



**Comparative Analysis of the Differences and Relations between Early
and Later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein**

R. P. C. H. Perera

College of Philosophy, Liaoning University, People's Republic of China

Article Info

Article History:

Received 15 Oct 2024

Accepted 30 Sep 2025

Issue Published Online

01 January 2026

Key Words:

Language

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Philosophical Investigation

Reality

Tractatus Logico

Philosophicus

ABSTRACT

Many scholars regard Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical contributions as having left an indelible mark on 20th-century thought, particularly through his exploration of language's role in human understanding. His philosophical focus centred on the analysis of language, and his intellectual journey can be understood through two distinct phases: the early philosophy represented by "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" and the later philosophy articulated in "Philosophical Investigations." In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein argued that philosophical issues arise from misinterpreting the logical structure of language, and he sought to clarify this structure. Conversely, in his later writing, especially Philosophical Investigation, he maintained his focus on logic and language but adopted a more practical and less formal method in addressing philosophical questions. Here, the main objective of this research is to explain both early and later Wittgenstein philosophy, mainly concerning the differences and relations of the two views. Several methodologies, such as textual, comparative analysis, critical and analytical methods, were used to analyse and develop this paper. This research study mainly used primary and secondary sources as they are available. Based on the textual and comparative analysis conducted in this study, it can be concluded that Wittgenstein articulated two distinct philosophical perspectives. He himself noted that he wished to publish his later work, particularly Philosophical Investigations, alongside the Tractatus to highlight the contrast between his earlier and later ideas. Although he frequently critiqued his initial standpoint, it would be inaccurate to claim a complete departure, as certain elements of continuity remain between the two phases of his thought. Throughout both his early and later philosophical works, Wittgenstein consistently engaged in clarifying propositions and aimed to prevent us from being misled by the deceptive nature of everyday language.

*Corresponding author

E-mail address:

chamm2233@gmail.com



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7713-3707>

Journal homepage:

<http://journals.sjp.ac.lk/index.php/vjhss>

<http://doi.org/10.31357/fhss/vjhss.v11i01.04>

VJHSS (2026), Vol. 11 (01),
pp. 26-38

ISSN 1391-1937/ISSN
2651-0367 (Online)



Faculty of Humanities and
Social Sciences 2026

1. Introduction

In general, when we consider the history of Western philosophy, there are four time periods that are named and classified by reviewers. Contemporary philosophy is the last period that also consists of various philosophical movements. During this time of modern philosophy, Georg Hegel emphasized idealism, which is based on his philosophy. Thus, Hegel turned philosophy into a logical extreme. To him, the world can be formed according to idealism (West, 1991). Likewise, he used dialectic theory to explore his philosophy. Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore were against Hegel's idealism. Then, contemporary philosophy began. In fact, it is difficult to ascertain when contemporary philosophy began. Nevertheless, this philosophical trend emerged around the late 19th and early 20th centuries (O'Connor, 1964).

In the realm of contemporary philosophy, numerous prominent thinkers have made significant contributions, including figures like Frege, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, and A.J. Ayer, among others. These philosophers introduced new philosophical trends that can be named as follows: analytic and linguistic philosophy, positivism, Marxism, and existentialism (West, 1991). Here, both analytic and linguistic philosophy are considered for this research paper. An analysis of Wittgenstein and his philosophy is not possible without explaining both analytic and linguistic philosophy, which we should focus on briefly.

Since the early twentieth century, philosophy has been radically changing. Bertrand Russell was the pioneering figure in contemporary philosophy to formulate, apply, and defend language analysis as the appropriate approach to philosophical inquiry (Cavell, 1971). He introduced the new philosophical concept of logical atomism, which was shaped by and based on analytic philosophy. There cannot be seen certain assumptions about

nature, duty, and scope of analytic philosophy. However, to some reviewers, the analytic philosophy began because of the necessity of that time period. At that time, the duty of philosophy was connected with language. When Moore and Russell presented their alternative to Idealism, they used a linguistic idiom, mainly based on their arguments on the "meanings" of terms and propositions (Cavell, 1971). Russell's suggestion seems to be that language ought to be treated as a complex and formal system. In addition, he seems to think that the best and only way of overcoming the obstacles presented by any given language is to reformulate the propositions in an appropriate idealized language; a language in which his true form takes on the logical way of looking at things (Kalansooriya, 2008). Due to this emphasis on language, analytic philosophy came to be broad, though perhaps inaccurately, perceived as a shift towards treating language itself as the primary subject of philosophical study, accompanied by a methodological focus on linguistic analysis. According to the traditional perspective, analytic philosophy is said to have commenced with this 'linguistic turn,' leaving a significant imprint on the history of Western philosophy. The idea of viewing philosophy through a linguistic lens was considered a groundbreaking development, notably starting with G.E. Moore. Consequently, analytic philosophy is often credited with sparking a large-scale philosophical revolution, challenging not only British Idealism but also the foundations of traditional philosophical thought as a whole. (Kalansooriya, 1997).

