

A REFLECTION ON WITTGENSTEIN'S THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

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In the history of linguistic philosophy Ludwig Wittgenstein holds a unique position. He in his short philosophical career addresses upon two contradictory linguistic methods of which one is philosophically known as early Wittgenstein and the other is known as later Wittgenstein. In short his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is known as early Wittgenstein and his *Philosophical Investigations* is known as later Wittgenstein. In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein proposes ideal language and in his *Philosophical Investigations*, he proposes ordinary language as a method of doing philosophy. Consequently, there we hardly notice any philosophical consistency between early and later Wittgenstein. Rather we come across a dramatic shift in mode, style and purpose between his early and later works. Max Black remarks, "Turning from the early book to the later is like leaving the ruins of a Greek temple for a Baroque Church."¹ Even though Wittgenstein initiates a spectacular shift from early to later philosophy, he nonetheless consistently maintains that analysis or clarification of language either in terms of meaning or in terms of use is all about of doing philosophy.

The linguistic method Wittgenstein introduces in his *Philosophical Investigations* (now on PI) is therapeutic in nature. Wittgenstein says, "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like a treatment of an illness."² A philosopher takes a curative measure while dealing with a philosophical question. In this sense a philosopher is both a doctor and a patient. Like a doctor, he has to aware the root cause of philosophical problem, the very nature of it and then finds out a proper solution of it. So long a philosopher fails to understand the locus and nature of philosophical muddle, his solution of this problem would be ad hoc and superficial in nature. It would then not be treated a sustainable solution. As a matter of fact he would be duped by the same problem again and again. Let us explain this point further with the help of example.

Suppose there are two types of patient, such as, a cancerous patient and a neurotic patient. Here the therapy of cancerous patient would be different from the therapy of neurotic patient. In the case of cancerous patient, the treatment of the patient would be effective without the awareness of the disease he suffers from. However, in the case of a neurotic patient there would a different therapy. Unlike the cancerous patient the neurotic patient must know the root cause of his disease. If he does not know the cause of his own disease, his treatment would not be effective like the cancerous patient.

¹ Black, M "Wittgenstein's View About Language", *Indian Review of Philosophy*, vol.1, January 1972, p.8

² Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, p.91e

In the case of a cancerous patient, the cause of his disease may be unknown to him and without knowing anything about the disease the patient may be cured. But this would not happen in the case of a neurotic patient. Here a neurotic patient has to play a dual role. He is the patient and also the physician of his own disease. As a patient he must be self-convinced that he is a neurotic patient. As a physician he has to diagnosis the disease, the root cause of the disease and eventually he has to introduce a proper therapy so that the disease would in due course be cured. Thus, unlike the cancerous patient the proper therapy of a neurotic patient is completely different. It is different in the sense that it tries to wipe out the root cause of the disease. A patient may be cured without knowing the cause of his own disease. In such a case his cure would not be perfect because he may further be infected with the same disease so long he does not know the cause and preventive measure of such disease.

Now Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy is very much similar to the therapy employed in neurotic patient. The root of philosophical problem is deep. According to Wittgenstein, a philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about"³ Philosophers have been duped by the grammar of language. They have failed to understand the logic of language, the actual and authentic use of language. They fail to tackle the multifarious uses of language. More importantly, linguistic philosophers have mostly been bewitched by means of language. Here we do not have a clear view of the use of words because our grammar is deficient or lacking in this sort of perspicuity. Philosophy always seeks clarity even though at times clarity is not enough. The problem with ideal or logical language is that it has held up language. For Wittgenstein a picture held us captive and we could not get outside it. It lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. The problem with speculative metaphysics is that it does not leave everything as it is. Speculative metaphysics survives within so many uncovering issues which according to Wittgenstein are pure nonsense. They live up beyond the limits of language.

Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy takes natural or ordinary language as a genuine philosophical method. For Wittgenstein ordinary language is all right for doing philosophy. There is no point of relevance of taking leave from ordinary language. Ordinary language is all right. Philosophy therefore must strict to proper analyses of ordinary language. Philosophy by no means departs from the actual use of language. Philosophy can in the end only describe ordinary language. Philosophy simply puts everything before us. Accordingly, there is nothing remains to explain, nor there anything to deduce. As everything lies open to view, there remains nothing to explain. That is why Wittgenstein has rightly pointed out what is hidden before us has no interest to us, because we the community cannot take part of it. It does not belong to our form of life. So long natural language functions in accordance with our form of life, discloses everything before the society or community, there remains no confusion in natural language. However, confusions arise 'when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work'.⁴ That is why Wittgenstein contends that philosophical problems arise when language goes on holidays. As language bewitches us, philosophy must stand against the bewitchments of intelligence by means of language.

³ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, p. 49e

⁴ *Ibid.* p.52e.

According to Wittgenstein philosophical problems are not really problems but language puzzles. Such puzzles, Wittgenstein opines, are inevitable in philosophical practice and that is why Wittgenstein aptly remarks that *Philosophical Investigations* starts with the riddle. Wittgenstein says, “The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one of another piece of plain non-sense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head against the limits of language.”⁵ Traditional philosophy is adjusted as non-sensical as it outranges the limits of language fixed by the conventional rules of usage. Wittgenstein remarks, “When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them and then draw the queerest conclusions from it.”⁶

So the function of philosophy, Wittgenstein suggests, is to clarify the confusions in language or to teach ‘the correct usage of the language’. Wittgenstein conceives philosophy as a form of therapy, which by correcting misuse of language, removes the conceptual confusions. The philosophers’ treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness. Philosophical analysis is a description of the ordinary uses of words and expressions which aims at dissolving the philosophical problems caused by their misuse. Wittgenstein considers such ‘cures’ to be worse than the original disease. However, whatever the malady, it is the job of philosophy to clear up the puzzle, to cure the ills of the understanding. Wittgenstein in this regard says, “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday usage...”⁷

While elucidating the nature of philosophical problem, Wittgenstein in his PI goes on to say that ‘a philosophical problem has the form: “I do not know my way about.”’⁸ The reason is that the grammar of natural language has played dubious role. The use of natural language is complicated and comprehensive because of the ambiguity of the verb ‘to be’. In natural language same word may be used by same person in different context differently. He says, “Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.”⁹ The very nature of natural language is that it always bewitches us. Philosophers are duped by it. Thus, philosophical problems are linguistic in nature because such problems are engendered due to the misinterpretation or misuse of language. Thus philosophical diseases are not something external, rather they are internal in the sense that they are committed by the philosophers while doing their own philosophical activities. As language bewitches us, we must take care against these bewitchments. We must protect ourselves by making careful analysis of ordinary language. There is no need for different language other than ordinary language. Wittgenstein rightly puts: “Philosophy may no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.”¹⁰ Philosophy leaves everything as it is. Philosophy simply puts everything before us. Hence, there remains nothing to explain, nothing to describe. For Wittgenstein what is hidden is of no interest to us. There is no question of reforming ordinary language for doing philosophy; rather we do philosophy

⁵ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, Sec. 191

⁶ *Ibid.* Sect.194.

⁷ *Ibid.* sec.29, 40, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.* sec.123.

⁹ *Ibid.* Sec.203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Sec.124.

by describing ordinary language. Wittgenstein therefore criticizes the philosophers who seek to improve upon actual language by appealing to an ideal language. The word 'ideal', Wittgenstein opines, is liable to mislead. He says, "The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakable. You can never get outside it, you must always turn back. There is no outside. It never occurs to us to take them off."¹¹ In contrary, Wittgenstein remarks that 'ordinary language is all right'. He further contends that we should leave the slippery ice of ideal language. He comments metaphorically, " We have got on to slippery ice where there is no fiction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that , we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground."¹²

Wittgenstein, however, does not incline to say that ordinary language is free from failure and misuse. Rather he would say that pseudo-philosophical problems arise due to the misinterpretations of the rules of ordinary language. For Wittgenstein ordinary language is not to be examined by means of a depth grammar. Language has to be explained in all its great variety and complexity. It has to be described and understood as it is found, not reduced some basic structure. His therapeutic approach guards against the picture theory of meaning. He tells us that picturing is not the sole and whole function of language. It is not at all true to say that that metaphysical sentences are meaningless because they are incapable of picturing facts. There are other means through which the worthlessness of metaphysics can be apprehended. Generally, the term 'metaphysics' is used by Wittgenstein in a pejorative sense. At times he maintains that the characteristic of a metaphysical question is "that we express an unclarity about the grammar of words in the form of a scientific question."¹³ Often he uses the term 'metaphysics' more broadly to connote those misleading uses of language by philosophers. In both cases we make a wrong syntactical structure with words. Therefore, what we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. Philosophy requires therapy or curative measure because the majority of traditional philosophical problems arose due to the failure of grasping the complexity and multiplicity of ordinary language. Therefore, linguistic philosophers should give deeper attention to the actual use of language. They must take guard against the erroneous function of language. There is no point of divorcing natural language for its unbounded complexity. There is no point of formalizing an artificial language instead of ordinary language. Artificial language, opines Wittgenstein, looks at the logical form of language. But the logical form of language by no means touches upon the steam of human life. According to later Wittgenstein, the meaning of a linguistic expression is not to be determined by correlation with some antecedently and independently existing structure of reality, rather it should be determined by the rules of use that the members of the community have adopted in their form of life. Since language is always a part of a form of life, its function, says Wittgenstein, must be defined anew for each form of life.

