

WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE GAME : A LYOTARDIAN DIALECTIC

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Wittgenstein's later analysis of language-game involves the dissolution of a number of philosophical errors like dogmatism, determinism, essentialism, representationalism, absolutism, universalism, apriorism etc. This is to say that there is an irony in both the pursuit and going against philosophy. However, it is more appropriate to interpret it from a postmodern perspective, a perspective which stems from Lyotard's denial of a metanarrative and the acceptance of small narratives. Besides Lyotard, who is one of the foremost leaders of the movement of postmodernism, there is another parallel strain represented by Richard Rorty. It is Rorty who has explored and advocated the philosophical dimensions of the postmodern thought. With regard to the critique of philosophy, Wittgenstein can be looked at from the Lyotard-Rorty axis. However, at this juncture, the paper is an attempt to explore Lyotardian dimension of Wittgenstein. The notion of 'dialectic' is taken from Albrecht Wellmer's discussion of the relation between postmodernism and modernism with a view to showing that the consideration of the modernism does not exclude postmodernism.

Lyotard's identification of postmodernism with the skepticism about grand narratives follows from a perspective of the irreducible plurality of language games. In his theorisation of postmodernism, Lyotard draws the idea of language-games from the later Wittgenstein's philosophy of language whose emphasis is upon the description of language games. What follows is an attempt to show how Wittgenstein's critique of language-games bespeaks of a motif which lies close to postmodernism as attributed to it by Lyotard.

It is in the context of the explanation of the nature of knowledge-

conditions of the post-industrial society that Lyotard embraces Wittgenstein's idea of language-game-analysis of meaning which gives emphasis to the pragmatics or performative aspect of the language. The current status of the scientific knowledge shows, as it has been expressed in the hermeneutic or historic theories of Kuhn and Feyerabend *et al.*, that science can no longer stick on to a realistic epistemology which endorses a representationistic relationship between the subject and object. And the working of the scientific and technological knowledge does not confirm the referential epistemology based on the traditional evaluative categories such as adequacy, accuracy, consistency etc. Rather what it does call for is a legitimization principle based on the performativity of sciences.

Lyotard characterizes the knowledge scenario created by the transformations in the nature of knowledge in highly developed society as "the computerization of society". Here knowledge is the form of an informational commodity. And,

along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore, a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge" statements.¹

Though the general paradigm of progress in science and technology is based on the notion of cumulative, scientific and technological knowledge, it has never gone unchallenged, as the scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge. As a kind of discourse, scientific knowledge has always been an addition to another kind of discourse of what Lyotard calls, "narrative".

However, since what the computerization of society shows is that the transformation of knowledge has its effects on public and civil institutions, the economic growth and the expansion of socio-political power seem to be natural complements to the general paradigm of progress of science and technology. This has created the problem of legitimation of scientific discourse according to the legitimation of political power of the legislator. For Lyotard, this is due to, a strict interlinkage, that existed since the time of Plato, between the kind called science and the kind called ethics and politics. In the contemporary world, this subordination of science to the prevailing power seems more complete than ever

before. This is the situation Lyotard describes as the *modern*, when, on the one hand, science is pursued on the basis of the rule of its own, and on the other hand, it appears to be a metadiscourse of politics or ethics as the rule for its own legitimation. However, with the emergence of contemporary post-industrial society and postmodern culture, the question of the legitimation of knowledge has also undergone transformation in such a way, entailing the loss of its credibility of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives of progress and emancipation. Therefore, Lyotard attempts to understand this with the help of the insight provided by Wittgenstein's idea of language-games.

As Lyotard says, according to Wittgenstein's language game investigation, each of various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put in, exactly and same way as the game of chess is defined by set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them.²

From the attempt to see the effects of different modes of discourse or the different types of utterances, Lyotard draws a set of three principles about the idea of language games. *Firstly*, their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players. This does not mean that players invent the rules. *Secondly*, that if there are no rules, there is no game. And *thirdly*, every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game.

