
Wittgenstein's Interpretations of Essences: Both in Tractatus & Philosophical Investigation

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To cite this article:

Sagarika Datta. Wittgenstein's Interpretations of Essences: Both in Tractatus & Philosophical Investigation. *International Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 11, No. 2, 2023, pp. 46-50. doi: 10.11648/j.ijp.20231102.15

Received: May 28, 2023; **Accepted:** June 15, 2023; **Published:** June 27, 2023

Abstract: Wittgenstein in his early work viz. Tractatus argued that there is a common, essential, underlying structure that links logic, language and the world. He also argued about the need for an analysis of ordinary language in terms of a perspicuous symbolism that would display a one to one relationship between a proposition and a fact – when both of them are broken down to their simplest components – viz. to atomic propositions and atomic states of affairs. All propositions are ultimately truth-functional combinations of atomic propositions – thus all language is resolvable to a unique constant. So for early Wittgenstein, though there is an apparent complexity and diversity of propositions still there lies a uniform, essential structure of truthfunctional propositions and that can be reduced to a single constant. And language to have a determinate sense must be ultimately based on objects – the absolutely simple logical atoms of the world. These objects imbibe their range of combination with other objects, which implies that any genuine propositions – however unusual and unconventional it may seem to be – must ultimately be constrained by the permissible range of combination of the objects. In this way early Wittgenstein sought to secure an essential metaphysics via an essential structure of language. However in Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein attacked essentialism by rejecting the picture theory, and the search for commonality and uniformity. He denied essence, the universal, the common element present in all the objects of a class and accepted only an indeterminate and incomplete flow of the criss-crossing, the overlapping features. For him language is constituted by an ever expanding flow of uses, which he called language-games. The significance of the term 'language-game' lies in the fact that like games language too is not based on any ontology that would confer a common essence across all the widely divergent uses. Nor did Wittgenstein accept any hidden essence behind appearance. In PI the later Wittgenstein denied both analysis and essence and propagated description of usage and behaviours as the only method of philosophy. Later Wittgenstein will neither commit himself to ontological necessity, nor to necessity being a matter of scheme-relative propositions in the Quinean sense. For later Wittgenstein all attempts to establish essences, or the contrary exercises to relativise them to a particular set of presumptions, are themselves language-games – they boil down to usage and practices that do not rest on any foundation.

Keywords: Tractatean Essence, Language & Reality, Later Wittgenstein on Essence, Tractatus vs Philosophical Investigations

1. Introduction

Wittgenstein as a forerunner of the twentieth-century analytic philosophy initiated a linguistic turn in the domain of philosophy. Wittgenstein believed that every proposition has a clear and definite sense; and he tried to relate the world with language. He tried to find out whether there is anything essential either to language or to reality itself. Wittgenstein's philosophy can be classified into two phases—the early and

the later phases. The Tractatus Logico Philosophicus represents the early phase and the Philosophical Investigations the later one. Wittgenstein in his early philosophy mainly devotes to a study about the structural meaning of language as relating to the reality of the world. His conception of language in the earlier work emphasizes the essential structures of language. [7] His main interest lay in discovering the essence of logic; and this led him to discover the 'essence of language'. Philosophy, for Wittgenstein, was an exploration of these essential foundations. Finally, I shall discuss to what extent

and in what sense, Wittgenstein's later philosophy is anti-essentialistic. [10]

2. Relationship Between Language and Reality

Wittgenstein's conception of language, his search for the essence of language through ideal language, is essentially related to certain ontological issues, i. e. the structure of the world. There are many types of philosophers having their own philosophical goals. One such goal is to be able to characterize the general propositional form. Being much attracted to this goal Wittgenstein wrote *Tractatus* wherein he was devoted to the task of characterizing the general propositional form, 'The general propositional form is the essence of a proposition.' 'To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world.' [4] Wittgenstein's concept of language in the earlier work emphasizes the essential structures of language. Language is an instrument with which we describe the reality of the world. It shows that there is a relation between the structure of language and the structure of the reality. This means a one-to-one correspondence between the components of language and the components of the reality which enables language to depict the picture of the world. Objects or Logical atoms exist necessarily. The range of combination of each object with others is given necessarily in logical space. According to this view, he puts forward that every name refers to an object and every proposition also has a particular sense vis-à-vis a particular combination of objects or states of affairs. Thus every sentence has a meaning of its own because it is an outcome of a combination of words which in their turn consist of names signifying simple objects. The early position of Wittgenstein's philosophy proclaimed the determinacy of sense of a sentence which is ultimately based on each name referring to an object. In 2.02: 'Objects are simple' in 2.027: 'Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent, their configuration is what is changing and unstable'. [14]

