language, Wittgenstein has tried to explore the important issues, which cannot be put within the framework of language i.e. what exists beyond the world. His emphasis is on making a distinction between ‘how things are in the world’ and how the essence of the world is grasped from the point of view of the ‘higher’ (Wittgenstein 1961: #6.432). Wittgenstein’s standpoint on

metaphysics remains same throughout his works. In fact, for him, metaphysics is unavoidable and the discourses on metaphysics are not false but merely nonsense.

Wittgenstein's entire philosophy is considered as propounding a new approach to moral philosophy. He displays the nonsensicality of the ways in which ethical theses have been discussed in moral philosophy. Philosophy, he states, has always tried to go beyond what the science tries to explain about the empirical world. Wittgenstein's aim in philosophy is to show that there cannot be any meaningful metaphysical discourses because language cannot touch the essence of world and the essence of life. The things, which are possible in language, have both assertion and negation. More precisely, building theories about metaphysics are beyond the propositions of natural sciences. In fact, Wittgenstein is quite critical of the traditional metaphysical philosophers who had attempted to describe something which cannot be significantly said about what the nature of reality is. They have failed to understand the syntactical rules of language and as a result produced the nonsensical philosophical propositions. *Tractatus* presupposes that logical investigation reveals metaphysical entities and the logical form of expression shows something about the essential structure of the world. The metaphysical expressions do not assert anything empirically; rather they exhibit something deeper and higher that is neither true nor false. It has no sense and no theoretical content according to the rules of language. But it is purely absolute and eternal, and hence, ineffable. These expressions are neither propositions of empirical sciences nor tautologies of logic or mathematics.

II

The most significant theme of *Tractatus* lies in the idea of 'philosophy as a critique of language' (Wittgenstein 1961: #4.0031). The superficial way of understanding does not give the clarification about the essential nature of language, which is the subject matter of philosophical inquiry. It demands to go into the depth by analyzing language. In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein uses logic as a tool of inquiry that constitutes the limits of

proposition of what is thinkable, and sensible. It is a *a priori* structure of all kinds of possibilities in empirical world. Here, logical investigation explores the structure of language and hence the structure of world. The critique of language involves the study of the logical structure of language insofar as it brings out the essence of language, which demarcates between the propositions, which have sense, which are senseless, and the nonsensical propositions. In fact, misunderstanding this distinction leads to the confusion between ‘what can be expressed’ and ‘what cannot be expressed’ in language. This is the source of, what Wittgenstein calls the philosophical ‘diseases’. He attempts to cure philosophy of these diseases in both earlier and later philosophical works. Though the difference lies only in the kind of treatments he suggests there.

Ordinary language for Wittgenstein, is good enough to analyze the philosophical activities, thus, there is no need to construct a formal language as suggested by Frege, Russell, and logical positivists. We only need to understand the logical structure of language. However, ordinary language is vague in nature and has ambiguity yet it is adequate to show the form of language and the form of world. Wittgenstein’s early work emphasizes on the process of *analysis*, which makes the sense of proposition clear. The complex proposition, which describes the complex fact, is analyzed into the elementary proposition, which describes the simplest (atomic) object. We cannot know the sense of propositions until we refine them. In other words, it clarifies the logical structure of language, which underlies beneath ordinary propositions. The focus of the *Tractatus* is on finding a common structure between the language and the world and constructing a possible pictorial relationship between them. Basic contention is to discover an isomorphic relation between the language and world where both share a common logical form.

In later writings, Wittgenstein has made a slight change in his viewpoint. Now there is no final analysis on clarity of language as in *Tractatus*, rather we get to know the usages of the words in the social context. He emphasizes that the language-game primarily teaches us to dismiss the ambiguity and vagueness of language but this does

not lead us to any fixed rules for using the words in day-to-day life. That is why some interpreters believe that in later works, Wittgenstein cannot be considered as a typical analytic philosopher. Here, there is no need to refine the propositions for discovering the formal language because formal language is inadequate to explain the moral life. This notion of language provides us with the flexibility to formulate language according to our own convenience and conventions and reject *a priori* structure of language. This is a clear shift from the essentialism of *Tractatus* to pluralism of his later works.

III

A proposition can be said to have sense if it does represent the possible situation in reality or say something about the empirical world. Hence, propositions are neither necessary nor contradictory but are contingent. That is, they have bipolar relation with truth-values. Whereas, the propositions of logic and mathematics have unipolar relation. They are senseless, as they do not represent any state of affairs. They eliminate nothing. They include all the possibilities in themselves. Hence, no other possibilities are left there. Also, contradictions and tautologies do not represent itself like the propositions with sense. The truth possibilities of the sentence 'It is raining', depends upon the situation of world. It means that it leaves open all the possibilities to world. Whereas, tautologies and contradictions have nothing to leave to the world. 'I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining' (Wittgenstein 1961: #4.461). Therefore, tautology and contradictions are degenerated propositions because they are *a priori* and fixed. They are nothing more than symbols and notations. They are sort of necessary and certain rules and their truth-value does not depend on facts. They neither say anything nor do they try to say anything but they show the logical structure of the world. Hence, logical propositions are unconditionally true, they are tautologies, and their negations are contradictions. They have 'zero sense' (P.M.S. Hacker 2001: 111).

