

PHILOSOPHICAL TECHNIQUES: WITTGENSTEIN'S EXPOSITION

(1) Introduction

One of the central issues Wittgenstein makes explicit throughout his later philosophy is that a word is not necessarily the name of a thing and that philosophical problems arise when one disengages a word from its natural context. Admittedly, the larger issue he takes to task and dismisses is the belief that a word has a 'meaning', referent, that words 'stand for' things. That is to say, he clearly shows the poor logic involved in the theory which claims that words stand for things. This paper concerns itself with the techniques Wittgenstein employs in the analysis.

Wittgenstein notes: "The best that a could write would never be more than philosophical remarks."¹ Again, "...the philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the courses of these long and involved journeyings."² The ideas contained therein consist of some kind of conceptual or philosophical techniques. These techniques, or the philosophical album of sketches and remarks, could bring light into one mind or another.

As the title indicates, the aim of this paper is to make explicit these techniques or key notions in broad terms. A central technique in Wittgensteinism involves as his deep interest, not in language itself taken as a field of inquiry in its own right, but in the roots of philosophical perplexity which are located there. The concern is not with the yield (or produce), but rather with the instrument itself. The language is created or evolved like an institution. Social, religious and cultural ceremonies, soccer matches, competitive examinations, parliaments, party systems, poetry, drama etc. are forms of functions of social life. Language operates

1. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford (1953) p. ix.

2. *ibid.*

against a background of human needs in the setting of a natural environment. Admittedly we must understand it in this way, as involved in a pattern that goes further, if we are to understand it at all. Our natural languages are immeasurably complex. To command a clear view of their workings is, therefore, a matter of difficulty.

Wittgenstein makes use of certain simple patterns of linguistic activity, which he calls 'language-games.' Certainly 'language-games' involve language-talk, which in turn entails language as a sort of play. The rules, however, vary according to custom, tradition etc. One cannot gain a deep understanding of the distinctive characteristics of a tribe's culture without a participant's understanding of the way of life of that culture. We are to give up looking for an essence or a structure, or both, of language, and instead we are to look at what is all the time before our eyes. That is the actual functioning of language. Then we see that linguistic activities are as diverse as all the things which we call 'games' and which are so because of family resemblances—"a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."³ Language-games help us to grasp the meaning of words, notions (or concepts), sentences, statements, expressions etc. If so, grasping a meaning is to be able to practise a technique.

Wittgenstein's point is this: that if one tries to treat inductive reasonings as if they were deductive ones, one could make nonsense of them. Analogically, if one tries to understand scientific discourse as if it were a sort of religious incantation, one could make nonsense of it. Again, if one attempts to construe moral statements as if they were empirical ones, and moral reasoning as if it were scientific reasoning, one could make nonsense out of morality. Inductive discourse, scientific discourse, moral discourse etc. have a logic of their own. The main concern of philosophy is to understand and to make explicit that logic, and not to distort it by attempting to reduce it to the logic of some other preferred type of discourse.

3. *ibid.*, p. 66.

To command a clear view of this logic is a matter of difficulty. The simple patterns of linguistic activity called 'language-games' are made use of by Wittgenstein to overcome this difficulty. Whatever the intricacy of the working out of the Wittgensteinian philosophical techniques, the master-theme is quite simple - a reorientation of our vision. It is not incorrect to construe as if this orientation implying thoughts are at peace. It is the plateau that someone who philosophizes yearns for. Certain very important philosophical techniques sprang out of this reorientation of vision. What there are we shall seek to explain in what follows.

(2) Language-games and not a language-game:

A Wittgensteinian technique

Wittgenstein constantly compares languages and parts of languages to a kind of games called language-games: "Systems of communication...we shall call 'language-games'. They are more or less akin to what in ordinary language we call 'language-games'".⁴ To put it more explicitly, language-games are not the fragments of a whole which is language itself (der Sprache) but we treat them as self-enclosed systems of understanding. That is, they are in language. In this way we can speak of a simple primitive language as a language-game. To keep the point of view in mind, it very often is useful to imagine such a simple language to be the entire system of communication of a tribe in a primitive state of society.

