

Wittgenstein on Culture

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1.

Wittgenstein's lamentation broadly fell upon the major characterizing features of western culture like outcomes of its industrial revolutions, irrational market growths, and greedy economies exhibiting itself in the imperialistic politics of their governments. In Wittgenstein's words, "The spirit of this civilization makes itself manifest in the industry, architecture and music of our time, in its fascism and socialism, and it is alien and uncongenial to the author (Wittgenstein 1980, p.6e)."

For Wittgenstein then, culture does not merely meant tools of civilization and the technological advancement exhibited through its industries and scientific achievements. Culture for him comprised of moralities and decorum of the society, religion, ethics, language and its mode of apprehending the world and nature. Culture for Wittgenstein was closely related to values. In his words:

"A culture is like a big organization which assigns each of its members a place where he can work in the spirit of the whole; and it is perfectly fair for his power to be measured by the contribution he succeeds in making to the whole enterprise...I realize then that disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value, but simply of certain means of expressing this value, yet the fact remains that I have no sympathy for the current of European civilization and do not understand its goals (Wittgenstein 1980, p.6)."

Culture for Wittgenstein is a constitutive whole wherein each part has a specific role assigned to it and his worth is evaluated on the basis of contribution that he makes to this whole. One can see the socialist tint in this definition of culture as put forward by Wittgenstein. The fact is that Wittgenstein flourished at the time when socialism was at its peak and showing signs of it's a viable socio-political theory of a better world order provide evidence to the hypothesis that socialism might have had good influence on Wittgenstein's mind. The talk of 'frictional resistances' seems a pointer to bourgeoisie-proletariat tussle for supremacy and 'fragmented forces' nothing but the consequent alienation of the proletariat in the wake of that great struggle.

Along with his epistemological conceptions about language and world, one can see, a general trend of paradigm shift in Wittgenstein's thought – be it language, life or culture. It immediately brings into focus the scattered views of Wittgenstein about culture. His views about culture are hardly as a culture as a single entity, rather his views are on different aspects of culture – its ethics, values, religion, language and so on. Because of this fragmentary approach to culture (though he considered culture as a whole) and viewpoints being scattered here and there in his numerous notes and works, a concrete idea of Wittgenstein's views on culture is very hard to perform. Wittgenstein's views on different aspects of culture will put to scrutiny, evaluated and analyzed their worth in today's scenario.

2.

Foremost, that Wittgenstein seemed to be concerned about culture was its values. Values hold transcendental significance for Wittgenstein such that at the same time, values live inside and outside the world. In his words, "what is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the supernatural" (Wittgenstein 1980, p.3e). In a sentence, he relates ethics with religion and aesthetics and imparts a transcendental color to values. Although, values are transcendental, still these are very much part of the operating social world for Wittgenstein instead of taking values to be absolutist, as any transcendental value should be, rather takes them to be relative and instrumental. In his "*Lecture on Ethics*" he compares the various relative and instrumental values and claims that so far as fact-stating propositions are concerned, there are only relative goods and relative values. There is no sense in talking about absoluteness of values for that would imply that such values are unconditionally necessary and binding for the people as the statements of sciences are. Thus, it is only in science that we find absolute truths which are factual but since, "the good is outside the space of facts" (Wittgenstein 1980, p.3e), one cannot have consistently absolute value outside these facts. In *Lecture on Ethics*, he expounds upon this as,

"The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, 'the absolutely right road.' I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge" (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965, p7).

One can instantly see two seemingly mutually contradictory currents running in Wittgenstein's thought. He apparently is trying to make the absolutist and relative aspects of the values compatible to each other. There is no absolutely good or bad value, but still, values have transcendental effect. Right road, in Wittgenstein's words, means only that, "it is right road relative to a certain goal" (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965, p. 5). And that seeking absolutism in such a state of affairs where everything is relative to one or the other thing is nothing but, "chimera". Still, values have a transcendental nature because contrary to scientific facts of the world, values are sought after for their own sake. That is, they have their "intrinsic" worth. Although, context bound as they are, they are not absolute, but they are transcendental owing to this intrinsic-ness which makes them stand apart from the scientific facts of

the world. That is why; Wittgenstein relates values with aesthetic goodness, which is in Moorean sense, indefinable. Values, like the goodness, are intrinsic and have totally different utilitarian aspect from scientific facts. When the utilitarian and instrumental aspects of scientific facts are clubbed with ethical propositions, most of the absurdity arises. Whereas one may validly wonder about the size of dog, what if one may “wonder about the existence of the world”? (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965, p. 8). World has an existence prior to any valuation and its existence is not relative or instrumental to any such evaluative endeavor. It does not matter whether what does one achieve by wondering at the existence of world, or if what achieves anything at all or not. Any values related to world's existence have to be intrinsic and non-instrumental. Here, the wonder is more of a metaphor than literal usage of the same word as in other contexts. From such “experiences” Wittgenstein concludes that most of the ethical discourses use language in a metaphorical or allegorical ways and that, “a certain characteristics misuse of our language runs through all ethical and religious expressions. All these expressions *seem*, prima facie, to be just *similes*” (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965, p. 9). All ethics and religions are nothing but the allegorical expressions of people's desires, beliefs, wanting etc. But, then similes are similes standing for something. That is, they are symbols that refer to something other than themselves. This other-reference imparts these similes or symbols a transcendental nature.