The word "analytic" has not denoted a certain meaning throughout the history of philosophy. Ordinarily it implies that analytic philosophy analyses the concepts of a conceptual form and classifies that analytically (*Analytic Philosophy | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d.). Thus, analytic philosophers treat philosophy as a discipline similar to mathematics, logic, or other formal sciences, focusing on the

clarification of statements within these fields. In contrast, areas like religion, ethics, and aesthetics are seen as differing in nature from this philosophical task. As a result, analytic philosophy seeks to establish a new direction in the philosophical landscape, aiming to address philosophical problems and deepen our understanding of the world (reality).

Among the mentioned philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein was influenced to turn philosophy into a new way (new movement), and he is the most important thinker of 20th-century European thought (Hülster, 2018). He introduced a new philosophical approach to solving the problems of philosophy. To the thinkers, his intellectual journey can be understood through two distinct phases: the early philosophy represented by "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" and the later philosophy articulated in "Philosophical Investigations." The Tractatus discusses the teachings or linguistic philosophy of early Wittgenstein. On the other hand, in the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein has advocated a kind of theory of meaning which is called the use theory of meaning. Wittgenstein's early philosophy, particularly in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, is deeply influenced by the logical systems developed by Frege and Russell. He admired their contributions to formal logic but was also critical of certain aspects, especially regarding the treatment of identity and the use of the identity sign "=". Wittgenstein sought to create a new "correct" concept-script that would overcome what he saw as the flaws in their approaches. His aim was to design a notation governed strictly by logical grammar and syntax, reducing unnecessary symbols to achieve greater logical precision and clarity (Schirn, 2024).

Here, the main objective of this research paper is to examine the fundamental differences and underlying connections between these two works, focusing on how Wittgenstein's perspectives on language evolved from a rigid logical structure to a more fluid, use-based approach. Further, this

will stimulate researchers to investigate language, logic, and mathematics in relation to understanding reality. Thus, to achieve the above objectives, this research is focused on the question of how far Ludwig Wittgenstein distinguishes his early thoughts from his later conception of reality through language analysis. Other than that, this research addresses the following key questions such as: what are the fundamental philosophical themes and concepts in Wittgenstein's early work, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus?, what are the major conceptual differences between Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning and his later use theory of meaning?, and what are the implications of Wittgenstein's philosophical evolution for understanding the nature of language, meaning, and philosophical inquiry itself?.

2. Materials and Methods

The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus discusses the teachings or linguistic philosophy of early Wittgenstein, which emphasises key ideas such as logical atomism, the picture theory of language, analytical and synthetic distinction, use of formal logic, elimination of metaphysics, and the role of philosophy. Conversely, in Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein proposed what is known as the 'use theory of meaning,' which highlights central concepts such as ordinary language philosophy, language games, forms of life, an opposition to rigid theoretical frameworks, family resemblance, the critique of private language, and the practical, context-dependent nature of meaning in language.

This study employs qualitative, analytical, and comparative research design, focusing on a textual analysis of primary philosophical works by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The core objective is to critically examine the differences and interrelations between Wittgenstein's early philosophy, represented by his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, and his later philosophy, articulated in Philosophical Investigations.

This study adopts a comparative analysis method, examining primary texts such as Wittgenstein's early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and his later work *Philosophical Investigations*. Textual analysis will be conducted to identify the different approaches, philosophical principles, and perspectives on language analysis. By identifying key passages from both texts, this study aims to highlight their inherent resonances and provide insights into how far they have been related and different according to philosophical stance. In addition, the methodology includes an examination of scholarly interpretations and commentaries on both early and later Wittgenstein's viewpoints. A comparative analysis method is applied to explore the evolution of Wittgenstein's thoughts on language, meaning, and the nature of philosophical problems.

In addition to primary texts, the research integrates secondary literature, including scholarly articles, books, and critical commentaries, to provide contextual understanding and diverse perspectives on Wittgenstein's philosophy. Discussions with subject-matter experts and academic resources further enhance the depth of analysis. The study is limited to a conceptual analysis of written texts and does not involve empirical or experimental data. Interpretative bias is mitigated by cross-referencing multiple academic sources, but subjectivity in philosophical interpretation remains a methodological challenge.

