

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED
WITTGENSTEIN ON MYSTICISM: THE EARLY PHILOSOPHY OF
RELIGION

Avhijit Ghosh

Introduction

The term *mysticism* comes from the Greek word ‘*μύω μύω*’, which means to close or to conceal. It is associated with the different historical meanings and it has Ancient Greek origins. If we look at the early and medieval Christianity then we will see that the term mysticism was used to refer to different dimensions, such as spiritual, biblical, liturgical, etc. If we look at the early modern period then we will see that the definition of mysticism includes an ample range of beliefs and ideologies. These beliefs and ideologies were related to extraordinary or unnatural experiences and states of mind. During modern times, mysticism was used to mean the union with the Infinite, Absolute, or God. William James was a proponent of such type of understanding, who said that “in mystic states, we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness.”¹ Therefore, it can be said that the experience of the Absolute, Infinite, or God is recognized as a mystical experience i.e. the key element of mysticism. This mystical experience is certainly different from our ordinary experience which is based on this mundane world. If we take the term *mysticism* in its broad sense then it can be said that in all religious tradition’s mysticism must be there; because without mysticism no religion is possible. In other words, all religions are ultimately based on mysticism. Here it is important to note that all religious experiences can be characterized as mystical experiences whereas all mystical experiences are not religious experiences. During the thirteenth century, the term mysticism (*unio mystica*) was used to mean the sublimation or rapture, spiritual marriage. That means when the prayer contemplates God then he does realize both God’s omnipresence in the world and God in his essence. If we look at Romanticism, in the nineteenth century, we will see that this ‘union’ is understood as a religious experience that provides firm conviction about something is the case i.e. God or a transcendental reality. In the sixteen and seventeenth centuries, the term mysticism was used as a substantive. It was a new discourse that separates religion from science. It also separates religion from natural philosophy though they aim to discover the hidden meaning of the universe by the middle of the seventeenth century. The terms, such as mystical experience, and mystical realizations are very much akin to mysticism. In other words, they are the key elements of mysticism. What we see in the realm of mysticism is ‘unity’ or ‘union’, and it is considered the main theme of mysticism. This union is held between the two entities, one is the devotee or the individual, and the other is the supreme or the God. Now let’s take a look at mysticism after Wittgenstein.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

Nonsense (Mysticism):

Being a linguistic philosopher Wittgenstein gives priority to the analysis of language as a means to know the world or reality. For that, he developed the concept of 'my language and my world' to determine the sense of the world. That is why Wittgenstein says, "The *limits of my language* mean the limits of my world."ⁱⁱⁱ The remark says that Wittgenstein admits two sides (inside the world i.e., my language and my world) and outside or other side of the world by drawing the boundary of the world. Here the term *my language* means Wittgenstein's understanding of propositional language. And the term *my world* means Wittgenstein's understanding of the totality of facts. According to Wittgenstein, everything can be expressed in the form of *to be the case* and *not to be the case* within the limits of the world i.e., my world. *To be the case* and *not to be the case* are the two senses of proposition i.e., true and false. Now the question may arise what about the other side (outside the limits of my language and my world) of the world? According to Wittgenstein, what lies on the other side of his language and his world cannot be put into words. It is ineffable, and as it is ineffable, we cannot say anything about it in the form of *to be the case* and *not to be the case*. Therefore, any attempt to put them into language leads to the result of nonsense. So what is nonsense does not exist in the true-false boundary. Its meaning cannot be grasped within the language because we do not have the legitimate language to express what lies outside of the world. Now one may ask why its meaning cannot be grasped within the proposition. Its meaning cannot be grasped within the proposition because what lies on another side of the world lacks *factual sense*. That is why they are called nonsense. Now the question may arise why does it lack factual sense? It lacks factual sense because it does not picture anything in the world. That is why it lacks factual sense. Therefore, Wittgenstein determines nonsense in terms of the factual sense of the world. Wittgenstein's further account of nonsense leads us to the concept of mysticism.

The Mystical Wittgenstein:

Wittgenstein further says that what lies outside my language and my world cannot be put into words. As it cannot be put into words, it is called *mystical*. According to Wittgenstein, we know that there is something under there, but we cannot see it, our language cannot prove them. As soon as we try to grasp them through language, we fall into the result of mysticism or it creates mysticism within us. In other words, beyond the limits of the world is the eternal (*aeterni*) from the perspective of the limits of the world and we can feel a sense of mystery but we cannot articulate it. Therefore, the other side of the world can be called the world of mysticism.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