As mentioned, propositions of ethics, religion, aesthetics do not have sense nor are they senseless. They are, as labeled by Wittgenstein, nonsensical because they are not real propositions but pseudo-propositions. They violate the syntactical rules of language as they go beyond the limits of language and hence, the world. They are neither about the state of affairs nor about the laws of the world. They show the ineffable truths that are not 'said' but only 'shown' by the well-formed propositions.

The correct method in philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is "to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science (Wittgenstein 1961: #6.53). By saying this, Wittgenstein has tried to draw the limits of philosophical activity, which is only a systematic description of how things are. That way, any metaphysical discourse becomes nonsensical. But it should not be taken as the rejection of metaphysics itself, as done by the logical positivists. Rather it is an attempt to show the limits language and philosophy, which was missed out by the traditional philosophers, which lead them to cause 'philosophical disease'.

IV

Tractatus aims at showing the inexpressible by exhibiting clearly what is expressible. That is why, Wittgenstein claims, 'it will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said' (Wittgenstein 1961: #4.115). This makes a clear distinction between 'saying' and 'showing'. The ultimate truth or reality about the essence of life and the essence of world is ineffable. Wittgenstein has reached such a point where the mystical must be treated as inexpressible. The mystical can only be shown but cannot be expressed in language. He has claimed that the mystical manifests itself in language, so the inexpressible reveals through the expressible. Hence, the concept of silence conveys more meaning than 'what is said'. For instance, the real sense that a poem conveys is more valuable than the utterable words. A poem usually goes beyond the said words by making use of metaphors. Wittgenstein says, "the sense of the world must lie outside the world' (Wittgenstein 1961: #6.41) because the sense of the world

refers to Absolute values. The Absolute values cannot be expressed in language because unlike empirical propositions they lack truth-values. They are intrinsic good and do not need any functional values and characteristics. They are absolute because they exist for their own sake. Absoluteness of value does not exist in empirical form rather comprehended intellectually through formulating and participating in the world. The ultimate truth is beyond the domain of empirical world. In fact, the subject matter of ethics, aesthetics and religion, etc., is not the domain of factual world. Metaphysical entities are not the matter of empirical experience rather subjective experience, which cannot be put into language. What is mystical and transcendental is the corner stone of our understanding of the essence of world. This silence indicates towards perusing a meaningful life.

This distinction between what can be said and what cannot be said in *Tractatus* is already fixed by the syntactical structure of language, which is *a priori* and *logical*. But in later writings this distinction is shown by the use of language because the ‘form of life’ comes to replace the ‘logical form’, which plays a crucial role for carrying out the meaning by the practical situation of human activity. Thus, we need to understand the form of life, which makes the connection between language and world and precisely exhibits the meaning of the use of words.

Comparing Wittgenstein’s notion of metaphysics demands that we understand why there cannot be any meaningful metaphysical propositions i.e. propositions of ethics, aesthetics, religion, etc.; why language cannot touch the essence of the world? These propositions would be about metaphysical self or ‘I’ that is purely subjective and private. And this subject or will and world of natural science are independent of each other and are not causally connected. The will or I remains a transcendental demonstrator, which sees the events of the world but cannot change its order. The self has no role to play with contingent facts in the world. The will is the bearer of ethical values such as good, evil, right, etc., these values do not get affected by the events of the world. So the self or subject is absolutely independent from the world. The world is as it is, governed by

the casual laws, which cannot be altered by the exercise of the good or bad of the will or self. Thus, essence of world lies outside of the world; what cannot be said is not the part of the world of natural science rather belongs to the metaphysical realm.

On many occasions, Wittgenstein himself engages in the nonsensical discourses about ethics, aesthetics, and religions especially in *Tractatus*. It does not mean that he is not aware of the nonsensicality of these metaphysical discourses. But this engagement cannot be taken merely as nonsensical. It is a deliberate attempt to display the nonsensicality of the metaphysical theses. This instructive nonsense also indicates towards the indefinable, ineffable, the real meaning of life. It propounds the Absolute truth that can only be shown or hinted at. It means making the structure or theory building in ethics, aesthetics, religion, and so on do not give the real meaning of life rather distorts the ethical value which cannot be learned and grasped from any teaching and training. Any *isms* and doctrines about ethical judgment would eventually limit and destroy the freedom of understanding in a broad perspective. Propositions of *Tractatus* on ethics do not give any structure or theory about values but they merely convey something for realizing the essence of life. These nonsensical propositions do not provide any destination of life but show in detail different lanes, which would lead to reaching at any such destination. By saying they are nonsensical, Wittgenstein compels the readers to get into the details and philosophize independently.

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