3. Results and Discussion

Understanding Ludwig Wittgenstein and his Philosophical Background

Ludwig Wittgenstein is regarded as one of the most impactful philosophers of the 20th century, and some even consider him the most significant philosopher after Immanuel Kant. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was born on April 26, 1889, in Vienna, Austria, as the youngest child in a

wealthy yet domineering family led by a steel industrialist with a strong cultural background. Tragically, three of his four brothers died by suicide, and Wittgenstein himself frequently battled suicidal thoughts. In his early years, he considered pursuing engineering, leading him to study mechanical engineering in Berlin. In 1908, he moved to Manchester, England, to engage in aeronautical research. Although he initially focused on aeronautical engineering, he soon shifted his attention to mathematics, which eventually sparked his deep interest in logic and philosophical inquiries concerning the foundations of mathematics.

Incidentally, what happened was that since he had become interested in the foundation of mathematics, Gottlob Frege, who was the most prominent logician and mathematician, was also aiming at something of a similar sort. He was also interested in the logical foundations of mathematics, and by that time, Frege had already published many important papers in this area, which Wittgenstein was aware of (Hacker, 1999). Upon meeting Frege, Wittgenstein was advised to connect with Bertrand Russell in Cambridge. He later went there and collaborated with Russell and G. E. Moore, both of whom were key figures in the development of analytic philosophy and pioneers of 20th-century British philosophical thought (Mustafaev, 2024). In 1914, with the outbreak of World War I, Wittgenstein enlisted in the Austrian army.

In 1922, with a foreword by Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein published *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), which remained the only book he released during his lifetime. After completing this work, Wittgenstein was convinced that he had addressed and resolved all philosophical problems, leading him to withdraw from the field of philosophy (Kalansooriya, 2008). Remarkably, he believed that writing this single book was sufficient to settle the core issues of philosophy, leaving him with no reason to further pursue the subject. So, he turned away from philosophy and started working as

a primary school teacher in a rural part of Austria. There, he is reported not to have been very fond of students, as he was a very strict and tough teacher. He was back in Cambridge and back onto philosophy, so there were still more interesting things about philosophy for him to discover in 1929. This realization ultimately brought him back to Cambridge, where he was appointed as a professor of philosophy in 1939. By 1947, he had resigned his professorship to focus on writing. He died of prostate cancer in Cambridge in April 1951 and didn't publish anything other than this first book during his lifetime. Wittgenstein's writings were collected, edited, and published posthumously by his disciples and many friends.

Early Wittgenstein (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus)

Wittgenstein's early philosophical writings were largely shaped by the ideas of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and significantly influenced by his mentors Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege (Hacker, 1999), with whom he developed a personal friendship. This phase of his thought culminated in the publication of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), the only philosophical book he released during his lifetime. In this work, Wittgenstein claimed to have resolved all the fundamental philosophical issues, a perspective that resonated strongly with the anti-metaphysical stance of the logical positivists (Kalansooriya, 2008). The *Tractatus* primarily addresses the notion that philosophical problems stem from misconceptions about the logical structure of language, aiming to reveal the underlying logic behind such issues. In contrast, his later major work, *Philosophical Investigations*, while still concerned with logic and language, adopts a markedly different, more practical approach to addressing philosophical questions (Wittgenstein, Ludwig | Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, n.d.). This later period contributed to the rise of ordinary

language philosophy. Although this school of thought has seen a decline in popularity, Wittgenstein's analyses of rule-following and the critique of private language remain highly influential, extending his impact beyond philosophy into various other academic disciplines.

In the preface of the book, Wittgenstein remarks that its significance lies in two aspects: first, "those thoughts are expressed in it" and second, "that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved" (Wittgenstein, 1922, preface). The issues he refers to are those central to philosophy, shaped largely by the contributions of Frege, Russell, and perhaps also influenced by Schopenhauer. At the end of the book, Wittgenstein emphasized that, "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes themes nonsensical" (Wittgenstein, 1922, Proposition 6.54). The *Tractatus* is primarily recognized in philosophy for its explanation that reality is depicted through the analysis of language, rather than addressing ethical questions directly. The work is structured into seven groups of numbered propositions. For example, Proposition 1.2 comments on Proposition 1, while Proposition 1.21 elaborates on Proposition 1.2, and so forth. The final, seventh group consists of a single, well-known proposition: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1922, Proposition 7).

