

HOW LANGUAGE WORKS ON HUMAN BEING: THE CONCEPT OF 'ORDINARY' IN WITTGENSTEIN

Ashique Shoukath P

Lecturer

Abstract

The paper aims to examine how humans use language and how humans know the world or reality with language. The paper looks into different philosophical schools: Ralph Emerson from the transcendentalist movement, Ludwig Wittgenstein from the analytic philosophy tradition, Slavoj Žižek, the cultural marxist, and Judith Butler from the post-structuralist feminist tradition. The paper argues that Butler and Žižek argue that both power, which is inter-connected with language, and human desire and pleasure become intertwined. The struggle of the human being in this regard should be dealt with trying to understand our thinking and through hermeneutic questioning. Wittgenstein and Emerson on the other hand adopted the postmodern philosophy of anti-foundationalism and celebrating the everyday and the ordinary.

Keywords: ordinary, language, pleasure, power

How language uses humans, at least how we use language is a major concern of both Judith Butler, an American post-structuralist feminist, and the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek. They emphasized the arbitrariness of the 'Sign' and entertained less concern over the correspondence of words with reality. This struggle and vulnerability is a major theme in the postmodern tradition. This essay expands this notion of struggle and vulnerability in the writings of these two thinkers, particularly focusing on Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004) and Žižek's *You May!* (1999).

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler examines how identity and sexuality intersect with politics. She argues that gender does not exist as an essential category and ultimately is informed by politics concerning performance and improvisation. 'Sex', 'gender' and 'anatomy' are all culturally framed and extends it's beyond cultural framing she argued - "To understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that 'anatomy' and 'sex' are not without cultural framing." This is the struggle for existence which is very critical in Butler's thought. In struggling with the vulnerabilities, the human self is not seen as an individualistic and autonomous, rather one involved in the play of unpredictability,

possibility, and passions that concede freedom from the realities of social or universalized norms and cultural constraints- "improvisation within a scene of constraint" as she articulates it. For Butler, "the critique of gender norms must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life." Further, her thought on the topic can be summarized as "There is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, survivability. We are, to an extent, driven by what we do not know, and cannot know, and this 'drive' is precisely what is neither exclusively biological nor cultural, but always the site of their dense convergence."

The Cultural critic, Zizek influenced by Lacanian thought, explores issues that involve language, desire, and consciousness. The world cannot be broken down into oppositional dialectics and fully understood. We see a similarity here with Butler suggesting both Zizek and Butler were influenced by Hegel. While discussing a scene from the movie 'The Matrix' (1999) in an interview, Zizek pointing to the scene where Neo (Keanu Reeves) has to choose between the blue pill and the red pill, essentially symbolizing a choice between illusion, in reality, he questions this bifurcation and says this very argument does not exist; instead, he advocates, "show me the reality in illusion itself . . . If you try to take away the illusion, in reality, you no longer have reality."

According to Zizek "the lesson of modernism is that the machine revolves around an emptiness; the postmodernist reversal shows the 'Thing' itself as the incarnated, materialized emptiness." That is, instead of God as the Sovereign Other controlling us in the pre-modern and human individual at the center in the Modern the postmodern humans have a notion of following the 'Other' as the ordering principle of the universe; a materialized force or power in the absence that controls and confines our existence. Here the 'Other' does not force us to obey, rather in the guise of serving human benefit, manifests a form of control in which we not only obey, rather enjoy obeying and controlling.

The famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the influential thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson, though they are from different periods echoed a similar idea on the concept of reality. How do both these thinkers emphasize the notion of ordinary or every day in knowing the world?

Both these thinkers emphasized 'paying attention to ourselves and those around us without worrying whether we can justify what we do on scientific or philosophical grounds' (Roth, July 2020). They were not concerned about discovering what 'the really real' is. They were talking about the ordinary, something similar to what we now understood as 'the Postmodern Everyday'. The current essay aims at understanding the concept of the ordinary

in the writings of these thinkers, mainly focusing 'Experience' (1844) and 'Self-Reliance' (1847) of Emerson and 'Philosophical Investigations' (1953) and 'On Certainty' (1972) of Wittgenstein.

The 19th-century American thinker, Emerson believed that the mind acts upon the world contrary to the Lockean Enlightenment tradition which perceived the mind as a blank slate responsive to stimuli. Knowledge can be acquired through active everyday experiences. Both these aspects of discovering one's self onto the world, thus liberating and experiencing one's self fully and ordinarily sums up his project of giving up on 'the really real'.

Experience explains Emerson, through the emotional trauma, "There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that . . . we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be . . . counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. (1844)" Experiences for Emerson do not break the banality of everyday life. What Emerson gives prominence is the "joyful presentness". He wanted people to experience life how it is, "The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway," highway is a powerful metaphor for life. Human emancipation as discussed in Emerson's Self-Reliance rely mainly on becoming independent. He states, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius.(1847)" Emerson inspires humans to live in the present, not to be subsumed by the past or historical consciousness. He elaborates aiming at a new identity, "It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, but to bring the past for your judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and *live ever in a new day*." The compliance with the status, for Emerson, is the opposite of self-reliance or self-discovery. The new identity is one's free action, "Your genuine action will explain itself, and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing."

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein highlights the concept of everyday or ordinary through the logical study of language. Wittgenstein advocates us not to be concerned about the ontological aspect of humans, rather he wants us to watch closely how we use language in ordinary situations. In 'On Certainty' Wittgenstein elaborates on what we are certain about; what is certain for Wittgenstein is the practice and application of language. Not focusing on the foundation of language he writes, "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing." Further, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein advances to maintain the use of language as to place to discover and determine to mean; "A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it. For it is what we learn when the world is incorporated into our language." He exemplifies his language philosophy through a game (language games). He explains that the meaning of utterances is produced by the moves (actions) that players (people) make within the field (context).

To conclude

Both in the works of Butler and Žižek power and pleasure become intertwined. The struggle of the human being in this regard should be dealt with trying to understand our thinking and through hermeneutic questioning as Žižek would put it. However, Wittgenstein and Emerson thinkers adopted the postmodern philosophy of anti-foundationalism and celebrating the everyday and the ordinary. For Emerson, openness to new experiences is the key to human emancipation, while for Wittgenstein understanding language is the key. Both thinkers celebrated living in the present.

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