The other important dimension of Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy is that he determines the meaning of a sentence not in terms of reference, but in terms if its use.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, Sec..107

¹² *Ibid.* Sec.107.

¹³ Wittgenstein, L. *The Blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1972, p.28.

Here Wittgenstein tells us, “Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use.” He is concerned about the use of words, but not so-much concerned about their meaning. One cannot guess how a word functions rather one has to look at the use and learn from that. There remains nothing captive in therapeutic philosophy as conceived by Wittgenstein. Here everything is open to us. Every member of the community takes part in the therapeutic analysis. It is a form of life based on psychotherapy. There remains nothing private. For Wittgenstein the meaning of sentence is determined by the rules of its conventional usages. The same view has been supported by Ryle, Austin, Strawson as well. It is, therefore, not the task of philosopher to discover the logic of language, but to shift from logic to the natural history of language. Therapeutic philosophy of Wittgenstein thus requires a kind of natural language which can perform in concrete situations of life with concrete ends in mind.

Language being a conceptual device originates in the human mind. Noam Chomsky has said that language is the mirror of human mind. The meaning of linguistic expressions is determined by rules of use of language adopted by the members of the community. There need not be any rule which can determine language irrespective of human needs and purposes. Language, Wittgenstein opines, is a part of natural history of man. The logomorphism of *Tractatus* had banished the concrete means for the sake of attaining purism in language. The PI rehabilitates men in the centre. The shift may be described as a return from Platonism. The craving for generality was essentially Platonic. It betrayed an attitude of indifference towards the particular and the concrete. The therapeutic philosophy of Wittgenstein just opposes it. It states that language is not defined for us as an arrangement fulfilling a definite purpose; it is *an experience* or a *practice* called ‘linguistic phenomena’ and not a means to a particular end. For Wittgenstein the problem of meaning is a verbal problem which we learn from the use of it. He however does not understand the term ‘use’ in the pragmatic sense of usefulness, but the role it plays in a language game. The term ‘language game’ says Wittgenstein “is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”¹⁴ In reflecting upon Wittgenstein, Max Black has argued that ordinarily the term activity means ‘the systematic character of speech and the dependence of the linguistic act upon the invisible context of the developing speech community.’ For Wittgenstein since the use of language is involved *in the form of life* based on the possibility of conviction of another person, it is impossible that it should be employed in a private use.

The therapeutic philosophy of Wittgenstein also suggests that philosophical problems can be understood by examining the natural and inevitable consequence of thinking. A language guides us how to attain an appropriate use of language. Wittgenstein calls this perspective of language a ‘synoptic presentation’ of language. Language is not a single activity, but multifarious, comprising of many different sorts of ‘language games’. The purpose of therapeutic philosophy is to show the path to those philosophers arrested in a cave enclosed by philosophical muddles, i.e. to show them in Wittgensteinian metaphor *the fly out of fly-bottle*. But it should be kept in mind that in philosophy every *fly-bottle* is different; every language game is different just like different therapies. Thus, there is not a therapy in philosophy, but there are different

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, op.cit. Sec.23.

therapies just like there are different language-games or different fly-bottles. However, there are over-lapping and criss-cross relations among language games just like there are similarities and dissimilarities among different therapies. Having said this, such overlapping uses of natural language are bound together by an underlying layer of non-linguistic behaviour. This instinctive behaviour is akin to what Wittgenstein calls a form of life. The analogy between language and game is extended to the idea that the different uses of language form a family resemblance. Family resemblance means the likeness that the members of a family share. Both in PI and in *The Blue and Brown Book*, Wittgenstein says that language forms a family, the members of it share family resemblances.