Below are several key and representative propositions from the *Tractatus*:

- 1: Everything that is the case constitutes the world.
- 4.01: A proposition functions as a picture representing reality.
- 4.0312: My fundamental idea is that 'logical constants' do not serve as representations; there can be no representations of the logic underlying facts.

- 4.121: Propositions reveal the logical structure of reality; they make it visible.
- 4.1212: What can be demonstrated cannot be expressed in words.
- 4.5: The essential structure of a proposition is to depict how things stand.
- 5.43: The logic inherent in all propositions communicates the same content—nothing.
- 5.4711: To capture the essence of a proposition is to capture the essence of all descriptions, and consequently, the essence of the world.
- 5.6: The boundaries of my language signify the boundaries of my world. In this and other parts of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein appears to assert this as the essence of the world (Wittgenstein, 1922).

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein explores a profound question: how is it that humans are able to communicate complex ideas with one another? His groundbreaking answer is that language enables us to form mental pictures of how things stand in the world. According to this view, the universe comprises everything that can be meaningfully expressed; it is the totality of facts or actual states of affairs.

Wittgenstein argued that we can construct a representation of the world through the framework of first-order predicate logic, where atomic facts are depicted as atomic propositions, and these are connected using logical operators, such as symbolic notations and logical propositions, to mirror reality (Wittgenstein, 2013).

Further, one key innovation was his proposal to eliminate the identity sign "=" from logical expressions (Schirn, 2024). Instead, he argued that identity should be represented through the identity of signs themselves: if two expressions are identical, they refer to the same object, and if they are different, they refer to different objects. This move was part

of his broader goal to refine the expressive power of logical language while adhering to principles of notational economy.

However, Wittgenstein's departure from the conventional understanding of identity was not without philosophical difficulties. He reframed identity as a non-relational feature, not a relation between objects, but something inherent in the sign's structure. His treatment was influenced by his adherence to the idea that certain things in logic can be shown but not said, an idea that traces back to Fregean and Russellian concerns with logical form and meaning.

Despite its originality, Wittgenstein's approach faced several criticisms, particularly regarding how sentences involving identity (e.g., "a = a" or "a = b") could be reformulated without the identity sign. His elimination of "=" led to complex debates about whether identity statements could be fully expressed in his revised notation and whether they retained their logical significance (Schirn, 2024). These concerns reflect a tension between Wittgenstein's pursuit of a purified logical language and the practical necessities of expressing logical relationships like identity.

Later Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations)

In his early years, Wittgenstein promoted the philosophical stance presented in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which remained the only book he published during his lifetime. Following its publication, Wittgenstein believed he had resolved all philosophical problems, leading him to step away from philosophy, seeing no further purpose in continuing his work in the field. He took up a position as a schoolteacher but eventually returned to philosophy and to Cambridge after nearly 16 years. This marked the beginning of his second philosophical phase, during which he extensively explored a variety of subjects. However, none of his writings from this later period were

published while he was alive (Kalansooriya, 2008). Even his lecture notes, later known as the Blue Book and the Brown Book, were only released posthumously.

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is widely regarded as the most significant contribution from his later philosophical period. In this work, he poses a reflective question: "What is your aim in philosophy, to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle" (Wittgenstein, 1958, §309). Through this metaphor, Wittgenstein conveys his philosophical mission in his later years to guide people out of the confusion and entanglements they face, much like a trapped fly seeking an exit. He illustrates how humans often find themselves in states of discomfort and confusion, stemming from misunderstandings and metaphysical puzzles. Wittgenstein argues that these perplexities arise due to the misuse of language, particularly when it is detached from its ordinary, everyday context. When language is used incorrectly or abstractly, it leads to philosophical problems (Wittgenstein, 1958). Wittgenstein's role, as he sees it, is to help people recognize these misapplications and to 'show the fly the way out of the bottle,' thus freeing them from unnecessary confusion.

In his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein presents a novel and intriguing perspective on language, which marks a significant departure from the views he held in his earlier writings. He distances himself from the 'picture theory of language' introduced in the *Tractatus*, directly challenging the central idea that language mirrors reality through a singular logical structure. Whereas the *Tractatus* was deeply concerned with uncovering the essence of language by identifying its underlying logic, suggesting that all languages share a common logical form, Wittgenstein later rejected this notion (Wittgenstein, 1958). In *Philosophical Investigations*, he argues that language does not possess a single essence; instead, it fulfils

a variety of roles and functions within human activities. Language is not confined to representing facts but is woven into diverse forms of life and practices (Conant, 1998). Consequently, his understanding of meaning evolves, moving away from the earlier picture theory towards a 'use theory of meaning,' where the significance of an expression is determined by how it is used in contexts. Meaning arises not from a static relationship between propositions and facts, but from the dynamic and multifaceted ways language is employed in our everyday interactions.

