

A Comparative Analysis of Early and Late Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophical Thoughts

Yuwen Xia^{1,a,*}

¹*Shanghai Yue Kong Pao School, Huaihai West Road, Shanghai, China
a. s20411@ykpaoschool.cn*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper examines the early and late thoughts of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein through the comparative study of two of his famous works: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*. A whole summary of the two works will not be presented in this paper; instead, essential concepts and ideas from the same two topics – Wittgenstein's view on language and reality and Wittgenstein's view on logic – will be summarized from the two works independently. After the summary, a discussion of Wittgenstein's thought evolvments on the same topic will be delivered. The paper examines the essay with a critical analysis of the two contrary perspectives through links to historical background and an evaluation of the ideas. Even though Wittgenstein's works have been extensively studied, this presentation will demonstrate them from a broader perspective. This essay aims to provide an in-depth review of Wittgenstein's philosophical movements of thought in areas including meaning, logic, and the philosophy of language.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, logic, language, philosophy, meaning

1. Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, was born in Austria and raised in a household that was extremely wealthy and influential in society. After studying aeronautics in his early years, he was deeply attracted by mathematics and logic and decided to pursue philosophy at the University of Cambridge. During that time, Wittgenstein was deeply influenced by Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore. Wittgenstein played a crucial role in the development of analytic philosophy and other topics like ethics, aesthetics, and politics.

His significant works *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* greatly influenced the philosophical perspective of the world's relationship and language, inspiring new developments in perception and language in philosophy. The *Tractatus*, published in 1921, introduced the concept of the picture theory of language and logical atomism, establishing a foundation for the exploration of linguistic representation and its connection to the structure of reality. Subsequently, *Philosophical Investigation*, published in 1953, introduced the notion of language games and emphasized the everyday use of language over formal structures. It challenged the formal structures emphasized in the *Tractatus* and diverged the ideas away from his previous work.

In his early years, Wittgenstein claimed that his book *Tractatus* solved all the problems in philosophy. Yet in his last years, Wittgenstein's ideas drastically changed, and he discarded the

majority of his earlier writings. He rejected his former rigidity of logical positivism and provided new insight toward a more nuanced, context-dependent understanding of language and meaning.

Therefore, it is very important to distinguish the differences between many of his contributions to philosophy and recognize the changes of thought in his life. Most research projects about Wittgenstein focus on analyzing a particular work or idea rather than comparing his ideas through time. This paper will organize and explain the critical ideas of Wittgenstein in his early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the late work *Philosophical Investigation*, which aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of his intellectual legacy.

2. Wittgenstein's early thoughts in *Tractatus*

2.1. Wittgenstein's Early View on Language and Reality

In the beginning, according to Wittgenstein, "The world is all that is the case" [1]. This indicates that the world is composed of facts, which are the state of affairs in this context. Combinations of items make up states of affairs. Objects may only exist within the framework of situations of events and are completely simple and unanalyzable [2]. The possibilities of an object's combination with other items are also determined by its internal qualities. Complex facts can be created by combining or interacting with several states of circumstances. Simple objects joined together to produce states of affairs are the basic foundations of reality. State of affairs can be either actual or possible. Any potential state of affairs can exist independently of all other scenarios, either as the case or not. As a result, the entirety of all states of affairs constitutes the world.

Following that, Wittgenstein presented the picture theory with the essential assertion that "the picture is a model of reality" [1]. Before delving into the explanation of picture theory, it is necessary to clarify the "proposition" that is stated frequently throughout the text to make Wittgenstein's claims understandable. Propositions are basic units of language that signify truth or falsehood. Propositions that are complicated and constructed from basic, elementary propositions make up language [3]. Basic propositions are just names and cannot be analyzed. Language shares the logical structure of reality and mirrors it. For picture theory, Wittgenstein suggested that pictures are composed of elements that come together to form the picture. Each element in the picture reflects an object, and the arrangement of elements indicates the arrangement of objects in a state of affairs. Whether in language or in language, the picture's logical structure is identical to the logical structure of the situation it depicts. In other words, the picture presents the reality. "A picture presents a situation in a logical space, the existence and non-existence of state of affairs." [1] In this sentence, Wittgenstein intended to convey that pictures can depict thoughts that transcend reality and actuality. For instance, a car and an arrow indicate its direction. Just as the world is the whole of facts, so too is language the totality of true propositions.

2.2. Wittgenstein's Early View on Logic

To Wittgenstein, logic sets limit to meaning. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent." [1] This delimitation is not to the real world or anything else, but to thinking, or rather to the representation of thought. Wittgenstein thought that natural language, because of its misleading grammatical structure, made the use of language in the field of philosophy quite confusing. He tried to analyze language logically, to be able to regulate the internal logical form of language, so as to solve the problem of expressing and describing the world in language, and therefore he demanded that we must use a language that conforms to the syntax of logic, i.e., "logically perfect language". Therefore, he demands that we must use a language that conforms to logical syntax, that is, a "logically perfect language. This is, after all, an ideal language, and the establishment of such a language is not sufficient to describe the world and express ideas satisfactorily. All languages,

including this logical language, have limits and can only express what can be expressed. By extension, there must be something inexpressible beyond the logical boundaries of language, and this boundary distinguishes the sayable from the unsayable.

What is sayable? Only propositions describing empirical facts are sayable. By analyzing the theory of images, we know that the world referred to by images is in fact the natural world consisting of sensory-empirical material. Since all propositions are images of facts, and descriptions of the relations between objects in the facts, all propositions should be regarded as expressing functional relations between objects. All propositions are composed of basic propositions, which are propositions as independent variables, both true and false, and the truth values of all propositions are determined by the truth values of the basic propositions, and thus the truth functions of the basic propositions are also sayable, and only the propositions that are meaningful are sayable. Wittgenstein believed that the ideal language would eliminate philosophical confusion by adhering to strict logical principles and representing reality with precision [4].