According to Wittgenstein speaking of language is a part of communal activity, a way of living in society what he calls *a form of life*. Describing a form of life of a species is tantamount to describe its natural history. In conceiving the use of language within the form of life, Wittgenstein suggests that a language is embedded in different activities performed by a large number of people. The daily exchange of greeting can be called a practice, a custom, an institution. It also belongs to a form of life. It is also a part of natural history of human beings. Hacker and Backer remark that when Wittgenstein goes on to say that *following a rule is a practice*; he thereby suggests that there remains nothing *essentially individual* which may be done in privacy. Thus, Malcolm aptly says, “It seems clear to me, however, that Wittgenstein in saying that the concept of following a rule is ‘essentially social’, in the sense that it can have its root only in setting where there is a people, with common life and common language.”¹⁵

According to Black, from a myopic perspective one should see a game of chess as a movement of a wooden black from one point to another by the two players. But one is in a position to see the moves as a game he would see players ‘checking the king’. It is a practice having meaning which in its turn exemplifies a system of rules of use having its root deep in the form of our life. Language is rule-following and one can practice language by following rules. Similar to this, language-game is also rule following and one can play or practice game by following rules. The rules of language are not something extraneous. They are part of language rooted deep in the form of our life. Such rules are not regulative, but constitutive. Similarly, the rules of games are not extraneous. They are part of games. They are not regulative but constitutive. Thus, it is claimed that the notion of language game through a form of life is connected with the notion of use as a major key to the analysis of the concept of meaning. Here Pitcher’s remark is particularly relevant. He says, “The way to escape from philosophical puzzlement, he (Wittgenstein) told us, is to abandon our a priori, oversimplified picture of the use of words, but look at the actual use of words to see what goes on.”¹⁶ Every sentence in our language, therefore, is in order. Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language. Problems of philosophy arise when we are not faithful in using words according to rules. Such problems can be dispensed with if we stop building up a theory of language, and only adopt a descriptive method. Philosophical problems are not empirical, they are linguistics in nature because they can be solved or resolved or dissolved by a proper analysis and clarification of language. Therefore, they can be solved by looking at the working of our language. The therapeutic philosophy teaches us

¹⁵ Malcolm, N. “Wittgenstein on Language and Rules”, *Journal of Philosophy*, January, 1989, vol.64, p.23

¹⁶ Pitcher, G. *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Prentice Hall, 1964, p.236.

about the correct use of language. Therapeutic philosophy, then for Wittgenstein, is a pure method, a pure therapy, its aim being intellectual health. Barnett in his recent article "The Rhetoric of Grammar" says, "It is well known that Wittgenstein conceived of a philosophical problem as a symptom of a "diseases of thought" and of its treatment as "therapy""¹⁷. By the phrase 'diseases of thought', Wittgenstein perhaps means the *psychopathic disorder* of the philosophers who have been struggling hard to release discharge from philosophical muddles. A person worried by a philosophical problem is like one who is suffering from a psychopathic disorder. So the task of an analyst is like that of a psycho-analyst. The patient in each case is cured by way of detecting the cause of the disorder. The nature of therapy is determined by the nature of illness to which it is applied. He is his own physician. The cure of the symptom of the disease is based on the unique diagnosis of the roots of the philosophical puzzlements. Thus, the philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness. In answering to the question: What is your aim in philosophy? Wittgenstein says, "To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle". Thus, we can conclude with Wittgenstein that language bewitches our intellect. The proper method of therapeutic philosophy is analysis and the proper business of philosophy is not to advance any metaphysical theory but to show the fly out of the fly-bottle. Wittgenstein invites us to look at the actual use of language, actual functioning of language. There is no longer the urge to see the world rightly by seeing through the underlying formal simplicity of ordinary language because ordinary language is no longer treated as mirrors of things but pieces used in various language games.

Now we are in a position to assess the therapeutic philosophy of Wittgenstein. His therapeutic philosophy as a philosophical method opens up a new dimension in philosophy. He has not only resisted the philosophers' tendency of making a drastic revision of ordinary language, but he equally establishes how the actual use of ordinary language in our form of our life would be effective in overcoming philosophical muddles. His therapeutic interpretation of philosophy is holistic in nature. It is holistic in the sense that there is a common participation of the members of the community. It is also said to be naturalistic philosophy as here everything is open to us, nothing remains hidden. Most importantly, Wittgenstein ultimately has succeeded to show the philosophers how to get rid of from philosophical muddles just by looking at the actual use of words within the form of life.



¹⁷ Barnett, W. "The Rhetoric of Grammar: Understanding Wittgenstein's Method", *Meta Philosophy*, Vol.21, Nos. 1&2, 1990, p.57.