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Silence as the Ultimate Fulfillment of the Philosophical Quest

Stephen Palmquist*

Abstract

The surprising comment Wittgenstein makes at the end of his Tractatus suggests that, even though the analysis of words is the proper method of doing philosophy, philosophy's ultimate aim may be to experience silence. Whereas Wittgenstein never explains what he meant by his cryptic conclusion, Kant provides numerous clues as to how the same position can be understood in a more complete and systematic way. Distinguishing between the meanings of "silence," "noise" and "sound" provides a helpful way of understanding how philosophers can devote so much effort to analyzing words even though their quest is ultimately fulfilled only in a deep experience of reality that is most adequately expressed in silence.

Keywords: *experience, insight, Kant, linguistic analysis, meaning, metaphysics, mysticism, noise, silence, Wittgenstein.*

"... one can speak far more of that of which one knows nothing than of that of which one knows something" (Kant, 1902, vol. 29, p.78).

Philosophy is about understanding words and how words come to have meaning. Thus much of the best philosophical thought and writing, especially in the twentieth century, has dealt with the analysis of

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language, perfecting the art and science of logical clarity and consistency. Nevertheless, one of the most influential linguistic philosophers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, ended his first book with the cryptic message: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1961, §7). This tantalizingly mysterious, single-sentence concluding section to a book that attempted to provide a highly logical explanation of how words can have the power to convey meaning has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways.

Could Wittgenstein have been a mystic? This seems rather unlikely, given the great number of words he wrote on wholly non-mystical themes. Yet in the few paragraphs immediately preceding the above quote, he points out that *some* things "cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical." (§6.522). He then encourages us "to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy" (§6.53) and suggests that we correct a person who has attempted to speak metaphysically by demonstrating "that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions." Such a person (presumably Wittgenstein was thinking of his students) would be dissatisfied, feeling we had *failed* in the task of "teaching him philosophy;" yet "*this* method would be the only strictly correct one."

Not being a Wittgenstein scholar, I shall make no attempt in this essay to explain how (or indeed, *whether*) these apparently mystical comments can be made consistent with the rest of Wittgenstein's philosophical corpus. However, I do wish to argue that the *prima facie* meaning of his words at the close of the *Tractatus* might be intended with the utmost seriousness. Although the philosophical task involves the analysis of words, the *ultimate fulfillment* of this task is an experience not unlike that described by mystics, wherein the words cease and are replaced by an awareness (sometimes called a "vision" or even, paradoxically, a "sound") of wordless silence. As Wittgenstein puts it immediately before the famous concluding sentence of the *Tractatus* "He must transcend these propositions" (§6.54)—i.e., the propositions of Wittgenstein's *own* philosophy, the propositions whose paradoxical purpose is to induce an awareness of the inability of philosophers to gain any knowledge of anything metaphysical, yet whose status cannot themselves be counted as anything other than metaphysical—"and then he will *see* the world aright." Here Wittgenstein is suggesting that the intended result of this new type of metaphysics is not (as in classical metaphysics) to gain knowledge, but rather, *to induce a certain type of experience*. This experience,

and not the words themselves, constitutes the final goal of doing philosophy.¹

Many other philosophers before Wittgenstein have acknowledged a role for silence as more than just the potentially-embarrassing space we must leave between our words in order for our speech to be understood. Kant, for example, once declared near the end of a book on the structure of the cosmos: "In the universal silence of nature and in the calm of the senses the immortal spirit's hidden faculty of knowledge speaks an ineffable language and gives [us] undeveloped concepts, which are indeed felt, but do not let themselves be described."² Kant penned this sentence in 1755, when he was just 31 years old and before he had published any of the works that eventually made him famous. In developing his Critical philosophy, though, he became suspicious of notions like "hidden faculty of knowledge," for he recognized that anything "noumenal" (Kant's mature term for what I think he was groping toward in his earlier statement) is *by epistemological necessity* unknowable. To put it simply, the fact that it is "hidden" (not to mention "ineffable") already indicates that it is (in itself) unknowable.