Thus, Lyotard wants to see the *third* aspect as the first principle underlying whatever the perspective or approach of the whole method of analysis, called as postmodern. The principle in question is that "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of general agonistics." The "delegitimation" process of postmodernity where science plays its own game, other than incapably attempting to legitimating the other language-games is something that follows from Wittgenstein and from thinkers like Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, who developed Wittgenstein's theme in their own way. Lyotard's attempt is to present language-game investigation as a "general methodological approach"³ which is not far removed from the idea of postmodern perspective. Or rather as a theory of games which accepts

agonistics as a founding principle to understand social relations from a pragmatic point of view. This way of attempting to locate the focal point of postmodern concern around the notion of "language-games" signifies that the whole issue is a matter of viewing the nature and status of knowledge and reason in the reflective endeavour. Thus, as opposed to the absolutist and universalist conception of knowledge and reason, envisaged in the history of traditional philosophy throughout, the language-game approach is said to have envisaged a "pluralistic conception of reason" and knowledge.⁴

Lyotard's appropriation of Wittgenstein's idea of language-games could be seen as a remarkable attempt to emphasize the methodological character of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language-game analysis. This is also Lyotardian endorsement of the later Wittgenstein's model of language, which consists in the admission of plurality of language-games. As McGowan has pointed out, the fundamental theoretical assertion of Lyotard's *The Postmodern condition* and *Just Gaming* is that there exists "no common measure" among different language-games. McGowan states that language use is not subjected to a set of universal rules but it is organised instead, into a number of smaller more local purviews, each of which operates according to its own set of conventions, procedures and goals.⁵ This can be called as case-by-case account of language games. It is against this view that Lyotard identifies the postmodernism with the skepticism about grand narratives, from the perspective of the irreducible plurality of language-games.

However, for Lyotard, the incommensurability of language-games does not mean that there is only the absolute absence of a 'common measure'. It only means that we know of nothing that is in common with those different language-games. And he continues to say that,

We merely know that there are several of them, probably not an infinite number but we really do not know. In any case, the number is not countable for the time being or if it is, it is so provisionally at least.⁶

This dialectical nature of the notion of irreducible plurality of language games is more explicitly given when Lyotard elaborates Wittgenstein's idea of language-game. According to this, each of the various category of utterances can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which

they can be put. This is exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each pieces of chess. And to know the set of rules of the game is, in other words, to know the proper way to move the pieces in a chess game.

For Lyotard, the pluralistic condition of postmodernity has made it impossible for the tenability of an approach or an evaluative strategy which is based on a distinct, unified language or totalising rationality. Since there are many games in any language, there is the possibility of no common measure between the *scientific* and *literary* languages. And one is not derivable from the other : Therefore, it is quite difficult to define an artistic language-game by way of an experimental sort, as in the case of a scientific language-game that describes a reality.

The untenability of a universal language or totalising reason has got its implication that the enterprise of philosophy cannot be taken to be a metanarrative or an encompassing theory which could get the norms for all actions and endeavours. As Watson has elaborated, from the point of Lyotard, philosophy cannot be identified as the meta-narrative. It is to say that there is no way to identify it to be so. Only by giving the status of meta-narrative, we could identify it. Otherwise the identity cannot be established. Since there is no identity, there is no meta-narrative. But for Lyotard, the identity of narratives is there. They are rather the identity of non-identicals.

Even though it is generally understood that Lyotard's critique is directed against the possibility of meta-narrative, it remains an open question whether Lyotard's critique loses when it is presented as the replacement of another meta-narrative. Thus he might have moved one but at the same time *re-moved* other one as it was pointed out by Jean-Loup Thebaud, the interviewer, towards the end of the *Just Gaming*. To the question whether Lyotard has put forward yet another meta-narrative, the answer was his laughter. More pointedly, the question was about the acceptance of the plurality of the language-games in Wittgenstein's sense. Having accepted the failure of the meta-narrative of language owing to its heterogenous character, what right Lyotard has to introduce the plurality of language-games except as a meta-narrative? It is this which evokes laughter. This is a sufficient indication of the acceptance of meta-narrative in the place of one which is rejected.

NOTES

1. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. by Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1979, p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
3. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, Trans. by WladGoldzich, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 15.
4. Albrecht Wellmer, 'The Dialectic of Modernism and Post-Modernism : The Critique of Reason Since Adorno's', in his *The Persistence of Modernity : Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*, Trans. by David Midgley, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, p. 93.
5. John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991, p. 182.
6. Lyotard, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 51.