

Wittgenstein: From Realism to Conventionalism

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Abstract

This paper discusses and brings into light Ludwig Wittgenstein's early and later philosophical thought as a movement from realism towards conventionalism. Taking into account both his early and later works, one can say that the early Wittgenstein was an exponent of realism- A philosophical position that claims reality to be objective/ external and independent of us. We argue that, while Language remained the central theme in his philosophy, Wittgenstein moved from realism to conventionalism in his later philosophy. Conventionalism is a philosophical position that emphasizes on conventions and general agreements in a society rather than taking reality as external.

Keywords: language, ontology, picture theory of meaning, language games, realism, conventionalism, context

Introduction

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was an Austrian-British philosopher and claimed to be a very influential and original thinker of the twentieth century (McGinn 2002). His philosophical thought can be divided into two broader eras, i.e. early and later. His early philosophy has been discussed in his famous book, 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus', a book, which he published in 1921, in his life time. The later philosophical thought of Wittgenstein can be found out in 'Philosophical Investigations', which appeared as a book in 1953.

Wittgenstein's philosophy was a progressive movement from realism to conventionalism. Philosophically speaking, realism is a doctrine, which says that the physical world is real in its own right; that is to say, the objects of our senses exist independent of us as knower (Titus 1946). In modern philosophy, the term realism most commonly refers to the view that the objects of the physical world exist independent of our perceptions (Flew 1979)- The world of objects is not a mind dependent world. "The basic idea of realism is that the kinds of thing which exist, and what they are like, are independent of us and the way in which we find out about them" (Craig 1998). Realists emphasize the objective and scientific aspects of the world as opposed to the speculative and subjective one. Conventionalism on the other hand, has been described as, "the view that a priori truths, logical axioms, or scientific laws have no absolute validity but are disguised conventions representing one of a number of possible alternatives"(Norton 1997). Conventionalists hold that scientific laws are

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conventions disguised in nature, which reflect decisions adopting one among the different available possible descriptions. Conventions, they believe, govern the usage of a word in a given language. These conventions also govern the formulation of every coherent system in mathematics, logic and mechanics (Flew 1979). The conventionalist tradition in philosophy acknowledges conventions and social agreements as determining factors in the domain of knowledge and related concepts.

Ontology and Picture Theory of Meaning in Tractatus

Wittgenstein's early works *Tractatus* explains the way the world is and what really exists in the World- Ontology. Wittgenstein argues that the world is a totality of facts not of objects. These facts exist in a logical space. Objects, which form the substance of the world according to Wittgenstein, are not compound but are simple logical entities. These objects always exist in groups having no possibility of independent existence. A group of objects make an atomic fact. The totality of facts in a logical space determines the existence of the world. We can think of an empty space but it is not logically possible to think of a fact without a space. The space, where a spatial object exists is infinite in nature (Wittgenstein 2003, 7-13).

The nature and structure of facts is determined by the arrangement of objects in a fact. Wittgenstein calls it concatenation. It is the difference of the arrangement of the objects in a fact which makes it different from other facts. Wittgenstein also divides facts into two categories: Possible facts and Actual facts. 'Possible facts/state of affairs' is a very big set comprising all those facts that have a logical possibility to exist. Whereas, the 'Actual facts' comprises the state of affairs that actually exist- The world is a totality of actual facts (Wittgenstein 2003).

After presenting his views about the nature of existence, Wittgenstein turns toward language. For him, language is an activity. Wittgenstein believes that language is a totality of propositions (Wittgenstein 2003). For him, it is the reality that determines our thoughts and we express our thoughts in language. The only use of language is to picture the facts.

According to Wittgenstein, we picture facts existing in a logical space. The picture, as a model of reality, represents a fact in the world by sharing its elemental parts with the objects in a fact; hence a picture is also a fact. A logical picture representing a possible state of affair in a logical space can only depict the world. It is the representation of the picture which gives it sense and meaning. Our thoughts are pictures of facts and the totality of thoughts is a picture of the world (Wittgenstein 2003). Our

thoughts about reality are in fact pictures of reality. These pictorial forms i.e., thoughts are not a priori, rather are the result of facts. A logical reflection of a fact is its thought and the totality of true thoughts is the world.