Now, the question is where does the urge towards the mystical come from? To answer this question Wittgenstein in his book *Tractatus* says, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.”ⁱⁱⁱ Here one may ask why we accept that there are things that cannot be put into words. In reply, it can be said that our quest for the mystical arises due to the failure of science. That means science fails to fulfil our wishes because science cannot explain everything. So it is the limit of science that proves that there is something under there, cannot be put into words, and hence, it is mystical. That is why he says, “The urge towards the mystical comes from the non-satisfaction of our wishes by science. We *feel* that even if all *possible* scientific questions are answered *our problem is still not touched at all*. Of course, in that case there are no questions anymore; that is the answer.”^{iv}

It has been said that “the term mystical appears in the *Tractatus* without preparation, as though it were a household word as if everyone was expected to know what it meant. In fact, it is extremely difficult to understand what it means or why Wittgenstein decided to use it...”^v Similarly, Bertrand Russell in his article *Mind* called Wittgenstein a mystic. A person can be characterized as a mystic when that person has gone through some kind of mystical experience. Now if this is so then how can we say that Wittgenstein has gone through any kind of mystical experience at some point in time? It is to be believed that Wittgenstein had a mystical experience at the time of watching a play named *Die kreuzelschreiber* of *Anzengruber*. In this regard McGuinness says, “this mystical experience of Wittgenstein would have been associated with the scene in which one character describes the ‘special revelation’ or ‘*afflatus*’ (*extraige offenbarung, Eingebung*) that he has had: previously his life had been one of unalleviated misery but one day when he had thrown himself, at the point of death as he thought, into the long grass in the sunshine, he came to himself again in the evening to find that his pain had gone, to be visited with unreasoning happiness as if the earlier sunshine had entered into his body, and to feel as if he were being spoken to: ‘Nothing can happen to you!’ The worst suffering count for nothing once they’re over. Whether you are six feet under the grass or know that you’ve got to face it all thousands of times more-nothing can happen to you!- you’re part of everything, and everything’s part of you. ‘Nothing can happen to you!’”^{vi}

Wittgenstein on Mysticism:

Now the question is, in what sense Wittgenstein has used and cognized the term mysticism? In reply to this question, Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* says, “To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole -a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole-it is this that is mystical.”^{vii} I think this remark can be divided into two parts. One is *to view the world sub specie aeterni and the*

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

other is limited whole. To confirm the first one Wittgenstein in his *Notebooks* says, “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside... In such a way that they have the whole world as background... The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space.”^{viii} It seems to mean that it is an experience of amazement and astonishment. It is a feeling of wonder about the existence of the world. This is so because viewing the world as *sub specie aeternitatis* means viewing it from outside. In the book, *Tractatus* the experience that the world exists is called ‘mystical’, and in *Notebooks*, it is called a ‘marvel’ and Anscombe translates it as a *miracle*. The meaning is the same in both cases. Regarding the second part of the above remark Max Black says that when someone has this mystical feeling about the world as a limited whole, he feels that there is something beyond the world and that is mystical. That is why it is said that “The word ‘limited whole’ could be interpreted as *to* limit anything is to contrast it with something else, as when in drawing a boundary line we contrast what is inside the line with what is outside.”^{ix}

Wittgenstein’s further account of mysticism is the feeling of being absolutely safe. He said when we speak of the mystical or God who sees everything and we kneel before him, it allegorically expresses our feeling of being absolutely safe in the hands of God or Mystical (LE 10). Regarding this absolutely safe Wittgenstein further said in his LE that “it is to be considered as the state of mind where one may feel that he is completely safe. He feels safe because, in such a state of mind, one feels that no one can injure him, no matter what happens.”^x This feeling of being absolutely safe is beyond language, or any attempt to put them into language is futile. But we cannot deny the experience of absolute safety that Wittgenstein had experienced while watching the play *Die Kreuzelschreiber*. Cyril Barret explains that it is not the case that being absolutely safe excludes the possibility of happening any misery to the individual. Rather it is the case in which even if all kinds of things happen to the individual he is not affected by the vicissitudes of life. In a sense, these vicissitudes occur to the individual and in another sense, they do not. As the individual regards these vicissitudes as an accident of life, they do not hurt or surprise him. What is remarkable in Cyril Barrett’s remark here is that he maintains that this notion of being absolutely safe is an oriental notion that Wittgenstein imbibed from Schopenhauer.^{xi}

The notion of being absolutely safe of Wittgenstein corresponds to the Indian concept of *Sthita Prajna* mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the *Gita*, it is said that *Sthita Prajna* is the realized person who remains in the world but actually, he is not in the world. That means he is beyond this world in another sense. He is not affected by the miseries of the world. He is also not affected by the joyfulness

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

of the world. He remains calm in each and every situation. Whatever actions he does is beyond any motive. This is so because he works for the welfare of all. So he is beyond bondage and suffering. It means whatever actions he does is ethical. It is said that not only *Sthita Prajna* but there are other realized persons such as *Bodhisattva* of Buddhism, *Jivan Mukta* of Advaita Vedanta, etc. correspond to the notion of absolutely safe amidst the vicissitudes of life. It is a life that teaches us that though a realized person lives in this world, is not part of it.