The noting of 'language-games' is nothing but a noting of primitive forms of language or primitive languages. If we want to note the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. When we look at such simple forms of language, the mental mist which seems to hide

4. L. Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, (1958) p. 81.

from view our ordinary use of language, disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. *Ipsa facto*, we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our more complicated ones. In a very large measure we see that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms. These forms are parts of the praxis of life. Very appropriately Wittgenstein notes: "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."⁵ Summing all this up, it can be noted that our language is not everywhere bound by strict rules; senses need not be definite; concepts, notions, need not have essences associated with them.

Yet again, the nature of 'language-game' is made explicit by Wittgenstein's oft-quoted question, namely, "What can I do with this word?" It is clearly related to what connexions a word belongs to, etc. An implication of this view of language is obviously connected to a rejection of the doctrine of elements—the doctrine that the clarification of an ordinary sentence is achieved when it is replaced by another, which makes explicit the complexity of the statements expressed, and reflects exactly the form of the fact described. This belief is an illusion brought about by confusions about language; it can be dispelled only by a clear view of the actual functioning of language. That is, we are to give up looking for the essence of language and instead are to look at what is all the time before our eyes; the actual functioning of language. Then we see that linguistic activities are as diverse as all the things which we call 'games,' and which are so called not because of 'a family resemblance' — "... a complicated net-work of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."⁶

The concept of 'game' is used here to cast light on that of 'language' by means of direct comparison: games

5. *Philosophical Investigations* p. 11.

6. *ibid.*, p. 32.

form a family, and so do the various activities which come under the general description of 'using language'. The important thing to notice here is the view that the application of the word 'game' is not limited by any precise boundary, though a boundary could be fixed for a special purpose. This can be called the Wittgensteinian method of philosophical therapy; and it involves taking a certain view of language and of meaning.

In this context, it is noted that "the speaking of language is part of an activity."⁷ If we are to see the significantly different roles superficially similar expressions play, we must keep in mind the countless kinds of language-using activity or language-games in which we participate. This is not an explanation as such but a description. It not only lays before us the different parts of segments of language, but also points out the actual use of different words or terms. The language-game is a complex system of linguistic activity; and every such game must be understood individually, for each works to its own end and its own given pattern. An implication is that a category of discourse remains unexplained in terms of another. There are various categories of discourse that are distinguished. For example, there are:

- (a) a discourse about material objects;
- (b) a discourse about scientific objects;
- (c) a discourse about other people's minds.

Primarily, therefore are three uses of language—the material, the scientific and the evaluative.

One might ask "Does mind exist?" Questions so framed now serve no purpose. If to serve good purpose, it has to be framed in such a manner so that the grammar of the central word is made explicit. That is, the use of the central word needs to be noted in the first instance. Questions about "the nature of mind" are abolished in favour of questions concerning "the nature of statements about the mind," a major shift of emphasis from ontological questions to linguistic ones.

7. *ibid.*, p. 12.

The point noted here is the need to formulate the right kind of questions. Wittgenstein notes: "Not exactness and full brightness are to be first striven for, but perspicuity."⁸ This is less an achievement of logical finesse. The notion of 'language-games' involves a philosophical therapy which entails taking a certain view of language and of meaning—the speaking of language as part of an activity. If one is to see the essentially different roles superficially similar expressions play, we must keep in mind the countless kinds of language-game in which we participate, and not one only—the scientific one.

In conclusion, the later Wittgenstein's following comments appear apropos: "But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say, assertion 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. (We can get a rough picture of this from changes in mathematics.)"

