

Ludwig wittgenstein's study of religious language essay sample



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Undoubtedly, one of the most significant and influential analytical philosophers of the twentieth century was Ludwig Wittgenstein who was a leading expert in the study of religious language. Early on in his philosophical career, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the main function of language is to name objects in the world. Therefore, if Wittgenstein's theory is applied, the meaning of a word is the object it stands for. Wittgenstein uses the example of a table arguing that it is meaningful because 'it stands for the mental picture that I have of a table'.

This theory became known as the 'Picture Theory of Meaning' which was constantly discussed and debated by the Vienna Circle before they developed the Verification theory. Later, Wittgenstein's views about language changed and he began to look again at how language can be meaningful, coming to a different conclusion. He realised that it was impossible for all words to be based on pictures, pointing out that language is used in a variety of different ways.

He then put forward a functional theory of language in 'Philosophical Investigations' which was published in 1953, two years after his death. 'Philosophical Investigations' showed that Wittgenstein was not concerned with whether language was true or false but with the way that it is used and the functions it performs. He coined the phrase 'Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use'.² Wittgenstein likened language to a game that we play, hence the term 'Language Games' being used to describe this theory.

One example Wittgenstein uses in 'Philosophical Investigations' draws upon the fact that 'language is meant to serve for communication between a

builder A and an assistant B. 'A' is building with building stones; there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B' has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which 'A' needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. 'A' calls them out; 'B' brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call; conceive of this as a complete primitive language. ' 3 This example allows Wittgenstein to bring together his views on language; a view that all language can be simplified. This is the first example used by Wittgenstein on the subject of 'Language Games' at the beginning of Philosophical Investigations.

It is not until ' 7' when he begins to define what he means by the concept of 'Language Games'. For Wittgenstein, when playing a game it is important to know which game you are playing and play by the rules of that game. It would not make sense to take the rules from one game and apply them to another because the rules of one game would make no sense when playing a different one. It is understandable that the participants playing the game agree on the rules of that game and if they all agree, the rules can be changed.

In the same way that there are many different games, there are also many different ways of using language. Every area of life has its own language, i. e. there is a different language for business, finances, psychology, religion etc. Wittgenstein would regard all of these as different 'Language Games' with their own participants and rules. To understand a word and use it correctly without breaking the rules, it is important to know which language

game we are playing. The meaning of the word ' language game' is determined by the ' rules' of that game.

The people involved in the language game agree on how a word is to be used. Language Games exist within all forms of human activity and life. People not participating in a particular game will not understand the language of that game. If people do not understand the language, then it will seem to them to be meaningless. Every ' language' is therefore a form of life, a game to be played out according to the self-contained rules.

Wittgenstein applied this idea to philosophy and concluded that language problems are created by not realising that there are different language games.

For example, problems with using the word ' soul' are caused by regarding it as a physical object. Wittgenstein argued that ' all of the problems with the word soul would disappear if we realised that the ' physical object' game simply does not apply to the soul. ' 4 In many different books, Wittgenstein's develops his arguments about the ' soul' and ' self' and tries to relate their meaning to the principles involved with religious belief which is what he began to work on next. Wittgenstein identified that religious belief has its own language game.

The only way that religious language can be understood is by playing the religious language game. Only an insider, a believer, can play this game and so only they can understand it. A non-believer will find religious language meaningless because they are not in the religious language " game. "

However, an outsider cannot claim that the language used in a particular 'game' is meaningless just because it does not make sense to them.

The philosopher D. Z. Phillips supports Wittgenstein's views when he argues that 'the religious language game is independent of other games.'⁵ This implies that religious language cannot be criticised by someone outside the game. They do not know the rules and when religious language is discussed, we no longer become interested in testing whether religious claims are true or not; rather we are interested in how religious words are used i. e. what function they have. Braithwaite adds weight to the argument when he states that 'this function could be to promote particular behaviour.'⁶ However, Wittgenstein's theory is not immune to criticism. It is very difficult to see how the religious 'language game' could be totally isolated from any other.

Religious believers are involved in other language games because they are involved in other aspects of life. This means that religious language is not totally isolated as there must be common ground between religious language and other 'language games.'⁷ This common ground means that non believers are able to understand religious language and decide whether it has meaning for them or not. Another criticism which has been raised by scholars is that if the 'religious language games' theory is correct, then it would be impossible for a meaningful discussion to take place between a theist and an atheist as to the existence of God.

An example of this is presented by Peter Donovan who states that 'when asked "Does God exist?" the believers answer, "Yes" would be as valid as an atheists "No", as they will be playing by the rules of their own 'language

game. ' 7 However, many believers feel that questions like ' Does God exist? ' can be answered as they believe that God does exist and is not dependent on whose language game we are playing. Religious believers could claim that many religious assertions are true for everyone, not just the participant in the game.

An example given by most scholars is that ' God will reward the good and punish the bad' which is as true for the ' atheist' outsider as it is for the believer playing the religious language game. Ultimately, the main criticism held by many philosophers is that non-believers might be able to understand religious language better than believers do as they have a more objective view of the use of religious language.

On the other hand, it is easy to blind ourselves from the strengths of Wittgenstein's theory of language ' being a game that we play. Wittgenstein has showed us religious language can no longer be criticised just because it cannot be verified or falsified by empirical evidence. The religious language game does not play by these rules and trying to verify or falsify it shows a misunderstanding of the rules. Wittgenstein's principle highlighted the fact that some games are more complex than others. The religious language game is a complex one, using terms which have little or no parallel in any other form of life. It can also be noted that the theory allows the scientist and the believer to communicate on their own terms, without fear of contradiction.

The scientist can talk about the world in terms of physical and biological laws, and the believer can talk about the beauty and the order in the world in

terms of God. So in conclusion, Wittgenstein presents us with a very different way in which to view language. It appears to be a rather obscure way to view language as a ' game' that can be played with and used to experiment with. In many respects, Wittgenstein is trying to demonstrate that language can be used in many different ways in many different areas of society.

Religiously, it can be noted that a believer would agree that it is difficult to talk about God without any empirical evidence. The word ' God' refers to a being beyond human experience and understanding. Any discussion of God is limited, but they would also argue that religious language does have meaning and purpose. Wittgenstein's ideas ask us to think in terms of ' Language Games. ' if we ask how our language games are taught and how they are used, we will begin to understand language better and realise that language, like any ordinary games, has rules and regulations that need to be followed to ultimately gain understanding.