

## Wittgenstein and The Crisis in Modern Civilization

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Wittgenstein is not only a philosopher in the strict academic sense but also a thinker of great depth and vision. He has not only brought about revolution in the field of philosophy but also changed the direction of human thinking in general by making an appeal to the innermost spirit of man. Philosophy for him is not just an intellectual tool of analysis and comprehension but a way of life, a means of liberation from the bondages of life and above all an ascent to the vision of reality that ensures freedom from sickness and bondages of the human soul.

The present essay is an effort to go into the main Wittgensteinian framework for understanding the modern Western civilization and for diagnosing its ills. As is well-known, Wittgenstein is a great critic of the modern civilization in which he was born. He left no opportunity to debunk this civilization which he characterized as anti-spiritual and anti-human. Like many thinkers of the West like Schopenhauer, Spengler, Toynbee and many others, he believed that the modern Western civilization is on the brink of a collapse because of its non-spiritual nature and its grossly materialistic culture.

### 1. CIVILIZATION WITHOUT A CULTURE

Wittgenstein characterizes the modern Western civilization as a civilization without a culture. That is, for him, this civilization is without a soul, i.e. without the spring of life which flows unhindered. It lacks depth and is superficial in its approach to human life. For him, it is a dying civilization.

Civilization is a system of outward development comprising the material and economic development along with its scientific and technological advancements. Thus civilizations stand for what we may call the tangible development in all spheres of human activity. This is manifested in the houses we build, the magnificent bridges we

construct and above all in the new technological wonders we create. All these constitute the progress that we achieve in all fronts of human activity. The civilizations of the past such as those of Greece, Rome and Egypt had their great achievements in all spheres of activity. The present day civilizations of Europe and America have excelled all past civilizations in their technological skills and material development.

Culture is the inner and intangible aspects of a civilization. It stands for the inner life and values and higher aspirations which keep the civilization alive. Culture therefore is the set of values that bring grace and order into the life of the people, the society and the entire human community at large. In this sense civilization and culture stand in an inseparable relation as a civilization without a culture is empty and a culture without civilization is blind. The modern civilization in the West is gradually separated from culture because it becomes progressively detached from the springs of life and soul. It snaps its touch with the eternal values of life. Wittgenstein expresses this in the following passage:

It is very remarkable that we should be inclined to think of civilization—houses, trees, cars, etc.—as separating man from his origins, from what is lofty and eternal, etc. Our civilized environment, alone with its trees and plants, strikes us then as though it were cheaply wrapped in cellophane and isolated from everything great, from God as it were. That is a remarkable picture that intrudes on us (*Culture and Value* [CV]: p. 50e)

The modern Western civilization is in essence negative in the sense that it separates man from his divine origin and thus it creates the illusion of self-sufficiency in its indifference to the higher values of life. Wittgenstein laments that such a picture of human civilization has been thrust on us by the twentieth century materialist civilization.

Why has it become inevitable for the twentieth century man to forget his lofty and eternal values? This question has bothered Wittgenstein throughout his life. The quest for the eternal values has been his passion in view of his commitment to the idea that values as such have no temporal existence and so have to be searched in a transcendental realm. In this connection he remarks in the *Tractatus*:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value." (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [TLP]: 6.41)

Values have a transcendental dimension in the sense that they are taken as lofty and eternal. That is, they are taken to be the eternal realities that inspire us from outside life and thus work as the

transcendental source of the meaning of life and the universe. Wittgenstein minces no words in offering a transcendental view of our ethical life. He says:

And so it impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.  
Propositions can express nothing that is higher (TLP: 6.42)

He further adds:

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.  
Ethics is transcendental (TLP: 6.421)

This transcendental view of ethics and values have had its implications regarding human culture and civilization. No civilization can survive if it does not directly or indirectly pursue eternal values. Civilization itself cannot manifest the values in its industry and technology but it must keep room for such pursuits which are meant for manifesting values, such as music, religion, art and painting. These latter constitute the culture of the civilization. Thus culture keeps the eternal values intact while civilization may forget them. Civilization being external it cannot lead us to what is good and valuable in life. Only culture can lead us to the values enshrined in the inner life of the civilized man. Wittgenstein echoes this thought in the following words:

What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural! You cannot lead people to what is good; you can lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts (CV: p. 3e)

This reminds us of the fact that the values do not come into being as the products of the civilization. They are not products at all. That is why civilization fails to capture the values. But culture is the transparent medium of the values as values constitute the essence of culture. The twentieth century has maintained a gap between culture and values on one hand and its civilizational achievements on the other. That is why this civilization fails to have a culture (cf. CV: p. 64).