Even in the first *Critique* Kant makes clear that he does not wish to *deny the reality* of this ineffable realm.³ Rather, he (very much like Wittgenstein after him) wants to put metaphysics in its proper place, by showing that any attempt or claim to gain *knowledge* of this realm is bound to be illusory. Yet, as he argues in the Transcendental Dialectic, our inclination to *go on a quest* in search of such knowledge is both inevitable and, in itself, bound to be fruitless. It is, he says, "a *natural* and inevitable *illusion*, which rests on subjective principles, and foists them upon us as objective" (Kant, 1929, p.B354).⁴ The subjective principle Kant is referring to here is reason's tendency to generalize. It is *natural* insofar as reasoning would be impossible without this tendency; but it becomes illusory when our impulse to generalization extends out beyond the bounds of possible experience and attempts to encompass "totality". This tendency is what Kant is referring to when he encourages us to become *well-grounded* in the "fruitful *bathos* of experience" before we go off exploring in the realm of metaphysics

This domain [i.e., experience, as analysed in the first one-third of the *Critique*, especially in the Transcendental Analytic] is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth—enchanted name!—surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and

many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion. (pp.B294-B295)

What, if any, relation does this have to silence or to the *ultimate fulfillment* of the philosophical quest? Kant seems here to be warning us that this quest (our mental voyage into the “stormy ocean” of metaphysics) *will not* bear the fruit it promises. Like Tantalus in ancient Greek mythology, we will be left forever trapped by the water surrounding us, seeing the fruit of our longing as if it were right before our eyes, yet never able to grasp it or bring it home.

Perhaps that, precisely, is the point. The point of doing metaphysics, if we are to believe Kant and the early Wittgenstein, is to *show* us this vision of a reality that can be “seen” (as the foregoing quotes from both Kant and Wittgenstein suggest) but cannot be *understood*, in the sense of reducing it to the propositions of science. This is why Kant’s second *Critique* shifts gears entirely and adopts an *explicitly* subjective standpoint to examine the implications of our moral nature. Perhaps it is not logic, but our moral sense, that can fulfill our forlorn love of Lady Truth, once and for all. Here, Kant argues, the philosopher’s verbal explanations of how and why “ultimate reality” can be a matter of rational belief, even though it is unknowable, bring us closer to the goal than classical (“speculative”) metaphysics ever could. However, even in the realm of morals, Kant leaves us disappointed. For in the Dialectic of the second *Critique* he likewise concludes that the most we can infer from our moral nature is that two of the three most important “ideas of reason” (namely, God, freedom, and immortality) are no more than “postulates of practical reason”. That is, God and immortality are *necessary affirmations* that must be made (Kant argues) by anyone who wishes both to *be* moral and to view the choice to be moral as a rational one.⁵ However, practical reason does not leave us wholly unsatisfied. For earlier in the second *Critique* Kant affirms that the other idea, freedom, is *the* fundamental “fact” of practical reason.

This is significant, because Kant devotes very few words to the defense of his view of freedom in the second *Critique*. Rather, he appeals to *our undeniable awareness* of this “something”, and the fact that this awareness is the very source of our ability to make moral choices, even though (troublingly, for anyone who demands *knowledge* of a thing before believing it is true) theoretical reason on its own is powerless to prove

we really are free. This awareness of our own freedom is, for Kant, the first point where reason rests, silently affirming that it has “come home”. Having reached this partial fulfillment of his philosophical longing, Kant is able to muse, in the Conclusion to the second *Critique*:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely conjecture them and seek them as though obscured in darkness or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I associate them directly with the consciousness of my own existence. (Kant, 1956, pp.161-162)

This deep awareness of his own position as a free being in the natural world then serves as a foundation for the third *Critique* and the writings on religion,⁶ where Kant comes gradually closer to treating the ideas of God and immortality in the way he treated freedom in the second *Critique*—namely, in terms of our own subjective awareness, rather than as objects we can understand in the manner of scientific knowledge. A concept such as grace, for example, becomes for Kant not a theological doctrine to be defended in the manner of a *creed* (a belief claimed with the certainty of knowledge), but an experienced hope for “a higher assistance inscrutable to us” (1934, p.45).

What is noteworthy about the progress of Kant’s philosophical quest—from the heady early days (before he became a professor in 1770) when traditional debates like the mind-body problem, proofs for the existence of God, and the nature of the physical world held his attention, through the decade of the 1780s when the three *Critiques* were written, to his final decade as a writer, when religious, political, and historical issues came to the forefront of his mind—is that Kant’s philosophizing moved from an almost exclusive preoccupation with advancing metaphysical theories, through a more cautious stage when his metaphysical words tended to be more paradoxical and self-limiting, to a quiet and fulfilled state where the presence of a transcendent reality (the “noumenal”) can be sensed on almost every page, but is difficult (if not impossible, at times) to *pin down* to the actual words he is using. That is, as Kant grew older, he seemed more and more to be putting into practice Wittgenstein’s concluding maxim in the *Tractatus*: what he realized he could not speak about, but nevertheless *saw clearly* before his eyes (at least the eyes of his morally-inspired imagination), he either passed over in

silence or described in metaphors that would do no more than point in generally the right direction.