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.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders and obeying them

Describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)-

Reporting an event-

Speculating about an event-

Forming and testing a hypothesis

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams-

Making up a story; and reading it-

Play-acting-

8. L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1969) section 464.

Singing catches-
 Guessing riddles-
 Making a joke; telling it-
 Solving a problem in practical arithmetic
 Translating from one language into another-
 Asking, thanking, cursing, guessing, praying."⁹

Is this picture of language-game, upon which, for Wittgenstein everything turns, inadequate and vulnerable? Patrick Sherry argues that 'language-game' and 'form of life' are over-simple models that are too weak for complex phenomena like religions."¹⁰ Sherry's point may have some relevance as regards any theistic religion but not the Dhamma (Buddhism) which is not a complex phenomenon in any sense. It is a simple doctrine with a clear soteriology. For that matter, for all purposes it remains outside the model envisaged by Sherry. The notion of language-games, therefore, is not an oversimple model in respect of the Dhamma—Buddhism—one of the simple doctrines.

(3) Form of life—a Wittgensteinian technique

Human nature is reflected in human grammar—our ultimate linguistic practices. But, then, what is "form of life?" That "speaking of language is part of an activity"¹¹ a particular form of life. That if we are to see the fundamentally different roles superficially similar expressions play, we must keep in mind the innumerable actual kinds of form of life or language-using activity. The emphasis here is the acceptance of the meaning of a word as involving in exhibition the use of the word in the various language-games in which it occurs. So Wittgenstein notes: "... think of words as instruments characterized by their use..."¹² What it amounts to simply is "philosophical analysis." But, then, what is "philosophical analysis"? "Analysis" here involves the exhibition of the use of words in multifarious

9. *Philosophical Investigation* p. 11-12.

10. Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language Games*, Macmillan, London (1977), p. 46.

11. *Philosophical Investigations* p. 12.

12. *Blue and Brown Books* p. 67.

language-games in which they occur. The most important thing we are striving after is order and clarity. Philosophical reflections loose the knots thinkers have unknowingly put there. Although it is said that consequence of philosophy is simple; it does not follow necessarily that the method of arriving at it cannot be.

(4) 'Model': A Wittgensteinian technique

Wittgenstein notes: "...And the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the application of the picture goes."¹³ Here Wittgenstein talks of 'models' ('pictures') to take the 'ontological sting' out of many notions, terms, concepts, words, which might otherwise be dismissed for absence of correspondence with facts, consistency, etc. The notion 'model', if taken in this sense, will admittedly contribute to eliminate irresistible problems that create an impulse to run up against the limits of language—giving rise to meaningless-talk or empty-talk. If an analysis of this sort can be called a method, it entails the following: preventing any 'ontological commitment' from slipping too easily into the argument. Wittgenstein notes: "Because in philosophy we handle many cases with many different methods, we have to go piece by piece, stretch by stretch, and cannot grasp everything at once. The many cross-sections which we have to grasp are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: they are all present, only all mixed up."¹⁴ Elsewhere he touches the point: "It is no use trying to apply force in fitting pieces together. All we should do is to look at them carefully and arrange them."¹⁵ If we make use of this method, we take a step in the correct direction, and then we notice we have the possibility of going a distance towards complete clarity.

13. *Philosophical Investigations* section 374.

14. *Zettel* section 447.

15. *Blue and Brown Books* p. 46.

(5) The technique of 'maching-idling'

A question, an expression, a statement, a proposition if it engages itself with nothing, then works nothing in the linguistic system which it claims to belong to. Forms of question, expression, statement, proposition, however fascinate and amaze us. That is, language drags us along with it. That philosophical notions are linguistic notions, say, 'causality', 'man', 'relation', 'extinction', 'emancipation', and so on. These notions have a compulsive character—the character of an illusion which leads one into complete darkness, confusion and obscurity. In turning from one region of thought to another, one carries over a whole set of pictures which govern much of one's thinking. The method of the natural sciences, explanation, generalization, simplification are pictures that could bewilder any one. These tendencies comprise the source of much meaningless-talk; it leads the philosopher (or any one) into complete darkness. Wittgenstein notes: "Uneasiness in philosophy, one could say, comes because we look upon philosophy in the wrong way, see it in the wrong way, as it were, that is tear it into (endless) longitudinal strips instead of into (limited) cross-sections."¹⁶ Our bewilderment takes on its peculiar character from the attempt to think in inappropriate terms and inappropriate pictures. By way of inappropriate terms and inappropriate pictures we neither advance hypotheses nor offer explanation nor discover new matters of fact. "We are ignorant of nothing; rather we have lost our way amongst things we know. We need no discoveries but reminders."¹⁷ Philosophical convictions grip us with the force of compulsion; we cannot conceive of the possibility of taking another course. This conviction binds us with things and prevents us from uttering the central question, "What can I do with this word?" We may note this aim in the following question as well—"What is the word's application?" (That is: What connections it admits and permits) The question seeks no more than to exhibit the actual functioning of the word. This is the only way we see our path through philosophical perplexities. The