There are great similarities between ontology and language in the *Tractatus*. In ontology, we have objects and in language we have names or words. In ontology, we have facts and in language we have propositions. As objects cannot exist independently similarly names or words individually cannot picture facts- World is a totality of facts and totality of propositions is the language.

Wittgenstein calls this new theory of language, “Picture Theory of Meaning”. Perhaps, it is another version of the Correspondence Theory of Truth. Language, for Wittgenstein, is the totality of propositions and a proposition is the totality of words or names. Words, for Wittgenstein (2003), as elements of a propositional sign are combined in a definite way hence making it a fact. Propositions are not mere mixtures of words but are articulate. Moreover, proposition is a model and picture of reality.

How is a proposition a picture or model of reality? For Wittgenstein, a proposition is a model of reality by sharing its logical form with it. When there is a logical agreement between the elements of facts in the world and elements of propositions about these facts, propositions can then stand as models of reality. “In everyday speech, making a picture of an object means producing something that has—or at least is intended to have—an obvious resemblance to an object. We call the product a representation of the object, or a picture of it” (Hulster 2015, 40).

A proposition as a picture of reality shares its form of representation i.e., its logical form with it, rightly or falsely. The picture is known to be logical if the shared form of representation is logical. For Wittgenstein (2003) a proposition being a picture of reality is helpful in knowing the state of affairs presented by it; hence, showing its sense. Understanding a true proposition leads us to know reality. A logically articulated proposition is a picture of the world. There is a comparison between reality and the proposition. We need to compare a proposition with the world in order to see whether it is true or false. Propositions being pictures of the world are true or false by virtue of facts which they picture. This shows that if any proposition pictures an actual fact, it will be a true proposition. A proposition picturing just a possible fact, not actual, will be a false proposition.

The sense or meaning of the proposition is determined by the fact pictured by it. Every proposition shows its sense and an understanding of

a proposition means knowing the fact pictured by it. Facts rather than class of names express a sense. The agreement/ disagreement of a statement with the existence/ non-existence of the atomic facts determine the sense of a proposition. Moreover, a word has a meaning in the context of the whole proposition only; hence, only propositions have sense. (Wittgenstein 2003)

According to Wittgenstein, whatever is thinkable is knowable and whatever is unthinkable is unknowable. Only that is thinkable which is logically possible for we cannot think illogically. (Wittgenstein 2003) When a thinkable thought is expressed in language, it is meaningful- and when an unthinkable thought is expressed in language, it is senseless or meaningless. Wittgenstein calls the meaningless thought as nonsense. According to Wittgenstein, only meaningful propositions can qualify to be declared as true or false. Propositions which picture actual facts are true, while propositions which picture possible facts are false. This was a very important contribution of Early Wittgenstein to the linguistic philosophical thought of the twentieth century.

The above discussion delineates Wittgenstein's Ontology and Picture Theory of Meaning. Picture Theory of Meaning has severe implications for very important areas of philosophy. Metaphysics, Ethics, Aesthetics etc., could not find their place in the meaningful class/area, though for Wittgenstein, their nonsense or meaninglessness refer towards their transcendental nature. Realism, as discussed earlier, holds the view that world of facts exists independent of us. An analysis of Early Wittgenstein's ontology and language reveals the same thing; since, he believes in the independent existence of facts. Hence, we can conclude that Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was a 'Realist'.