If Kant and Wittgenstein are right, and silence really *is* the ultimate fulfillment of the philosophical quest, then this leads us, as philosophers, to ask: What *is* silence? And what exactly is its *role* in the philosophical quest for understanding? Here we must guard against the temptation to provide a simplistic answer, for *any* attempt to answer such a question (given that an answer will be expressed in the form of *words*) will have the paradoxical effect of *blocking* the very reality we are seeking to elicit (namely, silence). Our best hope, then, is to *embrace the paradox*, in the hope that our willingness to hold tightly to both sides will eventually bear the fruit of a vision of that elusive reality we are after: *silence*.

On the *surface*, the word "silence" seems to refer merely to the absence of sound. Thus, for example, if students are talking too loudly during a lecture, the teacher might say: "Silence please!" This would mean something like: "Please stop making those sounds!" However, the word "silence" normally suggests much more than this. For there are some kinds of sound that do *not* disturb our silence. Certain types of music, for example, can promote just the sort of deep, reflective awareness that the word "silence" is attempting to convey. Thus, for example, the popular song, "Sound of Silence," clearly implies that silence is not the *absence* of sound, but is itself a (paradoxical) *kind* of sound.

Noise, in contrast to silence, can be defined as "*disturbing* sound." In this sense noise might not actually make any sound, as heard by our physical ears. A recalcitrant *thought* might function as noise, while the birds chirping away in a nearby tree might promote silence (in the well-disposed listener) even though they are making quite a loud sound. In the same way, the background music in a film makes lots of *sound*; yet it can actually promote a sense of silence in the film if used in the right way. But if the music detracts our attention from the action happening on the screen, then it begins to function more like noise. Music can similarly enhance the conversation between friends; but if the same music is playing while one of them is trying to tune a guitar, it will probably function more like noise.

Such examples suggest that the type of silence that serves as the ultimate fulfillment of the philosophical quest is an *inner* experience, not a scientifically measurable statement about the decibel level of the sound waves coming into a person's ears. What then can we *do* to cultivate within ourselves a disposition that enables us to experience silence when other people are being disturbed by the sounds all around us? How can

what is noise to other people become like music to our ears? And in particular, how can doing philosophy move us further along this path, rather than driving us crazy with the intolerable noise of its unanswerable questions? These questions are far too complex to answer in this foundational essay, where my purpose is not to fulfill the quest, but only to understand what it is.⁷

Of course, even after coming to the realization that our philosophizing is directing us toward an awareness of silence, we must use words in order to philosophize. The point of viewing silence as the goal is that this conveys the notion that in philosophy (or at least, in any application of philosophy to metaphysical problems) our words will never be anything more than pointers to a reality that is essentially unspeakable, knowable in its depth only when we are willing to "pass over in silence" the experience itself, observing it in such a way that we become aware of it in its depths.

When I teach Introduction to Philosophy to students in Hong Kong, I encourage them to be constantly on the lookout for experiences where this inner silence gives rise to what I regard as the single most important component of any good philosophy: *insight*.⁸ Insight alone, of course, is not enough to make philosophy "good", because our insights can be wrong. We must subject our insights to the scalpel of critical analysis, in order to discover what *reasons* we can use to support and defend them, before we present them as worthy of acceptance by others. All too much philosophy nowadays is little more than playing around with this analytical scalpel, without any evidence that the writer has experienced the silent insight that enriches and enlivens the whole exercise, making it worthwhile to undertake in the first place.

When the connection between silence and insight is recognized, we can appreciate how it is possible that beginners in philosophy can sometimes experience, even at a deep level, the ultimate fulfillment of the philosophical quest, while seasoned "professionals" might find the experience of such silent wonder frustratingly infrequent. The explanation of this phenomenon is that the insight depends more on one's aptitude for silence than on one's logical ingenuity. Some philosophers devote so much effort to logic-chopping that it is no wonder their work never seems to reach any *point*.

