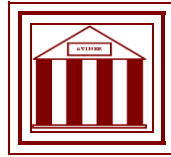


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**The Dimension of Silence in the
Philosophy of Wittgenstein**

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The Dimension of Silence in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein

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Abstract

Even though Wittgenstein throughout his life was preoccupied with language and problems of language in his philosophy, the aspect of silence played a decisive role, which should neither be underestimated nor ignored.

The dimension of this aspect finds its most prominent and frequently quoted expression in the last sentence of the *Tractatus* 7, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. However, I contend that silence plays a major role not only in his way of thinking, but also in his approach toward the world and the world outside the world of facts. Besides, silence is inherent, i.e. 'hidden' in numerous examples presented in his philosophical investigations, as a kind of counterpart to words, a means of *showing* instead of *saying*.

In my paper I will discuss this topic according to the following points:

1. Silence as a consequence of the limits of language, i.e. the philosophical consequence or résumé in an analytical sense in order to separate the thinkable from the unthinkable. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein clearly distinguishes between propositions that make sense and propositions that are nonsensical in philosophy – according to 4.022 where he states: 'The proposition *shows* its sense. The proposition *shows* how things stand, *if* it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand.'

2. Silence as an attitude of wonder and awe toward the world and the world beyond: This passage concerns above all the realm of the ineffable, and that which is usually considered the so-called mystical aspect in Wittgenstein's approach. In this context, I will also discuss the problem of time and eternity as treated by Wittgenstein in connection with his reflections on the significance of living in the present moment (i.e. not in time) – a silent attitude in 'nunc stans', so to speak, an attitude *sub specie aeternitatis*.

3. Silence as a means of expression in art: In this context the function of *showing* instead of *saying* plays a decisive role, even in another sense than that discussed in the *Tractatus*. In the realm of aesthetics, Wittgenstein explicitly emphasizes the role of *showing* in art, be it music, poetry or architecture. Moreover, he hints at the significance of gestures, mimicry etc. as a means of expressing what cannot be expressed by words.

4. Silence as regards to form: Wittgenstein's way of writing holds a strong ethical flavour in the sense of avoiding any use of superfluous words, in reducing language to a minimum, in restricting himself to the essential and thereby aiming at absolute clarity and transparency so that his philosophical concern becomes obvious – stated in 4.112: 'The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts' and the 'result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions' but to make propositions clear'.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, language problems, saying and showing, ethics, aesthetics

Introduction

Even though Wittgenstein was preoccupied with language and problems of language in his philosophy throughout his lifetime, the aspect of silence played a decisive role which should neither be underestimated nor ignored.

The dimension of this aspect finds its most prominent and frequently quoted expression in the last sentence of the *Tractatus* 7, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' – however, as I see it, silence plays a major part not only in his way of thinking, but also in his approach toward the world and the world outside the world of facts. After all, silence is inherent, i.e. 'hidden' in numerous examples presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as a kind of counterpart to words, a means of *showing* instead of *saying*.

In my paper I will discuss this topic according to the following points:

1. Silence as a consequence of the limits of language, i.e. the philosophical consequence or résumé in an analytical sense in order to separate the thinkable from the unthinkable.
2. Silence as an attitude of wonder and awe toward the world and the world beyond.
3. Silence as a means of expression in art.
4. Silence as regards to form.

Silence as the Philosophical Consequence of the Limits of Language

In his preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein clearly states that the book 'will draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts', and that the limit can only be drawn in language. What lies on the other side of the limit would be simply nonsense.

Accordingly, he clearly distinguishes between propositions that make sense and propositions that are nonsensical in philosophy – according to 4.022 where he states: 'The proposition *shows* its sense. The proposition *shows* how things stand, *if* it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand.'

It is the task of philosophy to show and to separate the difference between what can be said clearly and what cannot be expressed in words. Moreover, in showing the difference between, and thus the limits of language and science, a differentiation is made visible between what can and cannot be thought:

'[Philosophy] should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable.
It should limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable.'
(TLP 4.114)

'It will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable'.
(4.115)

Wittgenstein is convinced that 'everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly', and that 'everything that can be said can be said clearly.'
(TLP 4.116)

However, what about that which can neither be thought nor said clearly? Is this the realm where science and philosophy come to an end – where merely silence exists? Is this what Wittgenstein's last sentence in the *Tractatus* hints at, and is this to be understood as an appeal to silence in terms of a plea or rather a binding consequence in terms of a 'must'?