## 2. CIVILIZATION AND PROGRESS

The modern Western civilization is wedded to the ideal of progress. It seems to have become the basic goal of this civilization to have all round progress not only in the sphere of trade and economics, but also in the sphere of the intellectual activities such as science and technology. Progress is the hallmark of the Western model of development. The Western man believes in the idea that there is the goal of

complete progress towards which we must move. This goal of progress has so much seized the Western mind that it cannot think of anything less than complete control of nature and the natural resources. Out of this idea of progress has emerged the new horizon of science and technology.

From the sixteenth century onwards, the modern Western science has steadily progressed to its present stage of development. There has been a steady development in the invention of new scientific instruments for harnessing the natural resources. All the technological skills man has acquired in these past few centuries are amazingly complex and mind-boggling. The world has been transformed into a technological universe by virtue of the new techniques made available to common man. Thus, there is now a whole lot of material amenities made available for the rich who can afford them. As a result there has been competition in the sphere of business and commerce for increasing the purchasing power of the ordinary men and women. Thus, a consumerist civilization has arrived unnoticed under the shadow of the idea of progress. Progress has become synonymous with acquisition of wealth and the consequent access to new technological gadgets.

Wittgenstein characterizes this materialist and consumerist civilization as bereft of any culture worth the name. It is this civilization that has made man a machine, a robot who has almost become the slave of the machine. The Industrial Civilization has reduced man to an insignificant worker in the factor or at best a highly paid mechanic in the Industry. Wittgenstein shares with Marx the nostalgia for the primitive societies where man was not alienated from his labour and had the dignity of a human being. Though Marx dreamt of a classless society of the workers, Wittgenstein did not visualize a society of workers but a society that was closer to nature and God. Like Gandhi, he dreamt of the commune of the tillers and the fruit-gatherers who lived in Nature in the environment of self-satisfaction. These are not the industrial communes but the spiritual communes living in peace and amity. Thus Wittgenstein shares with Rousseau the idea of an idyllic civilization that keeps nature and man together. Wittgenstein's admiration for Tolstoy comes from this source. Incidentally Gandhi and Wittgenstein share a common admiration for Tolstoy.<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein's antipathy to science and technology comes from his belief that science does not solve the problems of life. He writes:

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 (TLP: 6.52).

That is, science does not raise questions related to the essential concerns of life and therefore it has nothing to do with how life is led except in the external sense. The inner life is completely screened off by science. This vital human activity called science thus remains indifferent to man and his problems.

Wittgenstein's rejection of the scientific attitude to life is based on his realization that science ultimately fails to solve the spiritual problem of life. The spirit of man is above the domain of facts and its causal history. It is well-known that science pertains to the domain of the facts and that it at best can explain why particular things happen the way they happen. But beyond that it cannot say why there are things at all in the universe. Thus there is a limit to the scientific explanations. Beyond science there is the metaphysics of the unsayable and the inexplicable. Modern science, however, does not admit its limits; it believes that it can explain everything including the ultimate source of the universe. But that is an illusion. Wittgenstein says:

The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. (TLP: 6.371)

The illusion follows from the idea that the laws of nature are really the explanations of the natural phenomena. They are at best the way we try to understand the world and are therefore, ". . . about the net and not what the net describes" (TLP: 6.35). Thus science is basically a method of description of what happens in the world but not an explanation of 'why' things happen at all. In this science has its limits *vis-à-vis* the ultimate metaphysical explanation of the universe.

Wittgenstein declares that science represents the lower level of intellectual life of man because it only attempts at a mere description of things. It cannot go beyond the phenomenal world in search of the ultimate meaning of the world. It is bound by its own insufficiency to penetrate into the deep mystery of the world. The mystery of the world lies beyond the intellectual categories. It remains mystical. Defending the mystical, Wittgenstein writes:

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical." (TLP: 6.522)

This shows that everything cannot be a matter of scientific description. There is a residue which is beyond the language of science.

That residue is mystical and indescribable.