This view of philosophy (or philosophical reflection) as finding its *resting point* in a wordless awareness of "the way things are" is commonplace in many non-western philosophical traditions. In Indian philosophy, for example, it almost goes without saying that, when we

learn to “[a]ppreciate purely the sense objective world as it is,” then “[w]ords become redundant” (Suddhananda, 2002, p.141).⁹ Examples of such claims abound in the literature, giving rise to the suspicion among many western philosophers that such claims are really nothing but religion in disguise. But what if even Wittgenstein (and Kant before him) shared a similar perspective? What if they, too, understood that our rational analysis of linguistic constructions, important though this is to the philosopher, reaches its ultimate fulfillment only when the analysis comes to an end?

The statement of Kant’s, quoted at the very beginning of this paper, may have a similar meaning. At one level (being an excerpt from Kant’s lectures on psychology), it surely refers to the tendency most people have to talk *more* about an issue the *less* they understand it. This is a purely psychological phenomenon of compensation. We hide our ignorance by trying to appear knowledgeable. But at a deeper level, that quote may also imply that, if it were possible to have *absolute knowledge*, or a genuine knowledge of “ultimate reality,” then *by definition*, we would find that knowledge *impossible to talk about*. It would be knowledge; and yet (paradoxically), no word or collection of words could possibly express it to another person.

Endnotes

1. A recent book by F. Davoine and J. Gaudillere has a subtitle that contains a parody of Wittgenstein’s famous maxim about silence. The book is called *History Beyond Trauma: Whereof One Cannot Speak, Thereof One Cannot Stay Silent*. Obviously, its main theme is that people who have gone through an experience so traumatic that they are unable to speak about it openly will be *impelled* to speak about it in subtle ways that reveal, indirectly, what they have suffered. But the subtitle’s allusion to Wittgenstein’s maxim also raises (for us) the interesting possibility that the position Wittgenstein defended near the end of *Tractatus*, with its paradoxical *need to speak* about what one is (according to the maxim itself) officially not even *able* to speak about, might indicate that Wittgenstein himself had experienced a trauma that he had, up to that point in his life, been psychologically unable to face. If this were indeed the case, then one might further speculate that, when Wittgenstein then left his philosophical pursuits for a number of years thereafter, he was able to work through that psychological inertia, and this may be what enabled him to *speak about* the very sorts of issues (in *Philosophical Investigations*) that he had barred himself from talking about in the earlier work. Or, the latter writing might be regarded as a retreat, as further evidence that “one cannot remain silent”

when one has experienced a trauma so great that it disturbs the inner silence that we need to reach a true fulfillment of the philosophical quest.

2. See Kant 1981, p.196 (p.367 in the German *Academy Edition* of Kant’s works). I have revised Jaki’s translation in consultation with Kant’s original text. Jaki’s translation is: “In the universal quiet of nature and in the tranquility of mind there speaks the hidden capacity for knowledge of the immortal soul in unspecifiable language and offers undeveloped concepts that can be grasped but not described.”
3. For a concise introduction to Kant’s theoretical philosophy and its implications for metaphysics, see Palmquist 2000a, Lectures 7 and 8. Lecture 16 provides a summary of Wittgenstein’s early (*Tractatus*) and late (*Philosophical Investigations*) periods, showing how both of his approaches to philosophy are consistent with the overall view of “the philosophical quest” I develop in that book, and am defending in this essay. An online version of the book is available at <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/TP4>.
4. Kant 1929, p.B354. References to Kant’s first *Critique* are to the original German pagination of the second (“B”) edition. References to other works of Kant are to the *Academy Edition* pagination, provided in the margins of most translations.
5. See Palmquist 2000a, Lecture 24, for a more detailed introduction to Kant’s moral philosophy. For a more detailed, scholarly explanation and interpretation of all three *Critiques*, see Palmquist 1993, especially Part Three.
6. See Palmquist 2000a, Lecture 29 and Lectures 32-33, respectively, for more detail on Kant’s theories of beauty and religion. For a far more thorough, scholarly treatment of this area of Kant’s philosophy, see Palmquist 2000b.
7. For further discussion of how silence can fulfill the philosophical quest, see Palmquist 2000a, Lecture 28 and all of Part Four. In *The Tree of Philosophy*, I associate silence with the philosophical discipline of *ontology*, where the deep essence of our being is under investigation. I therefore examine how philosophers have seen both mystery and paradox in human experiences such as beauty, love, symbolism, religion, anxiety, courage, and death.
8. See Palmquist 2000a, Lecture 2, for further discussion of the role of insight in philosophy.
9. Suddhananda 2002, p.141. He goes on to say: “But for my ‘being’, to ‘be’ myself, I do not need a thought.” For “to listen to the sound of silence, we do not need any specific decibel because it [silence] does not need any sound to announce its presence, it being self-evident.”

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