



## M.Foucault on Knowledge and Some Parallels With Wittgenstein : A Comparison

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### ABSTRACT

*In present day philosophy, Michel Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein are two well-known names. Though they belong to two different philosophical traditions, till some comparisons may be drawn between them. In spite of some obvious differences, both of them were seriously concerned with the issue of language and believed that the role of a knower is not fundamental in case of knowledge. Foucault laid emphasis on discourse analysis and rule-following while discussing about knowledge. Similarly Wittgenstein also focussed on following a rule and compared language with a game played according to rules. Wittgenstein speaks of language as a form of life—as a part of an activity. Foucault says that it is power which shapes rule-governing discourse. Rules cannot be followed privately, so, Wittgenstein is of opinion that there cannot be any private language. Both of them believed that language is basically a social practice and can be traced back to a communitarian context.*

**KEYWORDS : KNOWLEDGE, LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, POWER, RULE, FORM OF LIFE, SOCIAL PRACTICE.**

Twentieth Century Philosophy is marked by the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein whose philosophical career is divided into two halves—the early Wittgenstein and later Wittgenstein. The early Wittgenstein shifted through a period of transition to his matured views in the later period of his life. But throughout his career, he was concerned with the problem of language because he believed that clarification of language is able to dissolve all philosophical puzzles and problems. His interest in logic and language prevailed throughout his life. Twentieth Century analytic philosophy is greatly indebted to him and he left a lasting influence on philosophers who succeeded him. Von Wright wrote: “The unravelling and evaluation of various forms which Wittgenstein’s influence has assumed will constitute a major chapter in the history yet to be written of twentieth century philosophy and ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

Another Stalwart in the field of present day Philosophy is Michel Foucault who was basically a French Philosopher—though his work was transdisciplinary in nature, ranging across the disciplines of history, sociology and psychology. He was associated with structuralist and post-structuralist movements. He had strong influence not only in philosophy but also in a wide range of humanistic and social scientific disciplines. Drawing a parallel between Wittgenstein and Foucault, two authors who belong to two different traditions of analytical and continental philosophy is definitely a hard job but not an impossible one.

but is a limit of the world. In order to explain this idea he gives analogy of the eye and the visual field. The existence of the visual field shows the existence of the eye but the eye does not itself appear in the visual field.

When the self is decentred by Foucault, objects become no longer dependent upon the self or the subject. Foucault’s point is that objects are rather constructed by a discourse and its rules of formation. The central term which Foucault employs to analyse knowledge is the concept of ‘discursive formation’. He developed a notion of discourse in his early work, especially in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Language, as well as other forms of symbolic exchange is the primary object studied by discourse theory. This theory suggests that language can be broken into different bodies or corpuses of statements and utterances governed by rules and conventions of which the user is largely unconscious.<sup>6</sup>

When Foucault tells about “discourse” and “rule-following”, some writers try to link him with Wittgenstein. Thus Barker and Galasinski<sup>7</sup> find out links and connections between Wittgenstein and Foucault in their book *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis* where they tend to cast Wittgenstein as part of the historical background of discourse

analysis. Twentieth Century is sometimes characterized as the “Age of Analysis” in philosophy. According to Wittgenstein, Philosophy is primarily the activity of clarifying language and for this purpose he applied the method of analysis in his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein was much influenced by Russell’s *Theory of Description* where propositions are analysed to reveal their underlying logical form. Both language and the world, Wittgenstein says, have a structure. Language consists in propositions and propositions are compounds made up of what he calls structure or that one can speak only of a statement only when there is a proposition.<sup>9</sup> The statement/discourse relationship is here to be understood in contrast to the *Tractatus* fact/proposition relationship.

Foucault also speaks of **silence** though in a different tone from Wittgenstein. He was interested in ‘silence’ as a form of control within the discourse and he therefore drew an inseparability between speech and silence to enforce this position. He writes: “There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say, we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case: There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”<sup>10</sup>

Wittgenstein’s conception of language shifts from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations* through a period of transition. In the *Tractatus* he concerned the relation between language and world in terms of picturing. Regular that language pictures facts whereas in the *Investigations*, he conceived of language as a game. We use language to describe, to report, inform, affirm, deny, speculate and so on so. All these different activities Wittgenstein calls “language-games”. Wittgenstein talks of the “multiplicity” of language games. He rejects the Tractarian conception of language as having a single underlying essence which is to be revealed by logical analysis. Instead, by comparing language with game, he speaks of language as a part of an activity, as a “form of life”. The moment language is conceived as an activity,—to understand a language means to be master of a technique.<sup>11</sup> Mastery of a technique or a practice turns on the notion of following a rule.