Language Games

After giving the above philosophy to the world, Wittgenstein disappeared from the philosophical world for many years. He then came back with a new philosophy which he presented in 'Philosophical Investigations'; since, he thought that he has recognized grave mistakes in his first book (Wittgenstein 2009). Later Wittgenstein thought these mistakes occurring in the details of his early theories about language and logic. Although there is continuity in his early and later work, undoubtedly, specially his conviction that most of the issues of philosophy arise from the confusion about the logic of our language. (McGinn 2002) Wittgenstein's later thoughts reveal that he was no more a realist rather a conventionalist. Although there are great differences between the early

and later philosophy of Wittgenstein, yet there is a continuity as well. Commenting on the profound change that has undergone in the philosophical task of the same author, Marie McGinn writes that Wittgenstein's both works are unique because of the contrast between them as the first one is abstract, dogmatic, theoretical and precise whereas the second one is concrete and descriptive whose philosophical purpose seems elusive and veiled. Yet, language is the central topic of his works. (McGinn 2002)

Wittgenstein in both his early and later philosophical thought has assigned great importance to language. Language for him is an activity, a form of life. (Wittgenstein 2009) The differences lie in his views about the functions of language. Early Wittgenstein was more interested in the formal structure of language. For early Wittgenstein, the only function of language is picturing of facts. This early view can be an important position in the domain of physics as it has special reasons for giving a direct pictorial representation of phenomena. Later Wittgenstein on the other hand was no longer concerned with the formal structure of language, rather he thought that though picturing facts is an important function of language, but it is not the only function. Language serves other important functions as well, whose nature can be determined by the use of language. He thought of language as a behavior while concentrating on the analysis of pragmatic rules governing the use of linguistic expressions- the language games in which these rules are operational and on broader life forms (Allan Janik, Stephen Toulmin 1973). Hence language for later Wittgenstein means a behavior, a form of life an activity rather than just a mere logical structure whose sole function is to picture reality. Its functions encompass the entire domain of human life with variety of dimensions.

Wittgenstein's Tractatus tries to give limitations to human thinking on the basis of an abstract theory, which sets exact and precise limits to our linguistic expressions; whereas, his Philosophical Investigations focuses on the phenomena of language in-use as concrete, complex, indeterminate and multifarious reality. Rather than giving more importance to the logic of our language, whose misunderstanding he thought to be the root cause of our philosophical problems, Wittgenstein developed techniques that clarify these confusions by understanding the functions of language in our everyday life. (McGinn 2002) Later Wittgenstein saw his earlier solution of the transcendental problem of language in terms of a picturing relation as a metaphor. In his later work

he seems interested to understand the use of a linguistic expression in human life.(Allan Janik, Stephen Toulmin 1973)

An important theme in ‘Philosophical Investigations’ is theory of Language Games. He expresses, “I will call these games "language-games" and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the "language-game".”(Wittgenstein 2009, 5)

Wittgenstein sees great similarities between language and games. Both language and games are activities. He says, whatever we do in games, we do the same in language. In games we have definite number of players. We have specific type of objects, which we use to play games. These objects are moved under certain rules in a well-defined context of a game. The context of a game refers towards the defined boundary lines and its specific duration. Rules are applicable only when the context is on. Similarly every language has its own specified context. It has its own words which the speakers use under certain rules. These rules cannot be applied out of the context. Wittgenstein calls this new theory “Language-Game”.(Pitcher 1970)

Rules play an important role in both game and language. According to ‘Oxford Dictionary’, “A rule is one of a set of explicit or understood regulations or principles governing conduct or procedure within a particular area of activity.”(Wehmeier 2005, 1330) How do we acquire rules and how do we follow them? Wittgenstein has assigned a great deal of his thought to this topic of rule formation, acquisition and rule following. There are two traditional views about rule following, i.e. (i) Platonic and (ii) Dispositionist.

According to Platonism, following a rule means grasping a form. Whenever we act in which a specific rule related to that act is followed, a mental state related to that act comes into action, and we start believing as if we have followed a rule. Hence following a rule means understanding a mental form. On the other hand, Dispositionist believe that when we perform an act in which a specific rule is followed then a mental process related to that act comes into action. Hence, following a rule means understanding mental processes. (Finkelstein 2011)

The traditionalists thought as if rules exist independent of us. Later Wittgenstein has severe objections against these views of the traditional thinkers about rule following. Saul A. Kripke’s interpretation of

Wittgenstein can reveal that Wittgenstein asks very important and paradoxical questions such as: Where are these forms? Where are these mental processes? By what method can we understand these forms and processes? Why are we so confident to apply old rules upon new situations? How can we apply finite number of rules upon an infinite number of problems? (Kripke 1982)

Possible answers to these questions are in Wittgenstein's skeptical paradox. He writes, "201. This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here."(Wittgenstein 2009),(Kripke 1982, 81)

Wittgenstein rejects the philosophy of mental forms and mental processes because of its metaphysical nature. Besides, there is no available method to arrive at these mental states and processes. Similarly he objects, "Life has an infinite number of problems with many of them totally new in character." (Kripke 1982, 7-54) So, what justifications do we have to apply older rules upon completely new situations? In the same manners, why are we justified to apply finite number of rules upon an infinite number of problems?