It would seem so, yet what about the aspect of *showing* which Wittgenstein again and again mentions – as a kind of counterpart to saying, as a kind of alternative to and thus solution for an ultimate silence of resignation in view of the limits in language and philosophy?

Wittgenstein's concluding remark in the *Tractatus* 7 hints at the importance he gave the dimension of silence in philosophy – an importance he also expressed in his letter to Ludwig von Ficker when enquiring about publishing the *Tractatus* in the *Brenner*. He wrote that the purpose of his book was an 'Ethical one' and that it actually consisted of two parts: the one he had written and the one he decided to keep silent about. And that it was this part which he considered to be the essential one. (Cf. Wittgenstein 1969, 35)

Thus the dimension of silence is not to be seen as something negative, something involved with resignation in philosophy, but as a kind of path to further insight – insight into other important fields like ethics or art.

In this letter to Ficker, Wittgenstein clearly emphasized the ethical aspect of his way of writing philosophy – insofar as he chose to distance himself from treating ethical and religious matters in philosophy, thus distancing himself from those who would only 'babble' ['schwefeln'] about these issues. In doing so he would limit 'the ethical from within' (Wittgenstein 1969, 35) – just as he would 'limit the unthinkable from within by the thinkable', as quoted above. Consequently, he described his work as 'strictly philosophical and at the same time literary' (ibid., 33), obviously meaning that the task of philosophy is to exclude metaphysical matters and restrict itself to what can be said clearly and explained scientifically, while the word 'literary' hints at approaches other than scientific means – the means of *showing* literature (and in particular poetry) can transport.

The juxtaposition of *saying* and *showing* is not only a decisive point in Wittgenstein's so-called early philosophy, but could also be said to characterize numerous examples in his philosophical investigations of the later period.

In his reflections about the understanding of a sentence, he hints at the similarity of understanding a picture or a piece of music. Just as a picture or a melody conveys *itself* to us, 'language must speak for itself', as well. (Philosophical Grammar, 40) And just as language cannot exist without logic, though logic itself cannot be represented, the spoken words can only be explained by means of language. This does not mean, however, that language itself can be explained or accounted for, rather that 'Language must take care of itself.' (Phil. Gram., 40)

Thus Wittgenstein speaks of intransitive viz. immediate understanding of a sentence, an understanding of what the sentence *means* or *shows*. Just as we grasp a painting insofar as we feel somehow 'familiar' in it instead of

concentrating on the individual strokes and lines etc. The familiarity lies in the fact that ‘we grasp a particular rhythm of the picture and stay with it, feel at home with it.’ (Phil. Grammar, 78f.)

Wittgenstein is so ‘captured’ by the grasping of the picture that he no longer strives for further explanation: ‘What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do not interpret it. I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present picture. When I interpret, I step from one level of thought to another.’ (Zettel, § 234)

One could also refer to his reflections regarding certainty where he writes that sometime our doubts must come to an end, i.e. that we have to arrive at a so-called ‘comfortable certainty’ [beruhigte Sicherheit] instead of a certainty that is still struggling,¹ as language cannot be built upon doubts viz. uncertainty, but must have certainty as its fundamental basis. For: ‘In the beginning was the deed’ (MS 119, 146, 21.10.1937 / C&V, 36e)

‘It belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.’ (OC, § 342)

“To understand” means something like “to take it as a whole.”
(Phil. Gram., 40)

In connection with his reflections on ‘Wohlvertrautheit’, i.e. the acquaintance or intimate knowledge at the sight of an object, Wittgenstein speaks of something ‘fitting in a mental mould’, of the ‘falling’ of a certain aspect of an object into a corresponding mould prepared for it. The mould would have been made by the previous acquaintance; thus what is seen could be compared to a prototype [Abbild] evoked by memory. This feeling of intimate knowledge, though, Wittgenstein adds, we could also have when seeing an object for the first time in our life. This thought seems reminiscent of Plato’s theory of anamnesis. However, Wittgenstein is very cautious in his reflections on the concept of memory, being all too aware of the difficulties associated with it, and which he discusses on multiple occasions. The ideas of ‘recognizing’ and ‘familiarity’ involve reflections on the use of these terms and a multitude of terms connected with them. (Cf. The Blue and the Brown Books, II, 167)

