

## Candidate 21 - Fourth Essay Topic

In the quote "The limits of my language means the limits of my world." Wittgenstein claims that his understanding of the world is limited to his ability to articulate it through language. Is he right?

This quote displays a worldview, or a linguistic view, that is in stark contrast with the historically dominant one. As an example we can look to Plato's world, or realm, of ideas.

In that realm lives the ideas, or ideals, of the things we have words for. But, they exist as a more real version than the mere reflections on Earth. Plato's world view is centered on his Greek tongue. In a way, one can say that he believed his language was defined in a divine way. Language was not a creation to him. It was constant, and it reflected the blueprint (which was in another dimension) to the best of human ability.

Another historical example that we can look to is one that has been prominent through most of western culture, for thousands of years. Historically, there has been a tendency to believe that words have the ability to call upon things or events. For instance: In Norway it was for a long time considered dangerous to say the Old Norse word for wolf, "Ulf", as they believed that would call upon a wolf. Also, the Norwegian swear word "Pokker", stems from a fear of saying "Kopper" (measles).

So historically, the beliefs have been rather the opposite of what Wittgenstein states. The tendency has been to see language as tied up with the truth, and not as a human tool to express it. The most pessimistic way to look at it, is perhaps to see our languages as a hinder in our attempt to express the world.

For example we cannot explain to a blind person how a color looks. This might be because it is physically impossible; but, it could also be a lack of resource in our languages that is to blame. Perhaps one day we will have words that can make it possible to imagine the color, without having to tie it up to connotations that we delegate it to in our societies.

Maybe one day, we will not have to express the color red through "heat" or "danger". Maybe one day, we will have an adjective that makes the color feasible, in and of itself. In which case: Ludvig Wittgenstein's claim would be absolutely right. Because if so, it

means that what we might label as a physical impossibility, is merely a hole in our language that has yet to be filled up.

On the other side, one can easily disagree with the quote, if one thinks that there are some forms of understanding that is not limited to language. For instance, if one is religious one can say that the love and wholehearted relationship they feel with God is unexplainable through words: Yet, it does not limit their sensation or their feelings of Godly presence.

But, on the flip side, one can say that Wittgenstein's principle might be a bit misplaced in that instance. His point might be more sensible if one uses it on the word "God". Because, as it becomes clear, their feelings of divine presence and love is tied up to a really specific and much used term, that to a large degree shapes our societies' worldview. Our languages only has that word, "God", to accurately describe the divine, and at times somewhat belittling sensation a religious person might feel.

Many philosophers and authors, amongst them the controversial George Carlin, has expressed trouble with this linguistic situation. As an atheist, he struggled to accurately describe the love and respect he had for his family, his friends, and his role in the universe, without using the terms "God", or "Godly". Maybe those values were his Gods? This really does fall in line with Wittgenstein's claim. Because even if Carlin refused to tie his feelings up to anything that had to do with God, he had no accurate proposal for what one could call it instead. In other words: His language limited his world.

According to Wittgenstein's claim our understanding of the world is dependent on an accurate language to describe it. We can also read from it that, to him, our languages does not fulfill the demands of that. Since he uses the word "Limit", it becomes clear that he does not find our available terms sufficient. To him, there is a conflict where the lack of expressions is in the way of an objective truth about the world.

Maybe, his demands are out of reach for humankind. When we use human words and language to try and grasp the workings of the world, the answers we get, or even the questions we ask, are not neutral. They are necessarily rooted in a human brain, and in a human interest to find the truth. A famous quote from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the philosophy of language really bloomed, goes: "If a lion could talk, we would not be able to understand it."

This quote relates to Wittgenstein's. But it takes matters a bit further. Unlike Wittgenstein's, this quote dedicates itself a bit more to express that we only have the words we have made; words that make sense to us; or words that we give sense. We have words for the things that we need words for; for the things we need to utter. Would the things an English-speaking lion felt the need to express make sense to us? Not necessarily.

We can use the principle from this quote to give further sense to Wittgenstein's: Do the questions we ask, and the answers we give "make sense" to a neutral and objective world, or are they as insensible as the ones of an English-speaking lion are to us? Although it is certainly more comfortable to think that our questions and answers objectively makes sense, we cannot know for sure.

In summary: Whether Ludvig Wittgenstein's claim is true or not depends on two things. The first is whether or not we can have experiences, ideas, and feelings that are impossible to translate into language. The second is whether or not our languages are able to depict an objective truth about the world.

To tackle the first we can look to religious experiences that people feel, but cannot put into words. The Overwhelming love for God, and the overwhelming love they feel for God are not possible for them to put into words. The argument here makes it plausible to believe that one's language does not limit one's world view.

However; there are a couple of different ways to arguing against this. The first is the same that goes with our lack of ability to explain colors to people who cannot see them: Perhaps we just lack the right words for the color to pop on their mind. The second possibility is that we see the application of Wittgenstein's principle as faulty, as the experience they feel in fact is described through God, which in turn is a limiting way of expressing their feelings and thus their world.

Lastly we should consider whether or not our languages are able to express an objective or neutral truth in the first place. As shown in the earlier examples, many people have historically believed that was possible. But, nowadays the idea is probably a bit more insightful than so. With our modern worldview, and our idea of language as a construction, our tendency is to believe that our words first and foremost serve the purpose of informing about our subjective perception of life on Earth. And in turn, we

can agree that our subjective language might not be able to accurately depict the neutral reality we seek to find.

Our languages have the common trait that they come from humans. Our words stem from our perceptions of things, and our interest in finding out things. The words that we have define what questions we ask, and what answers we get. I do not think that our languages are neutral enough to objectively and accurately portray the world. Thus, I believe that Wittgenstein's claim is correct.