In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein introduced the compelling concept of 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 1958), where he likens the use of language to playing a game. Just as games like cricket, volleyball, and football are governed by specific rules that distinguish one from the other, language also operates within frameworks of rules depending on the context. In a conversation, speakers are much like players in a game, each performing particular actions guided by certain rules to make meaningful moves. Similarly, in real-life situations, participants in a dialogue follow implicit rules that shape how language is used and understood. Wittgenstein uses the idea of language games to emphasize the active and varied nature of language as it functions within different activities and life contexts.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein emphasizes how deeply our understanding of ourselves is shaped by the language inherited from others, a language that has evolved collectively over centuries, long before our own existence. For example, when I find myself overwhelmed and anxious on a Sunday afternoon, anticipating the demands of the coming week, my ability to recognize and articulate this private emotional state becomes significantly easier if I can access words that have been refined over time (Inquirer, 2018). Terms like "angst," introduced by Kierkegaard in 19th-century Copenhagen, as well as words such as "nostalgia," "melancholy," or "ambivalence,"

allow us to label and express subtle aspects of our inner experiences. These words act as shared linguistic tools that enable us to describe deeply personal feelings. Hence, the breadth and depth of language we are exposed to play a vital role in enhancing self-awareness. Engaging with literature and reading a wide range of books equips us with the vocabulary necessary to better understand and define who we are (Inquirer, 2018).

Philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein, are distinct from empirical problems. They are not resolved through experimentation or observation but by examining how language operates and becoming aware of its functioning. Unlike empirical issues, which are addressed by following a logical process to find concrete solutions, philosophical problems require a different approach (Cavell, 1971). Wittgenstein believed that many philosophical confusions dissolve once we clearly understand the way ordinary language works in everyday contexts (Kalansooriya, 2008). Therefore, the key lies in recognizing how language is used in real-life situations. In philosophy, our task is not to offer explanations but to provide clear descriptions. This perspective on language becomes a central focus in Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Compare the differences and relations of early and later Wittgenstein's philosophy.

As mentioned in the earlier topic, there can be seen two famous philosophical positions expressed by Austrian British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein as early and later philosophy. Both early and later viewpoints were primarily concerned with the philosophy of language, which started from the works of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in 20th-century British philosophy. However, the differences and relations between early and later Wittgenstein viewpoints can be seen as follows with regard to his language philosophy.

Wittgenstein's early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, holds a significant place in the philosophy of language. One of its central themes is the 'picture theory of language' or 'picture theory of meaning' (Wittgenstein, 2013), which plays a crucial role in understanding how his early ideas contrast with, and relate to, his later philosophical developments. Wittgenstein formulated this theory to explore how humans communicate ideas through language, and how thoughts can be conveyed meaningfully from one person to another. By engaging with concepts like logical positivism and logical atomism, he aimed to uncover how language represents reality and how it serves to describe facts about the world (Hülster, 2018).

Wittgenstein was deeply concerned with understanding the connection between language and the world, particularly focusing on how this relationship is expressed through logic and mathematics. To address this, he developed a metaphysical framework aimed at clarifying this link (Hülster, 2018). The central claim of the *Tractatus* is that the structure of language is composed of complex propositions, which are built from atomic propositions that include essential names and logical operators (Wittgenstein, 2013). Language, in his view, functions as a tool for describing simple objects that exist within states of affairs. These complex propositions create a 'pictorial' relationship between language and the world. In this sense, words operate as pictures of reality, enabling us to describe it accurately. Put simply, communication happens through language, but more precisely through the transmission of mental images formed by words. Wittgenstein argued that the structure of thought and the external world are interconnected through the principles of logic, and that the most effective way to understand reality is by employing symbols that model or represent it (Fann, 2015).

Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning was influenced by a news report he read about a courtroom case in Paris, where toys or

miniature models were employed to reconstruct and comprehend the details of a car accident. Toy cars and doors served as stand-ins for actual events that might have taken place. It was necessary to clearly specify which toy represented which object, as well as to define how the relationships between the toys corresponded to the relationships between the real objects involved.