Similar to pictures or objects, words can encroach upon us by experiencing a sentence. One is inclined to say that the word falls into ‘a mould of my mind *long* prepared for it’ (BB, 170). However, as Wittgenstein states, ‘this metaphor of the word’s fitting a mould can’t allude to an experience of comparing the hollow and the solid shape before they are fitted together, but rather to an experience of seeing the solid shape accentuated by a particular background’. (BB, 170)

Insofar as in the process of reading the spoken and written words come in ‘a particular way to us’ (cf. BB, 167), so that they don’t appear just like

¹Cf. OC, § 357. Cf. also PI, § 607, where Wittgenstein speaks of a ‘calm assurance’, a ‘coming to rest of deliberation’ [ein Zur-Ruhe-Kommen der Überlegung] – as it were, ‘simply by feel’.

scribbles to us, Wittgenstein speaks of a ‘*compound* experience’ (cf. BB, 168) consisting of several elements: the experience of seeing a word as scribbles and the experience of grasping the physiognomy of the word. He would say that when reading we are enshrouded by a certain atmosphere, yet we cannot explain this atmosphere.

The same is the case when we look at the drawing of a face and grasp its expression, for instance, as being sad. Here, too, the experience of seeing the drawing consists of at least two experiences: the experience of seeing the strokes of the drawing and the experience of seeing the face; the experience of realizing a sad expression in the face would be a third experience.

Regarding and experiencing a word or object this way suggests both a sensory and cognitive approach, and thus is not entirely consistent with Wittgenstein’s remark, ‘Don’t think but look’! (PI, § 66) However, numerous examples given in his philosophical investigations demonstrate this appeal to a sensory perception of the concrete phenomena and words, similar to his demand of returning from a metaphysical use of the words to their everyday use¹ – back to the ‘rough ground’ so to speak. (PI, § 107).

Once, Wittgenstein and a friend of his’ were looking at various beds of pansies. Each bed showed a different kind. ‘What a variety of colour patterns, and each says something’, remarked the friend and Wittgenstein answered that this was exactly what he would have said, as well. (BB, 178)

All these examples demonstrate the importance of the non-verbal viz. the aspect of *showing*.

Similarly, Wittgenstein’s shift from explaining to describing in later years can be said to indicate the significance of silence – in other words, the power an impression can have as long as we do not try to explain it. In MS 110, 180 he notes: ‘Here we can only describe and say: this is human life’. Then he continues in brackets: ‘[A motto for this book: ”Do you see the moon over there? It is only half visible, and yet it is round and beautiful”]’ And he concludes: ‘An explanation, compared with the impression of what is described, is too insecure. Each explanation is but a hypothesis.’

The motto quoted above explains Wittgenstein’s great appreciation of phenomena which elude scientific explanation, and his implicit appeal to let them speak for themselves viz. to hide themselves – as *impressions*.

His ethical demand regarding the dimension of silence can be seen in the renunciation of the attempt to verbalize, when we ought to content ourselves with what we see. All we can do is to meet them in an attitude of wonder.

¹Cf. PI, § 116: ‘When philosophers use a word – ”knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition”, “name” – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language game which is its original home? – What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical use to their everyday use.’

Silence as an Attitude of Wonder and Awe toward the World and the World Beyond

The man in the state of wonder or awe is so sensitive regarding language that he ‘suffers from every language, one can say that he ought to be mute, had language not been invented by others.’¹

In this context the *ethical dimension* of silence is particularly dominant – in an attitude of ‘wonder’ as expressed in Wittgenstein’s so-called mystical remarks in the *Tractatus*, the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, as well as in the *Lecture on Ethics*. There he explicitly touches ethical and religious questions – thus the sphere of the ineffable he actually refused to speak about in philosophy. However, this silence is not the result of a denial of this sphere as something non-existent (as seen from a positivist position), but as an attitude of respect and awe, along with the conviction of never being able to grasp this realm in words or explain it by means of a scientific theory. As Wittgenstein emphasized in his discussions on ethics, value and religion with members of the *Vienna Circle*: ‘If I were told anything that was a *theory*, I would say, No, no! That does not interest me. Even if this theory were true, it would not interest me – it would not be the exact thing I was looking for. What is ethical cannot be taught. If I could explain the essence of the ethical only by means of a theory, then what is ethical would be of no value whatsoever.’ (WVC, 116f.)

