



Speaking Through Silence: Wittgenstein on the Unsayable

Dr. Avhijit Ghosh

Former UGC Research Fellow, Dept. of Philosophy, University of North Bengal

Email: ghoshavhijit978@gmail.com

Abstract

The book Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (henceforth TLP), written by L. Wittgenstein, is a work consisting of seven propositions. Among them, the last enigmatic proposition is on the concept of silence, which says that what we are unable to talk about must remain silent. This statement has provoked intense debate over its meaning, implications, and place within the broader trajectory of his philosophy. This article explores Wittgenstein's concept of silence as more than a negation of speech; rather, it functions as a boundary marker that reveals the limits of language and gestures toward dimensions of experience that cannot be captured discursively. By situating silence within the logical structure of the Tractatus, the study highlights how Wittgenstein delineates the sayable—the world of facts, logic, and science—from the unsayable—the ethical, the aesthetic, and the mystical. The paper examines how silence speaks by drawing attention to what resists expression yet remains vital to human life. Special attention is given to interpretive debates: the 'traditional' view, which regards Wittgenstein as affirming ineffable truths, and the 'resolute' reading, which sees his silence as a therapeutic rejection of metaphysical speculation. Ultimately, the paper argues that Wittgenstein's silence is not an endpoint of thought but an invitation to reorient philosophy's task: to clarify language, dissolve confusions, and recognise the significance of what lies beyond propositional discourse. In this way, Wittgenstein 'speaks through silence,' not by offering ineffable doctrines, but by showing that the most profound aspects of existence are revealed precisely at the point where words fail.

Original Article

Open Access



Received: 12.09.2025

Accepted: 08.12.2025

Publication Date: October-December 2025

Volume: 1

Issue: 3

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.65842/nbpa.v1.i3.005>

Copyrights:



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: North Bengal

Philosophers Association

Website: <https://nbpajournal.com/>

<https://nbpa.org.in/>

Introduction:

Key Words: *Silence • Sayable • Unsayable • Mystical • Ethics • Aesthetics • Language.*

Introduction

Tractatus is considered one of the most influential works of linguistic philosophy in the 20th century. Its central theme is exploring the relationship between language, thought, and reality. It reaches a climax with the famous proposition 7: *That which cannot be expressed in language must remain silent*. This statement has become the hallmark of Wittgenstein's early philosophy, cited beyond academic circles in literature, theology, and cultural discourse. However, to fully understand its significance, one must see it not as a casual aphorism but as the cornerstone of the *TLP*. The idea of silence is not incidental but essential to the book's logical, ethical, and mystical perspective. It signifies both a boundary—the recognition that language cannot go beyond certain limits—and a gesture—an acknowledgement that what truly matters in human life lies precisely beyond that boundary.

The Structure of the World and Logical Representation

In his *TLP*, Wittgenstein first analyses language and logic before concluding that silence is both a philosophical conclusion and a sort of necessity. Wittgenstein, in his book *TLP*, talks about his most popular picture theory of meaning, where he maintains that the success of a picture depends on the alignment between the logical structure of language and that of reality. Wittgenstein views language as composed of elementary propositions, picture facts. That is why, at the very start of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein declares that the world is the sum of facts rather than of things.”¹ A fact is a situation: a specific configuration of objects. Objects themselves are simple, indestructible entities, and the world is the combination of possible and actual states of affairs they form. So, a proposition turns into a meaningful proposition when it represents possible situations. Language, in this view, is logical by nature because it accurately conveys the structure of reality. Logic is a system of principles that determines how propositions relate to the world and to each other. At this point, Wittgenstein's ideas are solidly grounded in logical reasoning that includes meaningful speech focusing on facts and propositions. Therefore, propositions, he claims, are logical pictures of facts. This implies that a meaningful proposition represents the way things are in the world. Just as a map represents terrain by sharing a structure with it, so too a proposition signifies a possible state of affairs by sharing a logical form with reality. For example, the sentence ‘The book is on the table’ is

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. MacGuinness, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961. P. 1.

meaningful because it is structured in such a way that it can correspond to a real arrangement of objects. This is how Wittgenstein arrives at what is recognised as the picture theory of meaning, or proposition, which yields a sharp criterion of meaning.

Accordingly, Wittgenstein says that a proposition has sense if and only if it can represent a possible situation. Anything that cannot be depicted in logical space is outside the bounds of meaningful language. Propositions of natural science fall within this boundary: they describe empirical facts and can be verified or falsified depending on the facts of the world. However, logic itself belongs within language, but in a special way: it does not describe facts but shows the underlying structure that makes representation possible. What lies outside entirely are metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, or religious claims, which attempt to say something about what cannot be represented as a fact. It is here that silence enters the picture, for Wittgenstein insists that where language cannot go, we must not attempt to push it.