Wittgenstein observed that to better understand the world, we require pictorial representations that depict what has occurred or could occur. More specifically, he believed that the logical structure of these pictures mirrors the structure of language, meaning the way elements are combined in a picture corresponds to how objects are combined in a state of affairs, which language can describe (Kalansooriya, 2008). He concluded that without a logical structure connecting simple signs and symbols to real-world situations, such signs lack meaning. Consequently, only those propositions that accurately represent reality hold significance and truth. Propositions that fail to depict reality are considered false or, as Wittgenstein termed them, nonsense (Wittgenstein, 2013). From this perspective, all philosophical problems are essentially problems of language, and metaphysics is no exception. This viewpoint reflects the influence of logical atomism and the impact of thinkers like Bertrand Russell on Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning (Vidanagama, 1993).

Wittgenstein later criticized the central claim of his own picture theory of meaning, believing it presented an overly simplistic view of the relationship between thought, language, and the world. He specifically rejected the foundational idea of logical atomism, particularly the notion that words derive their meaning solely by representing objects (Kalansooriya, 2008). Wittgenstein came to understand that propositions and the states of affairs they describe do not inherently share a universal logical form, as

he had once asserted. Instead, he recognized that meanings are not fixed but are shaped by cultural contexts and the practical functions words serve within those cultures. Meaning, therefore, arises from how language is used in specific situations rather than from a universal logical structure. He critiqued the traditional philosophical quest for definitions and essence, proposing instead that understanding emerges from observing how words are employed within specific social practices and forms of life (Hardman, 2025). A clear example is the well-known duck-rabbit illusion (see figure 01); how we describe what we see is not determined by objective logic but by how language operates within our cultural and perceptual frameworks.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously stated, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein, 1922, Proposition 7), applying this principle to numerous traditional philosophical questions, particularly those involving metaphysical definitions. Questions like "What is love?" or "What is pain?" cannot be precisely answered because they stem from issues within language rather than genuine philosophical problems.

This perspective also offered Wittgenstein a response to existentialist inquiries. He maintained the concept of 'pictoriality' as referring to the internal relationship between propositions, language, and reality when relevant, but ultimately dismissed the broader picture theory of language as presented in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* beyond this limited application (Vidanagama, 1993).

During a conversation on a train, Wittgenstein engaged an economist, which led to a pivotal shift in his thinking. Wittgenstein emphasized that a proposition and the reality it describes must share the same logical structure or logical multiplicity. In response, the economist made a Neapolitan gesture, brushing the underside of

his chin with his fingertips, a sign typically expressing disdain or dismissal. Wittgenstein then asked what the logical form of that gesture was. This interaction made it clear that the gesture, like many forms of communication, does not possess a universal logical form that can be broken down into

independent, atomic elements of meaning, as logical atomism suggests. It revealed to Wittgenstein that not every meaningful expression can be reduced to a proposition with a simple logical structure (Vidanagama, 1993).

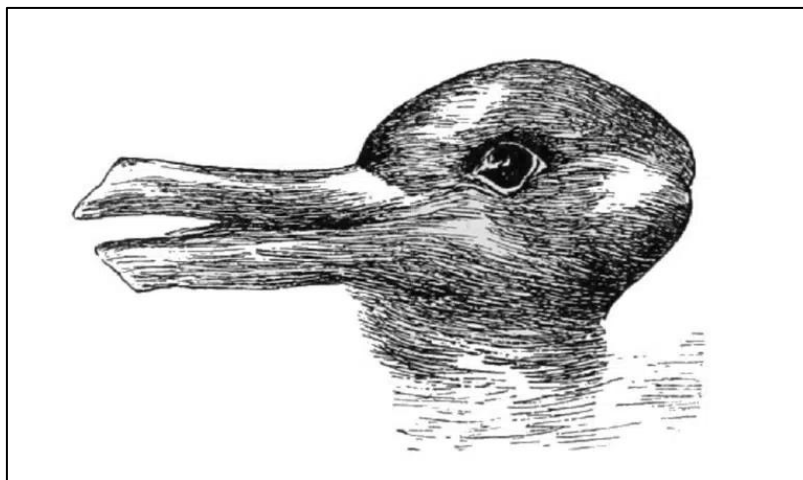


Figure 1. Understanding Wittgenstein's Duck-Rabbit (McGinn, 2020).