2.1. Tractarian Essence of Language and Reality

So language corresponds with reality from two aspects: that of word and object, and that of sentence and fact. *Tractatus* upholds that any proposition presupposes the whole of language. Propositions (by virtue of their logical structure) 'picture' reality. A proposition when thoroughly analyzed is always at bottom 'simply a concatenation of names, where name stands for an object'. According to Wittgenstein, to resolve philosophical problems ordinary language needs to be analyzed into an 'Ideal language' where there would be one to one relationship between a proposition and a fact. An 'Ideal language' which Wittgenstein called 'Sign-language' [9] is constituted of elementary propositions, i. e., propositions which cannot be further analyzed. An elementary proposition is constituted of 'names'. The 'names' stand for 'object's and objects are combined to form an 'atomic fact'. An 'atomic fact' is the one which does not have other facts as its constituents.

They are the last residue as a result of 'analysis'. Here lies an orderly and uniform structure of truth-functional relations and all propositions can be reduced to a single constant. This is common to all propositions and here lies their essence. Wittgenstein argues that all meaningful declarative sentence of any language have one feature in common – they all express propositions that are truth functions of atomic (= elementary = basic) propositions. [7] Also an atomic proposition is a truth-function of itself. An atomic proposition consists of nothing but logically proper names, each of which denotes absolutely simple existent objects. And what we call atomic facts is not a simple entity but a kind of relation between the existent simples which are partless and hence indestructible or eternal. Such eternal objects make up the substance of the world (T. 2021). By a name, Wittgenstein means a term that is essentially to be contrasted with an expression that can be verbally defined. It is one that cannot be further analyzed or defined. A name means an object. (T 3.203) and objects are simple. (T 2.02). [5] Wittgenstein's philosophical view has been very appropriately entitled logical atomism. The term was coined by Russell as a name for his own at the time, but Wittgenstein's system may be said to constitute a much purer version of logical atomism than even that of Russell. Wittgenstein's logical atomism is at once a theory of propositions and a Later Wittgenstein's Attack on Essence metaphysical theory. All genuine propositions are molecules constructed of elementary propositions and all situations are molecules constructed of atomic states of affairs. Elementary propositions are atomic, since they cannot be further reduced to any more basic propositions (or state of affairs). The above Wittgensteinian analysis of meaning is called the picture theory of meaning. Wittgenstein himself rejected the picture theory in his later work as it fails to solve the problem arising from the fact that we use the same expression in conveying different meanings in irreducibly different situations and contexts. These differences in meaning cannot be explained by the Tractarian postulate of 'form' of objects – i. e. the postulated range of combination of each object with other objects. If we go deeper and want to know why in the *Tractatus* carries the search for 'the essence of language', 'the general form of proposition' and 'the limit of language', [4] we shall be able to detect that the character of this search is just illusory, as Wittgenstein himself later diagnosed that for this illusion, our craving for generality is responsible. It is due to the fact that we are over-ruled by the uncritical belief that there is something common in all the entities which we generally subsume under a general term, our tendency is to assume that there is something in common in all horses, in all tables, in all men, in all games and so on. And such a passion for unity is so strong that it leads us to believe that everything has an essence. Thus his later philosophy – *Philosophical Investigations* is a very strong attack against the time-honoured view of essentialism.