Accordingly, in his *Lecture on Ethics*, he simply gave examples of his personal experience, among which ‘*I wonder at the existence of the world*’ he considered his ‘first and foremost example’ viz. his ‘experience *par excellence*’ for his subjective feeling what ethics might be.

Instead of a theory, ethics can be *shown* in one’s way of life. In his sparse reflections concerning an ethical way of life, the problem of time and eternity also plays a role – insofar as Wittgenstein emphasizes the significance of living in the present (not in time), which is to be seen as a silent attitude in *nunc stans*, so to speak – beyond time and space. Similar to Schopenhauer’s description of the pure subject of knowledge which finds itself on a higher level, beyond the secular and mundane, in aesthetic contemplation thus experiencing the only rare moments of happiness in a world of pain and sufferings, Wittgenstein writes that the happy man lives in the present moment. (Cf. NB, July 8, 1916) This is the mark of the spiritual and ethical way of life and attitude toward the world, and is decidedly different from that of the unhappy man, who is captured within the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, concentrated and dependent on his individual needs and endeavours. In the state of aesthetic contemplation, according to Schopenhauer (WWV 1977, 252f.), but also in the sense of Wittgenstein (who equates the aesthetic with the ethical, this with a mystical component), the world, so to speak, stands still. He sees the connection between ethics and aesthetics under the aspect *sub specie aeternitatis* (NB, October 7, 1916). Coined by Spinoza, Wittgenstein

¹‘Solch ein Empfindlicher (als Gereizter wie besonders als Verspürender) leidet vielmehr an jeder Sprache, man kann sagen: er müßte stumm sein, wenn andere nicht die Sprache erfunden hätten.’ (Bloch 1996, 17)

presumably took over this term from Schopenhauer, who in his description of aesthetic contemplation explicitly refers to Spinoza. According to Paul Engelmann, the term *sub specie aeternitatis* was the only philosophical term Wittgenstein often used, also in oral conversations. (Wittgenstein 2006, 152)

Silence as a Means of Expression in Art

The function of *showing* versus *saying* plays a decisive role in art, albeit not in the sense found in the *Tractatus*, where he restricts himself to the difference between meaningful and nonsensical propositions. In the realm of aesthetics, Wittgenstein explicitly emphasizes the role of *showing* in art – be it music, poetry or architecture – in order to convey what could not be accomplished by language. Moreover, he hints at the significance of gestures, mimicry etc. as means of expressing what cannot be expressed by words.

‘Do you really assume that *to say* what one sees is a more direct way of communication than to point at a pattern?’¹

Architecture, for instance, he considers to be ‘a *gesture*’ – however only if it is not a ‘functional building’ (C&V, 49e), but in the sense that architecture ‘immortalizes & glorifies something’ (C&V, 74e). In this respect I see again the connection to Wittgenstein’s emphasis of the view from eternity viz. the *view sub specie aeternitatis*, which plays an important role in his approach toward ethics and aesthetics, as well as in his attitude of silent wondering at phenomena not suited for the analysis by means of words.

The aspect of showing thus lies on the same level as the aspect of silence – in the sense of hinting at the non-verbal – where language meets its boundaries. Here it is necessary to find other ways than those made available to us by so-called ordinary language or by scientific methods, thus ways other than that of philosophical discourse, where we have to be careful not to say more than we know. ‘The difficulty in philosophy is to say no more than we know’, Wittgenstein remarks in the *Blue Book*. (BB, 46)

And in reflecting on the complicated structure in philosophy, he argues that ‘philosophy unties knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties.’ (Zettel, § 452). And he continues in brackets:

‘(As one can sometimes produce music only in one’s inward ear, and cannot whistle it, because the whistling drowns out the inner voice, so sometimes the voice of a philosophical thought is so soft that the noise of spoken words is enough to drown it and prevent it from being heard, if one is questioned and has to speak.)’ (Zettel, § 453).