Wittgenstein expressed the logical limits of language most vividly in *TLP* by his famous ladder analogy. The propositions in the book itself are likened to rungs of a ladder that must be climbed to gain clarity. Once one has ascended, one must throw the ladder away, recognising that the propositions that helped one see the limits of language are themselves nonsensical when taken as factual statements. According to this view, philosophy is understood not as a body of doctrine but as an active pursuit—a method of clarifying language so that we can see clearly what can be said and what must remain unsaid. The endpoint of philosophy, when clarity is achieved, is silence.

The Limits of Language (What Can Be Said and What Cannot)

As Wittgenstein progresses with his theories, he comes to a significant realisation: language can only convey what lies inside the world. This concept is emphasised by his well-known quote *When one is unable to talk, one must remain silent*. According to Wittgenstein, words are limited to conveying the inexpressible. By examining the limits of language and logic, he demonstrates how some facets of reality are just too abstract to be captured in words.

Therefore, silence is the line separating language from the rest of the world. Thus, it is possible to say that when logic is quiet, the issue of silence arises. Wittgenstein's philosophy of silence relies heavily on language (logic) as its ontological foundation. Wittgenstein emphasises that what is most important in life belongs precisely to what cannot be said. Logical form, for instance, cannot itself be represented in a proposition. It is not a fact within the world but the condition of representation. Similarly, the meaning of life, the essence of ethics, or the

experience of the mystical cannot be stated in propositions. They do not appear among the facts of the world. They are shown in the way we live, in the world's existence itself, and in the practices through which we express value.

Mystical dimension of Silence

To understand Wittgenstein's idea of silence, the difference between saying and showing is essential. But showing does mean nothing: it points us toward dimensions of life that matter most deeply but cannot be reduced to factual description. By the limits of language, Wittgenstein admits that propositional language is unable to adequately convey the most significant facets of human existence, including ethics, aesthetics, and the mystical. These elements fall into a category that is beyond what is rationally or meaningfully comprehensible. Wittgenstein suggests this shift toward the mystical in a sequence of enigmatic utterances at the very end of the *TLP*.

According to Wittgenstein, the domain of the mystical cannot be expressed verbally; instead, it must be *shown*. So, these facets of existence are similar to mystical experiences in that they are outside the realm of logic and are not explicable by the terminology used to express everyday facts. The word *ineffable*, which is frequently connected to mystical or transcendental experiences, describes it. Therefore, the *mystical* should be demonstrated rather than examined through language. In this regard, Wittgenstein writes, "*What is mystical is not the way the world is, but the very fact that it exists.*"² It means that the mystical refers to what cannot be captured by factual propositions or logical analysis—it is not part of the world's describable facts but rather the sheer existence of the world, the sense of value, ethics, aesthetics, or the meaning of life. The sheer existence of the world, the fact that there is something rather than nothing, cannot be put into words. It can only be contemplated in silence. In this regard, Hacker rightly observed, "Just as Kant set limits on reason to leave space for faith, Wittgenstein set limits on language to allow for inexpressible metaphysical truths."³

Mysticism has a deep impact on Wittgenstein's life, and its reflection is seen in his early years. So, Wittgenstein states that the need for the mystical arises from science's failure to fulfil our desires. We believe that our issue remains unaddressed even if every potential scientific query

² Ibid., p. 88.

³ P. M. S. Hacker. "Wittgenstein." In *A Companion to the Philosophers*. Edited by Robert L. Arrington. Oxford: Blackwell. 1999. 342-355.

is resolved. (NB 51, TLP 6.52). This might be seen as the anthropological explanation of the human predilection for the mystical, as well as a profound human need that influences religion and morality. Wittgenstein, therefore, views mysticism as the final shelter for life's most treasured possessions. In this regard, Prof. K.L. Das rightly said, Wittgenstein advises, when faced with what is sacred and ineffable, the most fitting response is reverent silence. The mystical or higher reality surpasses language to such an extent that nothing can be said about it; it is honoured best through silence.

Silence as Ethical Gesture

Ethics provides perhaps the clearest example. Wittgenstein states unequivocally: *"It is evident that ethics cannot be put into words."*⁴ Ethical values are not facts about the world. They cannot be captured in true or false propositions. To try to do so is to misunderstand their nature. And yet ethics, Wittgenstein insists, is the most important matter of all. What gives life meaning and the world its sense is not contained in the world but exists beyond it. This is why, he says in 6.41, *"The world's sense must be found outside the world."*⁵ Ethical silence, then, is not a denial of meaning but a recognition of its transcendence. To remain silent about ethics is to respect its dignity.