This realization eventually led Wittgenstein to compose *Philosophical Investigations*, a work that reflects his later philosophical views, where he discards many of the concepts associated with logical atomism that he had supported in his earlier book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In this later phase, Wittgenstein introduced ideas such as language games, which revolve around notions of perspectivism and the critique of private language, marking a clear departure from his initial philosophical stance (Fann, 2015). Wittgenstein proposed that the concept of language games provides a framework for understanding how religious language can possess meaning. This approach is non-cognitive, suggesting that subjective statements can still be meaningful, even if there is no universally agreed-upon interpretation.

Wittgenstein argued that the ambiguity of language is not a flaw needing correction, but rather a source of its expressive depth. Trying

to fix a word's meaning by rigidly connecting it to a specific object in the world is misleading. Instead, a word's meaning emerges from the informal rules and patterns that guide its use in everyday life (Vidanagama, 1993). For Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is determined by how it functions within language. He emphasized the vast diversity of contexts in which words are used, all of which are valid. Therefore, it is unnecessary to search for a single, fixed essence of meaning through methods like verification or falsification. Instead, we should understand language as a network of overlapping and intersecting similarities, a web where meaning is fluid and context-dependent (Fann, 2015).

Language can be compared to a game; when we actively participate in the game, we naturally grasp the rules that govern how language operates within that context. However, if we are engaged in a different game, we will interpret and understand

words according to the rules of that new context, leading to a different comprehension of their meaning (Conant, 1998). It is not legitimate to criticize the rules of one game from the perspective of another, for instance, if we were to challenge the rugby bet player for tackling their opponent, because we do not do it when we play chess. This would be illegitimate criticism. We have to play chess by the rules of chess, and we may only challenge the players based on the rules of the game.

Similarly, when it comes to language use, if a religious individual expresses ideas in a certain manner, it is inappropriate to judge or critique that language using the linguistic standards of science, such as falsification. The religious person operates within a different 'form of life,' following distinct rules that apply to their particular language game. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of "language games" to describe smaller units of language use that are simpler than an entire language system. These language games involve both words and the activities in which they are embedded, connected through what he termed a family resemblance. (Wittgenstein, 1958). Wittgenstein aimed to illustrate that language derives its meaning from the activities or 'forms of life' in which it is used. A 'form of life' refers to the environment or context in which individuals live and act. The term language game refers to specific ways language is employed for particular functions within the broader framework of language. The totality of language is thus made up of many interrelated language games that do not have rigid boundaries but overlap and merge with one another, similar to how family traits resemble each other without being identical (Conant, 1998). By comparing language to games, Wittgenstein did not intend to trivialize language, but to emphasize that words can be used in various legitimate ways, influenced by the context or form of life a person belongs to. (Wittgenstein, 1958). But are not necessarily the same; the way that words are used is

governed by the particular form of life or game that the individual is part of. For instance, scientists may be involved in one form of life, whereas religious mystics may be involved in another. When each speaks of truth, they may mean the word in a related way but not in the same way exactly.

According to Wittgenstein, the rules that dictate how language is used are not inherently correct or incorrect, nor are they true or false. Instead, their value lies in how effectively they function within specific contexts. Different communities create their own ways of speaking that suit their particular needs, whether they are rap musicians, accountants, politicians, or students. Each group engages in its own language game, where language operates within a system of shared and accepted rules. Even these systems themselves are forms of language games, played by mutual agreement within their respective communities (Wittgenstein, 1958).

This does not imply that individuals can arbitrarily assign meanings to words as they wish. Language is inherently a communal activity, not a private endeavour. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein argued against the possibility of a private language (Thomson, 1964). He illustrated this with the example of pain: while the sensation of pain is a private experience, our understanding of the word 'pain' comes from learning it within a social context. Others cannot directly access my personal sensations, yet the meaning of the word is taught through shared language practices. It is not feasible to establish the meaning of a word solely based on an internal, private experience. Therefore, words like 'pain' are connected to external, observable behaviours and reactions. The concept of pain becomes meaningful through the actions it prompts, such as wincing or groaning, which are visible to others (Wittgenstein, 1958). This makes language a public phenomenon, grounded in shared human behaviours rather than isolated inner experiences. However, the way these words

are used depends on the particular 'form of life' or context in which people interact.