Another account of mysticism according to Wittgenstein is that, “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.”^{xii} The above remark says that Wittgenstein understands mysticism on the basis of the existence of the world. The above remark actually related to the distinction between Wittgenstein’s conception of the sense of the world and the constituents of the world. As we have seen Wittgenstein defines how things are in the world in terms of facts. Fact is made possible by the interrelations of things or objects. So these different types of things and their interrelations i.e. the order of the world show how things are in the world after Wittgenstein. Hence it is proved that sense of the world i.e. mystical is completely different from how things are in the world. Therefore, it can be said that the order of the world is given to us so it is not mystical. As far as the nature of mysticism is concerned, Wittgenstein says, “How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world.”^{xiii} Thus the sense of the world i.e. mystical after Wittgenstein is also higher and placed beyond the world. It is completely different from the constituents of the world i.e. how things are in the world. The above point can also be understood by an example given by Cyril Barrett. He says, “Physical theories, such as the Big Bang, the Quantum Theory; Biological Theories, such as DNA helix and the Darwinian Survival of the fittest; psychological theories such as those of Freud, Jung, and Piaget, may explain, in Wittgenstein’s term, how the world is, how it evolves as it is. But they will not explain why it is, why there is this world, or any other kind. They may succeed in explaining the order of the world but they don’t explain the existence of the world itself.”^{xiv}

Further account regarding the nature of mysticism is related to the notion of absolute value i.e. the feeling of guilt. This notion of guilt is very much similar to the notion of being safe and wondering about the existence of the world, which are feelings of absolute value. In the words of Cyril Barrett, the above two types of feelings such as the feeling of being absolutely safe and the feeling that is wondering about the existence of the world are related to absolute value, and are common as religious beliefs. According to him not only Wittgenstein but some other philosophers such as Aquinas, Augustine, and Kierkegaard have discussed the feeling of guilt also. It is further said that the feeling

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

of guilt cannot be put into words. It is so because without being guilty the feeling of guilt is to be considered as the contradictory feeling. It is a feeling that lies beyond the boundaries of language. He also said that the feeling of guilt is the reverse feeling. It is so because the feeling of wonderment or astonishment about the existence of the world is a tautological feeling and on the contrary, the feeling of absolute guilty is the contradictory feeling. It is that feeling which has been taken by each and every religious person as a distinctive mark in their life. In this regard, Wittgenstein says, "People are religious to the extent that they believe themselves to be not so much *imperfect*, as sick. Any man who is halfway decent will think himself extremely imperfect, but a religious man thinks himself *wretched*."^{xv} According to Cyril Barrett, the above remark says that each and every religious person should remain humble. They should feel as if they are imperfect. He says the way Wittgenstein has interpreted the feeling of guilt definitely it appears that it is as though a mystical feeling. This feeling helps us to realize that we are insignificant without having an inferiority complex. Therefore, from the above discussion, it can be said that the above remarks about mystical or mysticism after Wittgenstein is the feeling of the mystical or absolute value. These are the feelings of absolute value that occur within Wittgenstein. These feelings are beyond language. Any attempt to put them into language will be characterized as the misuse of language. In this regard, Wittgenstein says, "...this is an entirely personal matter and others would find other examples more striking. I will describe this experience, in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground of investigation."^{xvi} Here the remark says that the above feelings are not the only feelings through which Wittgenstein has gone. But he says that there are other feelings as well of the same nature which other people may experience. These feelings are inexpressible and the feeling of absolute value.

Concluding Remarks:

Based on the above analysis of the mystical (mysticism) I conclude by saying that Wittgenstein reached the realm of mysticism by the method of negation and by the method of doubt. Now let's see first how he reaches mysticism by the method of negation i.e., 'cannot be put into words'. The method of negation means 'cannot be put into words' of the *Tractatus*. It can be taken as the ladder that helps one to understand Wittgenstein's notion of mysticism. Further, it can be said that through the method of negation, Wittgenstein sets a clear limit to what can be said. He sets this limit in the sense that the attempt to say anything about what cannot be put into words will neither refute nor deny its existence. So, any attempt to say anything that cannot be put into words must be *not this*.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