Thus Wittgenstein comes to the conclusion that the civilization based on science is really not the ideal civilization. It is only a half-made civilization which is incomplete and inadequate. It does not stand for what is the best in the human spirit. That is why this civilization is bound to collapse under the weight of its own emptiness. Wittgenstein very prophetically writes:

... It isn't absurd, e.g., to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end of humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are (CV: p. 56e).

It is true that science has created the illusion in man about the ultimate triumph over nature and man's supremacy in the world. He has forgotten that he is an insignificant part of the infinite universe—a small agent in the cosmic drama. That is why Wittgenstein reminds mankind of its own limits and the vast realm of truth that lies beyond its comprehension.

### 3. SPIRITUAL LIFE VS. MATERIAL PROGRESS

Wittgenstein stands for a spiritual civilization that can ensure the liberation of mankind from false ideas and opinions which have clouded our thinking. He stands for the spiritual civilization of the bygone ages which felt nearer to God. He sees this prospect in the teaching of the Gospel which speaks directly from the heart of the devout humanity. Wittgenstein is no more a champion of religion in the ordinary accepted sense. He sees in religion the beginning of a spiritually awakened life that takes the religious beliefs as a matter of faith and commitment. In religion there is the calmness of the human passions and the rise of the sense of God. He writes:

Religion is, as it were, the calm bottom of the sea at its deepest point, which remains calm however high the waves on the surface may be. (CV: p. 53e)

In religion one can get spiritual salvation which consists in the release from the torments of the soul created by our false beliefs and opinions. Religion, thus, has a deep spiritual meaning.

Spirituality knows no boundaries of religion, race and language. It is above all the universal language of human spirit. It is the language through which God speaks to mankind. Echoing Martin Heidegger's<sup>2</sup>

idea that the Being reveals itself to man in history, Wittgenstein considers the eternal spirit as revealing itself in the manifold activities of the human soul. The spirit, like Heidegger's Being, is itself beyond the language of the material world. It is the limit of the material world. Thus spirituality makes a transcendental leap into the 'Beyond' that is itself infinite and unlimited. Wittgenstein is influenced by Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy and many others in his search for the infinite spirit in the Beyond. Though he does not give a specific name to this Infinite Spirit, yet it is quite clear that he is struggling to suggest that there is the higher Reality that may be called God. He writes:

*How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world. (TLP: 6.432).*

Thus, there is a higher reality that is beyond the limits of the world, and it must be taken to be the background of everything that is phenomenally real. Wittgenstein sees in this higher reality the possibility of the salvation of mankind.

The material world is the world of the appearances that present to us the fragmentary character of things. They show those aspects that matter to our immediate concern. But this world of appearances itself has to have a source in the ultimate Being which is the ultimate reference point in all our descriptions of the world. Thus, there is no hypothesis of the Creator in Wittgenstein's metaphysics. There is only the indication that the world itself is a 'contingent scheme' of things that needs a 'necessary Being'. He believes that the ultimate Being is the true source of human existence and the existence of the non-human world. The Being is the non-contingent source of all existence.

Wittgenstein's spiritual world-view has the existential dimension as well as the metaphysical faith in the Infinite Reality. He shares the existential concern for human salvation and the redemption from the sickness of the human spirit. It is the sickness of the spirit that underlines the need of religion and spirituality. In sickness lies the need of spirituality. Wittgenstein has deliberately made a distinction between the intellectualist approach to spirituality and the passionate and existentialist concern for salvation. It is the latter that defines the way of spiritual life which is not a set of doctrines but a way of life. It is a matter of inward transformation. Thus Wittgenstein's vision of life includes the total transformation of the inward life of man culminating in his spiritual freedom from fear, attachment and bondage of life.

Wittgenstein does not seem to entertain the idea that spiritual

salvation is meant only for the select few who live in the monasteries and the hermitage. According to him, it is a universal way of life open to all those who can reflect on the deep need of rising above the lower level of life. The secret of spiritual life lies in the aspiration for the higher, and the feeling of being spiritually sick. When one has this feeling, one gets fed up with the mundane life and seeks the presence of the Divine Reality. Wittgenstein expresses this idea in the following way:

People are religious to the extent they believe themselves to be not so much *imperfect*, as *ill*.

Any man who is half-way decent will think himself extremely imperfect, but a religious man thinks himself *wretched* (CV: p. 45e).