In Wittgenstein's later philosophy, he described the role of philosophy as "to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle" (Wittgenstein, 1958, §309). For him, the fly bottle symbolized the entrapments of language, a theme that concerned him throughout both his early and later philosophical work. Thus, while his early philosophy pursued an idealized logical purity, aiming to express the essence of language through a strict formal system, his later philosophy acknowledges the fluidity and pragmatic functions of language in real-life interactions (Hardman, 2025). Although he developed two distinct perspectives during these periods, Wittgenstein once remarked that he considered publishing *Philosophical Investigations* alongside *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to highlight how much his later ideas diverged from his earlier views. Despite the frequent critiques of his early positions, it would be inaccurate to suggest that his later philosophy was a complete departure; certain continuities remain. Notably, across both phases of his thought, Wittgenstein consistently pursued the clarification of propositions and sought to prevent the confusion caused by the deceptive nature of ordinary language.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical contributions mark a significant turning point in the history of Western philosophy, particularly in the analysis of language. His early work in the "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" sought to resolve philosophical problems through the logical clarification of language, emphasizing a rigid structural relationship between language and reality. However, his later work in "*Philosophical Investigations*" introduced a more dynamic and context-sensitive approach, where meaning arises from language's practical use within forms of life. Despite the apparent contrast between these

two phases, Wittgenstein's philosophical journey reveals a persistent commitment to dissolving philosophical confusions caused by linguistic misinterpretations. His shift from a formalist to a pragmatic view of language underscores the evolving understanding of how language functions in human life. By critically examining both his early and later works, this study highlights that Wittgenstein's philosophy, though transformed in method, remains unified in its purpose: to clarify the workings of language and liberate philosophy from its self-imposed dilemmas.

Acknowledgements: It is my sincere pleasure to express gratitude and thanks for the assistance I received from Prof. Charitha Herath, Prof. M. S. M. Anes, Prof. Desmond Mallikarachchi, and Dr. Saman Pushpakumara for their immeasurable assistance and encouragement.

5. References

- Analytic Philosophy* | *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://iep.utm.edu/analytic-philosophy/>
- Cavell, S. (1971). The availability of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In *Philosophy and Linguistic* (pp. 166–189). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15426-5_10
- Conant, J. (1998). Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use. *Philosophical Investigations*, 21(3), 222–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9205.00069>
- Fann, K. T. (2015). *Wittgenstein's conception of Philosophy*. Partridge Publishing Singapore.
- Truemper, I. & Truemper, K. (Ed.). (2018). *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*

- Logico-Philosophicus*. USA: Leibniz Company.
- Hacker, P. M. S. (1999). Frege and the later Wittgenstein. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 44, 223–247. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1358246100006743>
- Hardman, D. (2025). Wittgenstein's method is simple: 'Describe language-games!' Philosophical Investigations. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.12450>
- Inquirer, L. S. P. D. S. (2018, August 30). *LANGUAGE – WITTGENSTEIN. SKEPTICAL INQUIRY*. <https://skepticalinquirer.wordpress.com/2018/08/28/language-wittgenstein/>
- Kalansooriya, A. D. P. (1997). *Bertrand Russell ha Samakalina Darshanaya (Sinhala)*. Warakapola: Ariya Publisher.
- Kalansooriya, A. D. P. (2008). *Batahira Vishlashi Darshanaya (Sinhala)*. Warakapola: Ariya Publisher.
- Lecture supplement on Wittgenste.* (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://faculty.fiu.edu/~hauptli/Wittgenstein'sTractatus.html>
- McGinn, C. (2020, September 26). Understanding Ludwig Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. *Simply Charly*. <https://www.simplycharly.com/articles/understanding-ludwig-wittgenstein-duck-rabbit/>
- Mustafaev, A. (2024). Philosophical-Theoretical and Methodological Aspects of Studying Ludwig Wittgenstein's Life and Works. In *Central Asian Journal of Education and Innovation* (Vol. 3, Number 5, pp. 225–232). Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11409874>
- O'Connor, D. J. (1964). A critical history of Western philosophy. In *Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08051-9>
- Schirn, M. (2024). On Wittgenstein's Dispensation with “ = ” in the Tractatus and its Philosophical Background. A Critical Study. *Acta Analytica*, 39(3), 415–437. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-023-00581-0>
- Thomson, J. J. (1964). *Private Languages*. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1(1), 20–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009116>
- Vidanagama, Kulasena. (1993). *Samakalina Bashamaya Darshanaya saha Ludwig Wittgenstein (Sinhala)*. Narammala: Author Publication.
- West, D. (1991). *An introduction to Continental philosophy*. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL999952M/An_introduction_to_continental_philosophy
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://iep.utm.edu/wittgens/>
- Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (C. K. Ogden, Trans.). Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical Investigation (3rd ed.)*. (G. E. M., Anscombe, Trans.). UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2013). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315884950>