¹‘Du willst doch wohl nicht annehmen, daß *Sagen*, was man sieht, eine direktere Art der Mitteilung ist als das *Zeigen* auf ein Muster?’ (Aufzeichnungen über privates Erlebnis und Sinnesdaten, in Vortrag über Ethik, 52)

Music, literature and art may take over the difficult task of expressing the ‘softness of a philosophical thought’ and thus express the inexpressible without the ‘noise of spoken words’. However, even here lies the danger of saying too much, as Wittgenstein notes: ‘In art it is hard to say anything, that is as good as: saying nothing.’ (C&V, 26e)

A poem written by the German author Ludwig Uhland, Wittgenstein considered to be an excellent example of expressing the inexpressible by not trying to express it. (Cf. Wittgenstein 2006, 24)

Georg Trakl, an Austrian poet, in particular, possessed the right ‘tone’ to silently hint at the inexpressible – a tone which Wittgenstein considered to be the ‘tone of truly genius’. (Wittgenstein 1969, 22)

Silence as Regards to Form

The high (stylistic) quality Wittgenstein demanded of genuine poetry and thus also of authentic authors and works of genius, he seems to have also applied to his own way of writing philosophy – both in the sense of distancing himself from ‘babbling’ about metaphysical questions *and* concerning his writing style. His writing style can be said to hold a strong ethical flavour in the sense of avoiding any superfluous word, in reducing language to a minimum, in restricting himself to the essential and thereby aiming at absolute clarity and transparency so that his philosophical concern becomes obvious: ‘The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts’ [...] The result of philosophy is not a number of “philosophical propositions” but to make propositions clear’. (TLP, 4.112)

Wittgenstein fulfils what Kierkegaard defined as necessary for essential acting, as the logical consequence of drawing the border between speaking essentially and merely babbling.¹

Conclusion

Language and silence are dependent on one another. Silence is the original phenomenon, and prior to the word. As Max Picard would say: the word arises from silence. (Cf. Picard 1848, 18)

One might also refer to Heidegger, who wrote: ‘The highest form of thoughtful saying is not simply to keep silent about what ought to be said, but to say it in a way that it is inherent in what is not said: the saying of thought is

¹See Kierkegaard 1922, 49: ‘Only he who knows how to keep silent essentially, knows how to speak essentially. Only he who knows how to keep silent essentially, knows how to act essentially. Secrecy is soulfulness.’ [‘Nur wer wesentlich schweigen kann, kann wesentlich reden. Nur wer wesentlich schweigen kann, kann wesentlich handeln. Verschwiegenheit ist Innerlichkeit.’]

to reduce it to silence. This kind of saying corresponds to the deepest nature of language, which originates in silence.’¹

Coming back to Bloch’s quotation about one’s sensibility toward language, I contend that these words appropriately characterise Wittgenstein’s approach toward language. However, to say that he ought to be mute, had language not been invented by others, cannot really be applied to him: For Wittgenstein, language was everything. He could not have lived without it, even though he suffered as a result of the problems arising not only from our careless use of words, but especially from not accepting its limits, thereby leading to philosophical confusions. And because he was acutely aware of these limits, he carefully maintained the distinction between what can and cannot be said – not only with regard to content, but also as concerning his writing style.

‘Style is the expression of a general human necessity’, he noted; and he continued: ‘This holds for a writing style or a building style (and any other). Style is general necessity viewed sub specie aeterni.’ (DB, 28)

To me, Wittgenstein’s remark ‘Ethics and aesthetics are one’ (TLP, 6.421) not only hints at the interdependence of ethics and aesthetics, but also at the significance of silence both inherent in ethics and in art in the light of his philosophical concern.

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¹‘Das höchste denkerische Sagen besteht darin, im Sagen das eigentlich zu Sagende nicht einfach zu verschweigen, sondern es so zu sagen, dass es im Nichtsagen genannt wird: das Sagen des Denkens ist ein Erschweigen. Dieses Sagen entspricht auch dem tiefsten Wesen der Sprache, die ihren Ursprung im Schweigen hat.’ (Heidegger: Nietzsche, Bd. 1, 471f. / See also GA 8 ‘Was heißt Denken?’)

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