Wittgenstein's skeptical position about rule following has shaken the foundation of traditional philosophy. It has made people working in different areas to start thinking in a completely new fashion.(Finkelstein 2011)

The following lines will reveal later Wittgenstein's "Conventionalist" position about rule following. Wittgenstein argues, following a rule is not the apprehension of mental forms or processes, but it is a social and communal agreement among the people of a community. Rule following is not a theoretical process of apprehension, rather it is a practice.(Lane 2017) Understanding a rule and its practice is social process. It's an agreement and contract among the people of a society. Rules have a social utility. They serve our purposes in life. Philosophical Investigations reveals, "241.....It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life."(Wittgenstein 2009, 94)

Similarly, language too is a social and communal process. It is a communal and conventional agreement among people of a community. Words are tools used to serve our purposes. They have a social utility. They remain part of our language till they serve our purpose. The moment

these words fail to serve our social purposes, we stop using them and after a prolong disuse, they become obsolete. These are then replaced by new ones which serve our old purposes in a new way. His later philosophy that takes language as a social and communal construction has resulted in “Use or Tool Theory of Meaning”. He rules out the belief that meaning is a mysterious subjective 'mental process', representing the 'inward' lives of language-users.(Read 2007) Rather he gives a dynamic, applied and practical conception of meaning in the form of language as use. “Wittgenstein maintained, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, that meaning more or less is 'use’”. (Kober 2006)

Wittgenstein’s later position on rules formation, rules following and language as a social and communal contract has implications for many private and subjective things. Private language, a language belonging to a single person, and subjective sensations become impossible. His argument against the possibility of private language can be phrased as: When we think that we are following rules is not the same as we are actually following rules. In a private language we cannot differentiate between thinking of following a rule and an actual practice of it. We cannot follow rules privately. Hence private language is impossible.(Wittgenstein 2009) Similarly, sensations according to later Wittgenstein are not totally subjective; rather they are “inter-subjective”. Later Wittgenstein resolves the old myth of “objectivity vs. subjectivity” by introducing the notion of “inter-subjectivity”. (Hark 1953)

Understanding too for later Wittgenstein is not the apprehension of mental forms, states and processes, but is a social and communal agreement among people of a community. It is the society which determines the nature of understanding on the basis of covenants, contracts and agreements. He also has rejected the philosophy of essentialism for the process of classification. Instead he introduced the concept of “Family Resemblance” which helps us to classify things into various categories. (Wittgenstein 2009)

Conclusion

Wittgenstein maintains in the *Tractatus* that world is the totality of facts having an independent existence, a view similar to philosophical realism. We picture these facts to ourselves in language; hence picturing facts is the only function of language. Moreover, truth or falsity of proposition is also independent of us; it actually depends on whether a proposition has pictured an actual or a possible state of affair. Early Wittgenstein was more concerned with the logical structure of language as a pictorial representation of reality. But in *Philosophical Investigations*,

Wittgenstein argues that though picturing facts is an important function of language, it is not the only one however. There are other important functions as well. Language is not an abstract thing, rather it is a concrete activity; hence, a behavior and a form of life. It is the use of language in a social context which is more significant. The nature and use of linguistic expressions is determined by the conventions (i.e., agreements) among people in a society. This later position is a view similar to philosophical conventionalism. Hence, a comparative evaluation and analysis of his early and later philosophy reveals that he was a 'realist' in the beginning of his philosophical career and gradually developed his thoughts into 'conventionalism' in the later phase of his philosophical development.

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