The indicate the essentially public character of language. This idea of Wittgenstein is compared to Foucault’s attempts to interrogate the conditions of the existence of the statements (in his archaeological period) and to trace back the conditions of knowledge to a communitarian and historical context, composed by power’s relations in the genealogy. Foucault begins the third chapter of his *Archaeology* by emphasizing a performative aspect to language by referring to for-

mulations and goes on to say that it is the modality of existence of these formulations, that form the statement. He thinks that discourse is not something passively related to practice—it modifies the domain it is brought into relationship with. To investigate a domain of human activity is to investigate a discourse. Discourse is not simply the word written or spoken but must crucially be understood in terms of the practices it evokes and gives meaning, the relationships it exposes and refines. This is how both these philosophers shared the view that concepts and discourses cannot be referred to an eternal, rational structure but are the byproducts of practices within a particular communitarian space.

A certain familiarity between these two authors was first observed by Ian Hacking<sup>2</sup> and Arnold. I. Davidson<sup>3</sup> who drew elements and concepts from both authors for a practical analysis of certain historical and epistemological issues. There are several issues where these two authors converge so much so that we are bound to find out some intellectual overlap between them. One such issue is that of knowledge. "Knowledge shall not finally know the knower"—this interdict from the Vedās links Wittgenstein and Foucault.

Commonly knowledge implies a knower. But recently thinkers like Popper, Foucault etc. argue for objective knowledge without any subjective knower at all. Foucault in his book *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) shows that the subject or the spirit is not fundamental. His account of language decentres the role of knower and the subjective states of knowing. Similarly, Wittgenstein writes in his *Tractatus* : "There is no such thing as the soul—the subject etc. as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day."<sup>4</sup> (TLP 5.5421) Actually, Wittgenstein made a distinction between "metaphysical self" and "psychological self". The psychological self is the thinking subject and Wittgenstein claimed that "there is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas."<sup>5</sup> (TLP 5.631) Wittgenstein, seems to introduce the notion of a metaphysical subject that does not belong to the world

'elementary' propositions, which in turn are combinations of names. Names are ultimate constituents of language. Correspondingly, the world consists in the totality of facts, and facts are compounded out of "state of affairs" which in turn are compounded out of objects. Each level of structure of language corresponds to a level in the structure of the world. Wittgenstein begins the *Tractatus* with "The world is all that is the case" and then "The world is the totality of facts, not of things." From the apparent nihilism—a world devoid of things—Wittgenstein advances arguments to lay anchor in the realm of language, locating truth in the propositions of an ideal logical language. It is the propositions which limit what can be said—all else the *Tractatus* treats as non-sense. They are non-sensical because they are attempts to transcend, in language, the limit of language and, hence, the world. They try to say what cannot be said. We should pass over them to **silence**. (TLP, 7) But they are what is truly important because they show what the limits of meaningful discourse are. They are what is mystical. (TLP 6.522) Religion, ethics, art, metaphysics are concerned with what cannot be said.

Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* mulls over the limits of what can be said when he begins to consider the role of "statements". He claims that statements are "the elements of discourse"<sup>8</sup> He then goes on to ask : What boundaries must one accord to it ? Is this unit identical with that to which logicians have given the term "proposition" and that which the grammarians call a "sentence" ? In the next paragraph, he writes : "I do not think that the necessary and sufficient condition of a statement is the presence of a defined propositional question of "rule-following" occupies a very important role in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Evidence of knowing a rule of a game is shown in how we play. Similarly, how language is used or performed is an expression of how the rules are interpreted.

Similarly, we find Foucault's deep reliance on rules when he claims that the unity of discourse rests on the interplay of rules which make possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time.<sup>12</sup> But how is rule-governing discourse shaped ? In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault answers by saying that it is power that shapes rule-governing discourse. Thus the idea of power becomes vital in Foucault's context of knowledge.

The connection of power with knowledge in Foucault's system reminds us of "knowing-how"—a kind of knowledge which is defined as the ability or skill to do something. It needs the execution of power to perform something. Foucault admitted causal interdependence between knowledge and power.<sup>13</sup> There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor there is any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute power relation at the same time.

Regarding rule-following, Wittgenstein was of the opinion that it is not a mysterious inner process but it is a practice embedded in the customs and agreements of a community and as such is essentially public. Nobody can follow a rule privately. Rule following is a social phenomenon. So, if language is conceived as a game governed by rules, then there cannot be a private language. Wittgenstein's view is that the notion of "rule-following" and "form of life"

From this discussion we may say that Foucault's interest in language and use was a little Wittgensteinian. Though Foucault's work covered a broader spectrum of interests than Wittgenstein and they did not share a common background, yet, both of them had a common critical stance against traditional philosophy and they may definitely be compared for several reasons. Thus, Wittgenstein's conception of language and Foucault's rationality can both be ascribed to practice. Both of them disbelieved that subject is an eternal substance and surprisingly, both of their epistemic structure enforced them to say about their own particular **silence**.

But the point of difference between them is that Foucault's archaeology and genealogy are linked to a particular way of describing and researching the conditions of existence which is explicitly rejected by Wittgenstein in his conventionalist conception of language. According to Wittgenstein, language is a form of life but Foucault, though he also told about 'form of life', moved beyond Wittgenstein's "form of life" to "biopolitics" and institution" of the micro-physics of power. These two philosophers are not in direct opposition but there is a divergence in their analysis.

#### Abbreviation :

TLP : Tractatus Logico Philosophicus.

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