The feeling of being spiritually sick is the genuine source of religious life. Herein lies what the Buddha would call the genuine need of *nirvāṇa*. Wittgenstein's idea of the sickness of the soul and the Buddha's idea of suffering (*dukkha*) has much in common because both recommended an inward transformation as a way out of the bondage of life. This search for salvation is not just an idle speculation for them as they believe that one has to go beyond the present state of life to overcome the sickness.

Spirituality for Wittgenstein does not demand any religious denomination or any philosophical label. It is an open-ended form of life that recommends no particular idea of the higher order of life. It throws open the possibilities of life in the infinite directions. It releases man from the pain and misery of the soul and opens up a level of existence that is no more attached to a particular mode of expression. This free expression of life is the hallmark of a spiritually enlightened person. Spiritual enlightenment consists in the feeling of being free from any kind of torment of the soul. Wittgenstein, like Buddha, does not demand that one must depend on a transcendent reality for obtaining spiritual enlightenment. It is the self-transcendence that matters as the key to spiritual enlightenment.

#### 4. WITTGENSTEIN AND THE VEDANTIC WAY OF LIFE

Wittgenstein's approach to problems of life is Vedantic in spirit in the sense that he believes like the Vedantic seers that ultimate solution to all spiritual problems lies in us, that is, in changing our own life and attitude. Wittgenstein writes:

How can man be happy at all, since he cannot ward off the misery of the world?  
Through the life of knowledge.

The conscience is the happiness that the life of knowledge preserves.

The life of knowledge is the life that is happy in spite of the misery of the world.

The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world.

To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate.

(Notebook-1914-16, p. 81e)

Here the talk about the life of knowledge is concerning the spiritual enlightenment that brings about a transformation in the life of one's own such that one does not suffer from the misery of the world. One Remains undisturbed by the happenings in the world. This corresponds to the Gītā's ideal of *sthita-prajñā*<sup>3</sup> which means that the truly enlightened person is one who renounces all attachments to the world. The attachment to the world is the root cause of our bondage and the consequent suffering.

Wittgenstein's Vedantic way of looking at things lies in his idea that there are no ways of solving life's problems except in seeing them disappear. Problems like suffering are not permanent states of a person; they arise when we are in deep delusion. Once the delusion is over, all the problems disappear. Wittgenstein says:

The problems of life are insoluble on the surface and can only be solved in depth. They are insoluble in surface dimensions. (CV: p. 74e)

In the depth dimensions the problems themselves disappear as they are not genuine problems; they are illusions bred through lack of knowledge or *avidyā*.

The Vedantic notion of *avidyā* suggests that man's problems are created by confusion, that is, by the lack of knowledge to distinguish the real from the unreal, the eternal from the non-eternal, and the truth from the falsehood. Because of this ignorance, we fail to know the ultimate reality and so are engrossed in the world of ephemeral things. This delusion of clinging to the ephemeral world or the *saṃsāra* is what is known as bondage. This can be removed by leading a life of knowledge which brings an end to all suffering. The Upaniṣads<sup>4</sup> eloquently speak of the virtues of knowledge that remove suffering and misery. Wittgenstein comes closer to the Vedantic way of thinking by emphasizing knowledge as the key to the removal of suffering. He insists that philosophy alone can bring about complete cessation of suffering.

For both Wittgenstein and the Vedanta, the modern scientific

suffering.

For both Wittgenstein and the Vedanta, the modern scientific civilization suffers from the bankruptcy of the soul in that it has no roots in the spiritual soil of mankind. It has removed itself from the eternal sources of culture and religion. That is why the modern civilization is empty and soulless. Wittgenstein's panacea for this state of affairs is a return to the spirit of man and his spiritual heritage. The Vedanta provides the platform on which the civilization can be rebuilt—it provides the way out of the mess by asking us to look within. So the future of mankind and the human civilization lies in the spiritual development of man.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See, Suresh Chandar, "Attacking Modern Western Civilization: Mahatma Gandhi and Ludwig Wittgenstein" (forthcoming) in *Philosophy of Wittgenstein; Indian Responses*, (ed.) R.C. Pradhan, New Delhi: Decent Books, 2000.
2. See, J.L. Mehta, *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University, 1967).
3. Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, II.
4. Cf. *Kāthopaniṣad*.