3. Wittgenstein's Later Thoughts in *Philosophical Investigations*

3.1. Wittgenstein's Later View on Language and Reality

Philosophical Investigation is very distinct from the rigid isomorphism between language and reality proposed in the *Tractatus*. Unlike the direct mirroring of reality in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's later work recognizes the complexity of language. Notably, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of "language games," proposing that meaning is more subjective than objective and is shaped by subjective interpretations and definitions. Meaning is thus forged and reshaped through the day-to-day utilization of language within distinct linguistic settings. The influence of social practices is tremendous in shaping people's interpretation of reality.

Firstly, Wittgenstein uses the term "family resemblance" to argue against the traditional view that words have precise and universally applicable definitions [5]. Instead, he suggests that the meanings of words are interconnected in a way that resembles the relationships within a family. For instance, different members in a family may share certain physical traits, but there is no single feature common to all family members. In this sense, meanings are established through a network of overlapping similarities among various uses. The idea of family resemblance underscores the diversity and multiplicity of meanings that a word can have. Therefore, family resemblance emphasizes the dynamic and context-dependent nature of language. Meanings evolve and adapt within specific language games, and the connections between different uses are contingent on the specific contexts in which words are employed. For example, "mouse" has double meanings in modern times since the advent of the computer. This theory highlights the evolving nature of the relationship between language and reality, moving away from the earlier idea of a fixed correspondence.

3.2. Wittgenstein's Later View on Logic

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's view on logic also undergoes a notable transformation. While *Tractatus* employ rigid rules of logic in analyzing languages, Wittgenstein, in his later years, adopted a more pragmatic and contextual perspective and rejected the fixed structure of logical positivism. However, he still acknowledges the confusion language brings to philosophical discussions due to ordinary language [6].

Logic has usually been regarded as an ideal language, surpassing the limitations of everyday language. However, Wittgenstein expresses opposition to this idea of logical superiority. He believes that logic is not an "ideal language" but a human-constructed form of communication—a game abstracted from reality [7]. Wittgenstein's opposition to logic as an ideal language stems from his belief in the importance of human agency in constructing language. According to him, logic is not an

inherent or transcendent structure but a linguistic game fashioned by individuals. This means that logic can be very individualistic and subjective. Wittgenstein asserts that meaning can be found in even the most ambiguous statements, suggesting the presence of a “perfect order” within linguistic expressions [6]. Consequently, he dismisses the need for an alternative language specifically designed to discuss language itself. Pursuing an ideal language is unnecessary, as it already possesses a coherent and meaningful structure in its ordinary use [8].

Wittgenstein’s critique challenges the entrenched notion of logic as an ideal language. Instead of analyzing and constructing an ideal logic within the confines of everyday language, he advocates for treating everyday language as inherently perfect.

4. Discussion

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical journey from early *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to later *Philosophical Investigations* presents an intense shift in understanding the nature of language, meaning, and logic. Both texts are valuable since they offer diverse perspectives in learning about the philosophy of language.

Several factors contributed to Wittgenstein’s philosophical evolution. Firstly, his discontentment grows through time with the rigid nature of logical positivism, a feature in the *Tractatus*. After going through substantial changes in his life, Wittgenstein critically engaged with the ideas of fellow philosophers, including self-reflection and critique of his earlier work, at last, reshaping his philosophical stance. His direct experiences and observations of language in everyday contexts also influenced his shift towards a more dynamic and context-dependent understanding of meaning [7].

Some claim that philosophy has not progressed since the time of ancient Greece to the present. Wittgenstein believes this is because people’s language changes very little, and similar language guides us to pose similar questions. The unclear use of language leads to philosophical problems. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein insightfully suggests that philosophy should function as a kind of therapy, helping to dissolve conceptual confusions and misunderstandings rather than providing definitive answers. Clarifying language is crucial in the solving of philosophical puzzles. Wittgenstein’s late philosophy helps us observe problems from a new perspective and approach it. His ideas and theories opened up a new philosophical path, tremendously influencing subsequent generations of philosophers and people. Even today, some philosophers continue the line of thought initiated by Wittgenstein. In analyzing various fields of philosophy, such as logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and epistemology, Wittgenstein’s ideas have profoundly impacted contemporary philosophical thinking and contributed to the development of the philosophy of language [9].

5. Conclusion

Examining Ludwig Wittgenstein’s early and late philosophical ideas reveals a remarkable evolution in his viewpoints regarding the nature of language, logic and meaning. While Wittgenstein underscored the importance of exact logical analysis of language and the representation of ideas as pictures in *Tractatus*, he recognized the subjectivity of meaning in language. In *Philosophical Investigation*, he refuted the superiority of logic in real life. Transitioning from the logical positivism and picture theory of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the explorations of language games and ordinary language in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s transformation of philosophical thoughts offered two distinct and consequential perspectives in viewing language. He significantly impacted the focus of 20th-century philosophy, inducing multiple interpretations from academia until now in understanding his work.

The importance of this research paper lies in the contribution to a deeper comprehension of Wittgenstein's philosophical legacy. Through this comparative analysis of his early and late works, insights can be gained into the shifts in his perspectives, the influences behind these changes, and the broader implications for philosophical discourse. Furthermore, the significant transformation of his thoughts illustrates the flexibility of philosophical discourse and how philosophical thoughts change through continuous examinations.

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