Wittgenstein here cautions to use similes as pointers to these facts, for as “soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965, p. 10).” Similes, therefore, should be considered as similes only and not as pointers which point to some fact other than themselves. This is one difference between ordinary symbols and ethical and religious similes. And the fault of people is precisely that like ordinary symbols, they try to look at the fact behind these similes as in the case of ordinary symbols. Since this confusion is initiated and perpetuated incorrect use of religious and ethical symbols, Wittgenstein calls it the misuse of language. It is this misuse which has created so much philosophical rubble over the two millennia in philosophy by posing entities like mind, god, and inner life as something other than the similes which pointed towards them. In Wittgenstein's words,

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of the life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965, p.11-12).

One can here see strong current of anti-scientism and anti-behaviorism in Wittgenstein's thoughts. Ethics for Wittgenstein was not just an enquiry into “what is good” but an enquiry into the meaning of life itself. Against absolutism of traditional ethics, Wittgenstein brought ethics into the empirical reality of the life which is relative. Through the misuse of language we tend to see the apodictic elements in ethical and religious discourses which yield totally ‘nonsensical’ claims about life and beyond. It does not tantamount to say that all ethics is nonsense, as many commentators on Wittgenstein have maintained, rather by

exposing the inherent misuse of language, Wittgenstein rather home in on the true manner of considering ethics which is metaphorical interpretation of its aphorisms rather than literal ones for behind the similes there are no facts to look for. Such a literal interpretation of similes can be afforded in sciences, but not in ethics or religion.

Why and how does the same similes come to have different interpretations is answered by Wittgenstein in his concept of ‘language-games’. Every language-game which represents a “form of life” or activity is governed by its own rules. Therefore, the words used in a particular language-game may have different meanings according to the context. It is because of this reason that a same symbol can have literal or metaphorical interpretation according to the language-game in which it is being played. The different language-games of ethics and sciences thus account for the different meaning of their discourses and the words used in them.

Owing to this difference, the approach of the speaking community should be different with respect to both. Whereas one may validly look for ‘facts behind the simile’ in case of a scientific language-game, such may not be a plausible move in an ethical language-game. Confusion arises when people tend to mix their approaches to different language games. In “On Certainty” Wittgenstein explains the relation between language-games and changing connotations as, “the concept of knowing is coupled with that of the language-game” (Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1969, Aphorism No. 60) and further that, “when language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts, the meanings of words change (Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1969, Aphorism No. 65).” Thus, while interpreting a discourse, the proper location of its language-games needs to be distinguished from its corollaries that may fall in other spheres. Whereas, science demands literal interpretation of its discourses, ethics demand only metaphorical or allegorical interpretation.

Thus, language-games come to define what approach we should adopt in understanding the reality around us. Language-games are the major contribution of Wittgenstein towards philosophy of language, but equally in other disciplines, its effect can be seen as language-games are the tools through which various perspectives upon reality can be made and understood reality in various hues and colors. Language-games depict various ‘forms of life’ which are nothing but varied activities conducted by the people throughout their life. All the facets of life be it religion, ethics, morality, aesthetics, and even culture are nothing but various ‘forms of life’ which can be apprehended through their particular language games. Within a language-game of ethics, the basic building blocks are ‘values’ which are relative to the other constituents of that language game, but outside the language-game these values have transcendental existence. Although these are not, and should not be, used in language-games of other disciplines, still these do not lose their ontological reality on that account. Through language-games, thus, Wittgenstein maintains, simultaneously, the relative and transcendent aspect of values.

The inexpressibility thus implies that it is virtually impossible to define values with respect to objective facts found in the world. Values, like language, can only *show*, not *say*. That is why, Wittgenstein keeps asserts in the end of *Tractatus*, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence (Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1961).” Ethics, therefore, is something that can not be validly spoken about like scientific propositions about the world. It can, at best, give us metaphors or similes which can point to higher truths,

but those cannot be analyzed in the manner of scientific facts. It is their inexpressibility that lends values a transcendental character. In *Lecture on Ethics*, he asserts, "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts (Wittgenstein 1980, p.7)." Since philosophy, in Wittgenstein's view, is nothing but a therapy, any moral enquiry, likewise can not be a science, but will necessarily remain a therapeutic study only.

Literature

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