Further, Wittgenstein reached toward the mystical and thereby senses of life i.e. the solution to the problem of life by the method of doubt. That is why, Wittgenstein said in his book *Tractatus*, “For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*.”^{xvii} It means that according to Wittgenstein if we want to say anything that can be expressed in language as either in the form of a question or an answer is to be considered as the subject to doubt. But as we have seen what lies, another side of my language and my world cannot be put into language as either in the form of a question or an answer, hence according to Wittgenstein beyond doubt. Again, he said that what can be said clearly means the questions of science i.e. the matter of doubt. That is why Wittgenstein remarks “We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.”^{xviii} It says that the questions of science are a matter of doubt because they can be expressed in language. But what cannot be expressed in language i.e. mystical or sense of life is beyond doubt. That is why 6.521 of the *Tractatus* says that the sense of life becomes clear after a period of doubt on what can be said, while the mystical shows itself. Here one may say that Wittgenstein was influenced by Descartes’ method of doubt. But I think although they used the same method there is a difference in their purpose. By the method of doubt, Descartes reached the conclusion *I think therefore I am or I exist*. But on the other hand, by the method of doubt, Wittgenstein reveals a *sense of life where the mystical shows itself*.

Further in the words of B. R. Clack when Wittgenstein was talking about God or Mystical in his *Tractatus and Notebooks*, he talks in favour of pantheism like Spinoza. Wittgenstein’s remarks “How things stand, is God. God is, how things stand.”^{xix} and another remark from *Tractatus*, “How the world is, is completely indifferent to what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world.”^{xx} The above two remarks prove that Wittgenstein took the path of pantheism. If we carefully look at *Tractatus*, it would be clear that the essence of the world is its form which is depicted by the general form of the proposition, because Wittgenstein said proposition shows the form of reality. That is why he remarked, “The general propositional form is the essence of a proposition.”^{xxi} It means “To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world.”^{xxii} So the sentence i.e. the general form of the proposition means this is how things stand. As he remarked *how things stand, is God. God is, how things stand* means the general form of the proposition. Therefore, it can be said that the general propositional form is the variable name (TLP 4.53) i.e. the proper sign for the concept of God. So, the general form of the proposition is identical to the concept of God (Zemach 1966, 366, and 367). Hence the God in *Tractatus* and *Notebooks* is identical to nature: *Deus, Sive Natura* of Spinoza.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

It thus reflects, I do reckon, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is a project through which the concept of mysticism is reflected. It may also be known as the early philosophy of religion. It can also be called Wittgenstein's philosophy of silence which is designed to protect what is higher from human encroaches by language. That is why Wittgenstein in the last proposition of his book *Tractatus* said that "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."^{xxiii} This method of silence expresses that the point of the *Tractatus* is an ethical one. This ethical root is the most fundamental mystical attitude. We can say that it is the ethics of articulation. So, in our activity of articulation, maintaining a silent mood before that which cannot be spoken of is the ethical thing to do. Here, it can also be said that the root of the *Tractatus* is the religious one. It is religious because it is rooted in the form of religiosity i.e. *mystical or mysticism* is characterized as the early philosophy of religion.

ⁱ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, NY: Collier Books, 1961, p.78.

ⁱⁱ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, With an introduction by Bertrand Russell, D.F. Pears and B.F. Mc Guinness (trans.), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 68.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 89.

^{iv} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Notebooks 1914-16*, (Ed.) by G. H. Von Wright and G. E. M. Anscomb, (Trans.) by G. E. M. Anscomb, New York, Harper and Row, 1961, p. 51e.

^v Pandey, K. C., *Religious Beliefs, Superstitions and Wittgenstein*, New Delhi, Readworthy, 2009, p. 92.

^{vi} M. B. F., 'Mysticism of the Tractatus', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXV, 1966, p. 327-28.

^{vii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Op.cit., p. 88.

^{viii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Notebooks*, Op.cit., p. 83e.

^{ix} Pandey, K. C., *Religious Beliefs, Superstitions and Wittgenstein*, Op.cit., p. 98.

^xWittgenstein, Ludwig, 'A Lecture on Ethics', in James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein; Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Indianapolis & Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993, p. 41.

^{xi} Barrett, Cyril, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Beliefs*, Oxford, U. K., and Cambridge U.S.A., Blackwell, 1991, p. 81.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

- ^{xii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Op.cit., p. 88.
- ^{xiii} Ibid., p. 88.
- ^{xiv} Barrett, Cyril, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Beliefs*, Op.cit., p. 72.
- ^{xv} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Culture and Value*, (Ed.) by G. H. Von Wright in Collaboration with Hekki Nymnan, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980, p, 45e.
- ^{xvi} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 'A Lecture on Ethics', Op.cit., p. 41.
- ^{xvii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Op.cit., p. 88.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., p. 88.
- ^{xix} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Notebooks* Op. cit., p. 79e.
- ^{xx} Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, op. Cit., p. 88.
- ^{xxi} Ibid., p.56.
- ^{xxii} Ibid., p.56.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid., p. 89.