2.2. *Tractatus* vs *Philosophical Investigations*

Both in the *Tractatus* and in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argued that the subject matter of

philosophy is restricted to language, though he changed his position with regard to its method. In the Tractatus, he rightly pointed out that the method of philosophy is to analyze language in order to arrive at the 'elementary propositions' which in their turn would 'picture atomic facts'. [9] Thus, in the Tractatus, the analyzed language mirrored reality. In Tractatus Wittgenstein accepted only two kinds of assertions to be meaningful: 'Atomic propositions' and 'Tautologies'. In this manner we have seen that in the Tractatus, the essence of language is the form of language. Wittgenstein maintained that the method of philosophy is to analyze language in order to arrive at the 'elementary propositions', which are constituted of names and 'names have a fixed and permanent meaning' [14]. In the Tractatus, we find deductive rigor, with its constituent aphorisms expressed in the unvarying tone of a prophetic revelation. Even the world itself is to be an expression of a solipsistic mind as he said that the limit of his language means limit of his world. (T 5.62) Wittgenstein upheld the technique for theory is to investigate dialect with a specific goal to touch base at the 'basic recommendations', which is constituted of names, and names have a settled and lasting importance. Behind the moving appearances of the world there is something endless and perpetual - a universe of 'objects' that remain dependably the same. Wittgenstein of Tractatus upholds an ontology according to which our world is not of simple objects but arranged in a certain order that is distinct from and independent of one another. Objects are incomplete because each object has to exist in relation to other objects that are arranged in a certain order constitutive of facts. 'All words are names' means the meaning of a word is the object it names. A proposition is meaningful if it is in isomorphic relation with a state of affairs, i. e. there is a one to one correspondence between a proposition and the state of affairs. The structure of the one is completely identical with the structure of the other. The later Wittgenstein wanted us to look upon the age-old things in a new way: he says, what we call something common among the different things is in fact a 'family resemblance'—a kind of resemblance that we observe among the different members of the same family. For him the so-called common essences purportedly present in all the objects of a class disperse in an unending flow of criss-crossing and overlapping features - as we find in the ongoing history of a family. The function of language can also be compared with the function of tools in a toolbox, where there are hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, a glue, nails and screws. (PI 11) [15] The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. The language has meaning in their function as the tools show the functional meaning when they are used. When a communication occurred between two persons they should have shared a common language rule - which is ultimately entrenched in a common form of life, enabling the language-users grasp the meaning of the words or sentences they speak. In his later approach to ontology, Wittgenstein rejected the categories of 'content', 'essence' and 'universals' and accepted only 'appearances'. He did not accept anything 'hidden' behind 'appearances'. In the Tractatus he had

claimed that through analysis one can arrive at the essence of language, whereas in Philosophical Investigations he denied both analysis and essence and propagated description of appearances as the only method of philosophy.

3. Later Wittgenstein's Denial of the Essential Structure of Language and Reality

For later Wittgenstein language has no single essence, but is a vast collection of different practices each having its own logic, as each is embedded in a form of living. We use language to describe, report, inform, affirm, deny, speculate, make experiments, present a situation according to its quantitative measurements, give orders, ask questions, tell stories, play act, sing, guess, riddles, make jokes, solve problems, translate, request, thank, greet, curse, pray, warm etc. etc. (PI 23) [15] All these different activities Wittgenstein calls 'language-games'. The term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life. He has made it clear in his writings that by a language-game he will understand a language and the actions into which it is interwoven. As for example, a boy knows the meaning of the word 'toy' if he can bring the toy if required; can recognize it as a toy if assimilated with other items; if he knows what to do with the particular toy, if he can refer to it when it is absent. Hence mere linguistic utterance of a word does not make it clear whether he has understood the meaning of the word or not. That is why Wittgenstein says it again and again that it is the usage of words in ordinary language that is the sole determinant of meaning, meanings do not pre-exist uses but spread out through an ever-incomplete flow of uses. And grasping the actual working of a word in our ordinary language requires both physical and social activity, which makes it similar to that of a game. Language being a collection of games, has no single essence which can be unearthed and stated in terms of a unitary theory. To understand the workings of language we must recognize its variety and multiplicity—instead of producing something common to all that we call 'language', they are related to one another in many different ways. These relations cannot be brought under a non-relational core of identity. Wittgenstein's early philosophy can be said to be encased in the Augustinian model in so far as the Tractatus held language to be composed of names and each name referring to a corresponding object. But later Wittgenstein upholds that naming a thing or pointing to a thing cannot give us its meaning unless we already know the meaning of naming or pointing itself, or already have conceived the ostended item in a specific manner. So it is wrong to say that knowledge begins with naming or denoting or by ostensive definition, which (according to later Wittgenstein's reading) Saint Augustine had upheld. But Wittgenstein showed that ostensive definition works good only because we already have a language, it is not that language has become possible because of ostensive definition;