16. *Zettel* section 447.

17. *Philosophical Investigations* section 126 f.

philosophical technique to which Wittgenstein drew attention here is known as "machine idling." By way of it, he attempts

- (1) to make explicit the various functions of a word;
- (2) to demolish the theory which affirms the working of a word in terms of its function of naming only.

A clear understanding of the various functions of a word entails a rejection of the theory noted at (2) above. The implications are three in number:

- (i) Put restraint upon the sloughing off of conceptual associations, which means avoidance of isolating a word from the life to which it naturally belongs, in which it is used and in which alone it has meaning. An ignorance of this technique gives rise to confusions: that is, thought has got deranged. The point is noted in this way: "The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work."¹⁸
- (ii) Emphasis on "the conceptual family." That is, a family of notions or a scheme is brought into prominence. Outside the given conceptual scheme a notion cannot be properly understood. Transgressing the ambit entails empty-talk, which is referred to as 'sending language on holiday'. An example from epistemology will enlighten the point: 'knowledge,' 'perception,' 'belief', 'sensation', are the notions that comprise a possible conceptual family here. Emptiness or nonsense is produced by any attempt to give application to one of the above notions without reference to the other notions that form its logical background.
- (iii) Drawing attention to different ways in which words function. The point being to avoid deformed language-games (shoes that are too tight!) Giving birth or development of building up is not its affair. But, then, what is its affair? Dispelling

18. *ibid.*, section 132.

particular confusions. The implication is a therapeutic one. We begin with a therapeutic purpose and our interest exhausts itself when the purpose is achieved. This reminds us of a general prescription for doing philosophy. Putting the word in its linguistic context and the whole statement (utterance) in its social context; and, then describe, without preconceptions what one finds, remembering, of course, that each word, each statement (utterance) makes appearance in many contexts. This exposition brings out a key aspect which is characteristic of Wittgenstein's philosophical techniques. That is, mastering of a technique. Wittgenstein comments: "To understand a sentence means to understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique."¹⁹ As things stand, a training is implied as against, for instance, an explanation or, for that matter, declaration made with view to understanding. It boosts one's morale, specially with reference to knowing one's way about.

Wittgenstein repeatedly warns us against being led astray by superficial or spurious or fictitious similarities between certain forms of expression. But, then, how does the philosophical technique of 'training' help one to avoid these similarities? The 'training' provides us with means towards distinguishing between 'surface grammar' and 'depth grammar' of expressions, statements, utterances etc. Wittgenstein notes:

"Perhaps the word 'describe' tricks us here. I say,

'I describe my state of mind'
and
'I describe my room'.

You need to call to mind the difference between the language-games."²⁰ The grammar of the former statement seems to

19. *ibid.*, section 199.

20. *ibid.*, section 290.

differ in no essential respect from that of the latter; and the apparent similarity conceals significant conceptual difference. Language-games set everyone the same traps. They comprise an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings. Distinguishing between 'surface grammar' and 'depth grammar' is something attained by way of analysis and training. It is a turn in a new direction. Once one has been turned round, one must stay turned round, wisdom-attained by way of analysis and training. Throwing dust in one's own eyes it now appears is done away with. Thoughts are at peace. Understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change is prevented. There is no machine-idling and therefore there is no irritating nonsense. That is what someone who philosophizes yearns for; and that man will be revolutionary who can revolutionize himself: you are the master of yourself.

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