In this regard, we find the distinction of values after Wittgenstein, such as lower or accidental and higher or non-accidental, associated with human life. Wittgenstein begins with the accidental values, such as the propositional values. Wittgenstein says that propositional values are lower and accidental. They are artefacts and manmade stipulations. They cannot determine the meaning of life, which depends on the higher and non-accidental values that ethics, religion, and aesthetics can provide. It lies beyond the world. In this sense, Wittgenstein maintains that *"the sense of the world transcends the world itself. Within the world, things are simply as they are, and events occur as they occur. Therefore, no genuine value can be found in the world itself—and even if something were called a value, it would not truly be one."*⁶ Wittgenstein thus subscribes that the real value lies on the other side of the world. This shows a clear transformation or transition of his philosophical position as he begins with the propositional sense. He now claims that the world's sense lies not within the world but beyond it. Thus, here

⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Op. cit., p. 86.

⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

we have two different perceptions of the term sense. He acknowledges the *sense of the proposition* and *the world*. The former is lower, and the latter is higher. The former is stipulated and artificial, whereas the latter is natural. The former no longer determines the meaning of life, whereas the latter determines the meaning of life. This opens up a new dimension as far as our understanding of Wittgenstein's interpretation of the term *sense*. The real value of life is associated with the *sense of the world*, not with the *sense of the proposition*.

Silence in this sense is not neutral but an ethical gesture. It expresses humility in the face of what transcends our grasp. Wittgenstein's personal life reflects this stance. He drew significant inspiration from *The Gospel in Brief* by Leo Tolstoy, which accompanied him during the war. He saw the meaning of life not as a theoretical matter but as a way of living. Silence, for him, was the right response to the deepest questions—not because they are unimportant but because they are too important to be distorted by inadequate words.

Interpretive Debates: Traditional vs. Resolute

This brings up the question of how seriously we should take Wittgenstein's discussion of the ineffable. Two main schools of thought have emerged. The 'traditional' reading holds that Wittgenstein believed in a realm of ineffable truths—ethical, aesthetic, mystical—that cannot be spoken but are nonetheless real. Silence acknowledges their existence while respecting their unsayability. On this view, the *Tractatus* is pointing beyond itself to a higher, inexpressible order. Language points toward a transcendent realm beyond facts.

The resolute interpretation, linked to thinkers like James Conant and Cora Diamond, rejects this interpretation. According to resolute readers, the *Tractatus* does not reveal ineffable truths at all. Its propositions are ladders to be thrown away, and the silence at the end is absolute. What the book teaches is that attempts to make metaphysical or ethical claims in language collapse into nonsense. The point of silence is not to gesture toward the ineffable but to cure us of the temptation to think such nonsense is meaningful.

Here, my support aligns with the traditional view because, as far as my understanding of Wittgenstein is concerned, he clearly treats ethics, aesthetics, and the mystical as of supreme importance, even though they cannot be put into words. He further describes ethics, aesthetics and religion as important or illuminating nonsense because, according to Wittgenstein, they help us to lead a good or happy life. They determine the meaning of life, they determine the value of the world, and this is how they make human life happy and prosperous. Thus, silence plays the crucial role of drawing the boundary line of language and protecting us from

confusion. So, we remain silent about ethics, aesthetics and religion to give dignity to their discourses though they illuminate the meaning of life.

In support of the traditional interpretation of silence, I think Wittgenstein's emphasis on silence was shaped by multiple influences. From Arthur Schopenhauer, he inherited the sense that rational explanation cannot exhaust reality, and that value lies beyond the world of representation. From Soren Kierkegaard, he absorbed the idea that religious truth resists direct communication and requires a kind of silence before God. From Tolstoy, he drew the conviction that the meaning of life is not a matter of doctrine but of attitude and practice. And from his teachers, Frege and Russell, he inherited a rigorous concern with logic, though he pressed their insights to a more radical conclusion. The confluence of these influences produced a philosophy in which silence is not merely logical but existential and spiritual.

Indeed, Wittgenstein's own life testifies to his commitment to silence as more than a theoretical point. He repeatedly withdrew from academic philosophy into solitude, often living in austere conditions. He wrote relatively little and published even less, often suppressing his own manuscripts. To him, philosophy was not a profession but an ethical discipline, a way of life. In this context, his final proposition, "*If something cannot be put into words, then we must keep silent about it.*"⁷, can be read as much as a personal credo as a philosophical injunction.

The silence of the *Tractatus*, therefore, serves a dual role. It is a boundary that marks the limits of language: meaningful speech belongs to the realm of facts, and beyond that lies only nonsense. It is also a horizon that gestures toward what cannot be spoken yet still matters profoundly: ethics, aesthetics, the mystical, the very existence of the world. Silence, then, is not emptiness but fullness. It is the recognition that the most important things are lived rather than said, shown rather than spoken.