rather ostensive definition is possible because we have a language and a language is possible through the appropriate use of it. Thus it emerges that for later Wittgenstein none of the usually proposed foundations of language – the ontological essence of Plato and Aristotle, physical ostension, mental images, verbal rules, nervous excitements, brain-patterns, or even forms of life, have the required self-interpretive character. They only call for further interpretations in terms of further rules, further ostensions or images) which themselves call for further interpretations in an endless series. [1] (This impression can be gathered from his extensive critique of Augustinian model and of rule following scattered over Blue and the Brown Book p 2, PI 29, 47-49, 85, 389, 198-227) For Wittgenstein our linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours do not rest upon an extra-linguistic or pre-interpretive foundation. It is our actions and behaviours all the way down, and no pre-existing essence from which our uses and actions are to take off. The Augustinian claim that language works through naming discrete bits of reality waiting out there is as absurd - as absurd as the claim that the levers of a mechanism, say the handle of a brake, the switch of a light or bulb, the latch of the door, the handle of the crank are externalized labels or names to be tagged on the mechanisms. (PI 12) Our non-linguistic behavior and reality is caught into an internal blend (like the machine and the lever), and our linguistic behaviour comes as a sophisticated extension of the former. Once this radical anti-essentialist position is made plausible, one can read Wittgenstein's crucial notion of family-resemblance (i. e. overlapping and crisscrossing fibers as presented in PI 66, 67) in this light. Wittgenstein's attack on essences does not stop short at merely showing how the supposedly unitary and fixed essences are broken into short-ranged properties invaded externally by new fibres coming in and brushing away the old ones. For the way the seemingly short-ranged properties transit from one case to the others within a limited range is not based on any real temporary features; rather this transition is a matter of language-games embedded in forms of living. To illustrate the point – the feature of skill (present in chess) not only drops out in certain other games (say in ring a ring a roses), but even within chess the commonality of skill is not a real essence, but rather this commonality is played out in a way of life. In this way later Wittgenstein replaces the traditional metaphysical (Realistic concept) of reality with non-separable expression of life. Thus the concept of the world (the outer) in a metaphysical (Realistic) sense is rejected. [8] One can only move from one form of life to another form of life. There is nothing external that is independent of our forms of life and there is no 'metaphysical observer'. Just as the chessboard and not only the pieces applied (in the game) are part of the game we call chess, similarly the so-called 'foundation's (nature, universe) and all of us belong to our forms of life, where the aspects of reality are provided by our linguistic observational apparatus. The furniture of the universe (chairs, tables, elephants, galaxies) when provided to us through our observations amount to 'players' (participators). But this furniture may change. Here the subject (thought, language)

and nature (reality) are both exhibited as parts of language-games, the provider of the innumerable common forms (language-games) of language and nature occurring in forms of life. [11]

Language-games vis a vis Transworld Essence

As already noted Wittgenstein's language-games do not share any commonly recurring word-meanings or semantic primitives, nor a common syntactic structure. Even within the language-games of description there are irreducible variations. He gave examples like: 'A chair can be seen as made of bits of wood, or of atoms and molecules, or (normally) as composed of a back-rest and seat propped up on four legs, or as a unitary design resisting any analysis' (PI 47). A chessboard is normally seen as a unique composition made out of thirty two white and thirty two black squares. But we can also see it as colours black and white and a schema of squares. A length of 2 cm can be seen as 1 cm + 1 cm (normally) But it can also be seen as embossed in a loaded history, e. g. as a previous 3 cm stick shrunk to 2cm, i. e. becoming less by 1 cm. In that case 2 cm is created with two bits - 1 bit 3 cm long and one bit 1 cm long measured in the opposite direction (PI 47). [15] These different games are not permutation and combination of a given set of simples - as Wittgenstein held in the Tractatus.

Now the crucial question is how Kripke (and Adams) would respond to these different language-games on the chair, chessboard and the length of 2 cm. They would obviously say that say that to propose counterfactuals on a chair, chessboard or 2 cm length is already to be rooted on their respective transworld essence. For Kripke, the language user formulating different modes of conceiving the chair or the chessboard is causally related to the referent of the words – 'this chair' or 'this chessboard' (or any other proper name that he may care to give). And the referent of these words is the rigid designata – viz. the material origin of the mentioned objects (whether it is the hunk/hunks of wood or the components from which the chessboard is constructed.) As for the expression '2 cm' it will be a paradigmatic example of a rigid designator for Kripke, and all attempts to conceive it in terms of its spatio-temporal interactions will only give rise to non-rigid designators viz. 'the length of this 2cm stick at time t1' or 'the length of this 2cm stick at time t2' [3] The strongly rigid character of the rigid designator '2cm', and that of the transworld designata or referents will not be affected hereby. Kripke and Adams would also insist that to conceive anything as undergoing a spatio-temporal change is not to conceive its valid world-variant, but only to conceive the thing as undergoing a historical transformation in the same world. There cannot be a causal –historical transformation of a thing in one world to another world, for worlds are logically related, there is no causal dependence between two worlds. In fine, for Kripke and Adams there cannot be any way to dissipate the trans-world essence [2] of a thing in terms of its historical vicissitudes and interactions with other objects, for to perform such thought-adventures Wittgenstein had to presuppose its non-historical and non-spatial identity.

We can only conclude that it is perhaps not obvious that later Wittgenstein has to accept the force of the Kripkean

contention. While essentialists would say that to generate differences with an effort to break essences is already rooted on real essence, Wittgenstein would insist that this seeming reference to an unvarying identity is only a language-game of reference. It is a formal or ceremonial stance of putting an unvarying or non-relational starting point. The so-called trans-world identity is shaped up bit by bit through the factual and counter-factual descriptions. (PI 217) [13].

4. Conclusion

So to sum up I may say that I have considered some of the specific arguments in favor of essence forwarded by Kripke, Plantinga, Adams and early Wittgenstein. They accepted essence that are real and general but neither in the sense of haecceity nor in sense of Platonic form. These features taken together mark the kind of essentialism. Essentialists would say that to generate differences with an effort to break essences is already rooted on real essence. [10] On the other hand later Wittgenstein would say that this seeming reference to an unvarying identity is only language-game of reference. It is a formal or ceremonial stance of putting an unvarying or non-relational starting point. The so called trans-world identity is shaped up bit by bit through the factual and counter-factual descriptions. Here we see that more the anti-essentialists try to disperse essences, make them relative or peripheral, the more the essentialists will show the underlying essence exploding through such anti-essentialising exercise. And parallelly, more the anti-essentialist will seek to project the multiple characters and relativize them under different schemes more will the later Wittgenstein seek to disperse the essentialist frames underlying these schemes themselves I would like to side with the essentialists with an appreciation of Adams's insight. Adams said that the transworld essence being non-qualitative (and thus non-conceptual) one cannot conceptually explain how it grounds the possession of the other qualities. [11] Later Wittgenstein also admitted common forms of life (if not material origin, atomic structure, or pure length) as the bedrock where all explanations and justifications end. (PI 217 and also p 226) Thus perhaps an indirect commitment to ineffable essences is reflected in the staunch anti-essentialist exercises as well. Let us then conclude with a leaning towards essences that form a ground of our language-usage, but cannot

be fully conceptualised in language.

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