For Wittgenstein, silence marks not the conclusion of thinking but the start of a different stance toward it. In this regard, David Pear remarks, "Wittgenstein's refusal to ground religion and morality in factual truth was not a dismissal, but an attempt to safeguard them. Though he labelled them *nonsense* for lacking empirical sense, this was not to dismiss them as meaningless; instead, it marked the initial step in grasping their significance."⁸ This means that once we

⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

⁸ D. F. Pears. *Wittgenstein*. London: Fontana. 1971. P. 57.

understand the limits of language, we are freed from the temptation to misuse it. We can appreciate what can be said clearly while also acknowledging with reverence what lies beyond. In this sense, silence is not merely a refusal but a form of clarity, an ethical and existential stance. It teaches us humility before the mystery of existence and seriousness about what cannot be put into words.

Conclusion

To conclude, Wittgenstein's idea of silence in the *Tractatus* is at once logical, ethical, and mystical. Logically, it follows from the picture theory of meaning, which confines meaningful propositions to the realm of facts. Ethically, it expresses respect for values that cannot be reduced to propositions. Mystically, it gestures toward the wonder of existence itself, which cannot be captured in language. Whether one interprets his silence as pointing to ineffable truths or as dissolving the very idea of them, it is the point of culmination in the *TLP* and the central hallmark of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. Silence marks the place where philosophy ends and life, in its depth and mystery, begins.

Further, Silence is not emptiness. It is filled with significance, reverence, and a recognition of the unsayable. It is the final move of philosophy and, at the same time, a gesture toward what transcends philosophy. Thus, when Wittgenstein ends the *Tractatus* with the injunction to remain silent, he is not merely closing off speech. He is inviting us to see clearly what language can and cannot do, and to recognise that what matters most lies not in propositions but in how we live, act, and respond to the mystery of existence.

Silence has an important and profound role in Wittgenstein's philosophy, especially when it comes to language, meaning, and the boundaries of what may be spoken. More hypothetically, Wittgenstein's fascination with silence may also have mystical or moral implications, shaped by his own ethical and religious sensitivities. According to Wittgenstein, some facets of human existence, like ethical, religious values, could not be sufficiently expressed in words. Even though these aspects of life are extremely significant, they are outside the purview of common conversation, and being silent can be seen as a polite admission of their ineffability. However, in my view, silence is not the endpoint of Wittgenstein's early theory; rather, it is the background against which he reopened his later philosophy. Wittgenstein's early and later philosophies are different from each other because the nature of language is different. In his

later philosophy, he says that one shouldn't ask for meaning but ask for its use or practice. Since his philosophies are different in nature, his later philosophy makes sense only in the background of his early philosophy. The following remarks reflect the truth. *Perhaps the inexpressible—the mysterious that I cannot put into words—forms the background that gives meaning to all that I am able to express. (CV 16e)*. This leads me to say that, as a linguistic philosopher, his philosophical development was most consistent and planned, because he began with the propositional sense, then, based on this propositional sense, he shifted to the non-propositional domain, which includes inexpressibility, the mystical and silence. Again, based on these, he opens up his later philosophical writings with a new type of language to make philosophy a meaningful discourse, and both his early and later philosophies give his philosophy completeness.

Therefore, from the aforesaid discussion, I conclude by saying that, as a linguistic philosopher, he views language as the most important component to make philosophy a meaningful discourse. According to him, philosophy is all about the clarification of language and thoughts. The purpose of philosophy, for Wittgenstein, is linguistic clarification—a view he underscores in 4.112, where he writes, *Philosophy is not theoretical knowledge but a form of activity*. He, therefore, arrives at the silence by applying logical analysis to the language. The term silence gets its utmost importance in Wittgenstein's philosophy, which is evident from the letter he writes to his friend Ludwig von Ficker, a very close friend of his. The letter says that the book's ethical message is its main focus. He also writes that there are two components to my work. Regarding the first one, I have put everything explicitly, but everything else that I haven't written is about the second part, which is the most fundamental in *Tractatus*. To put it another way, by the term, *silent* Wittgenstein has been able to solidify everything in his manuscript, where many others are simply gasping. This is where the *Tractatus* gains its significance in relation to Wittgenstein's notion of silence.

References

Primary Texts

- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Notebooks 1914–1916*. Edited by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. Edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

Secondary Sources

- Anscombe, G. E. M. *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. 2nd ed. London: Hutchinson, 1971.
- Black, Max. *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964.
- Diamond, Cora. "Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the Tractatus." *Philosophy* 63, no. 243 (1988): 5–27.
- Hacker, P. M. S. *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Revised ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Janik, Allan, and Stephen Toulmin. *Wittgenstein's Vienna*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.
- McGuinness, Brian. *Approaches to Wittgenstein: Collected Papers*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990.
- Conant, James. "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" In *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, 242–283. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989.
- Stern, David G. *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. (For contrast with later Wittgenstein.)