

# Delimiting the "Unsayable": Wittgenstein and Logical Holism

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## Abstract

**This paper aims to clarify a long-standing misconception in the history of philosophy by reconstructing the core arguments of early Wittgenstein's philosophy, namely the identification of his early thought with the Logical Atomism advocated by Bertrand Russell. Through a systematic analysis of Wittgenstein's strict demarcation between the "sayable" and the "unsayable," his particular treatment of the concept of "generality," and the priority of propositions over words in his theory of meaning, we argue that Wittgenstein's early philosophy is essentially a form of Logical Holism. This holism is not a metaphysical doctrine about the composition of the world but the necessary conclusion of his linguistic critique and study of logical syntax. It fundamentally rejects the atomistic model that posits simple entities as the foundation of meaning. Furthermore, this paper will reveal that this holistic perspective, grounded in the "unsayable," provides a deep and coherent philosophical foundation for his later "grammatical investigations" in the *Philosophical Investigations* and his revolutionary epistemological views concerning "certainty" and "world-picture" in *On Certainty* [1]. This paper concludes that understanding Wittgenstein solely through the label of "Logical Atomism" not only obscures the originality and profundity of his thought but also severs the intrinsic conceptual thread, based on "delimitation" and "showing," that connects his early and later philosophy.**

## Keywords

**Logical Holism; The Sayable and the Unsayable; Wittgenstein; Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus; Logical Atomism; Showing.**

## 1. Introduction

The intellectual positioning of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has been a contentious issue in the history of analytic philosophy since its publication. Philosophers like Bertrand Russell, based on his close early association with Wittgenstein and a particular reading of the book, shaped its interpretation as co-founder or key source of "Logical Atomism." Russell himself repeatedly emphasized that his views on Logical Atomism were largely inspired by Wittgenstein. This constructed lineage has been profoundly influential, making "logical atomist" a prevalent and seemingly solid label for the early Wittgenstein [2].

However, a crucial and widely overlooked fact is that Wittgenstein himself never explicitly accepted this identity. Textual evidence shows that he not only refrained from using the term "Logical Atomism" to describe his philosophy but, in his mature reflections, explicitly pointed out fundamental disagreements with Russell regarding the aim of logical analysis. More importantly, if we follow Wittgenstein's own terminology and the internal logic of the *Tractatus*, we find a philosophical framework markedly different from, and even directly opposed to, Russellian Logical Atomism [3]. The core of this framework is not a reductive atomic

decomposition of the world, but the demarcation of clear limits for the expression of thought; its key operation is not the search for simple objects as the basis of meaning, but the clarification of propositions as holistic carriers of meaning; its ultimate conclusion is not the revelation of the pluralistic substantial composition of the world, but the acknowledgement that generality concerning the world as a whole, value, and meaning is "unsayable" and can only be "shown."

Therefore, this paper challenges the traditional narrative that "Wittgenstein is a logical atomist" and attempts to construct an alternative interpretative framework more faithful to his text and spirit. We argue that the essence of early Wittgenstein's philosophy is a form of Logical Holism. This thesis rests on three cornerstones of his philosophy: first, his fundamental stance of "linguistic critique," namely that the task of philosophy is to delimit the sayable from the unsayable; second, within this framework, his logical analysis reveals that the basic unit of meaning is the proposition, not the word, and that meaning derives from a proposition's place within the system of logical syntax—a holistic theory of meaning; finally, as the metaphysical counterpart to this logical holism, formal concepts such as "object," "totality of facts," and "generality" are judged to be "unsayable"; they constitute the logical scaffolding of the world, which can only show itself through the operation of the symbolic system, and any proposition attempting to state them is nonsensical [4].

This paper will first dissect the core theses of Russell's Logical Atomism and Wittgenstein's implicit critique of it, clarifying the root of their divergence. Next, through an in-depth interpretation of Wittgenstein's unique distinction between "generality" and "quantification," it will argue for the logical necessity of his doctrine of the "unsayable," which forms the metaphysical foundation of his logical holism. Then, it will elaborate on the specific content of his holistic theory of meaning, namely the principle of the priority of the proposition and the ontological status of logical syntax. Finally, it will demonstrate how this early-established holism and the demarcation of the "unsayable" logically lead to his later epistemological turn. In particular, the view in *On Certainty* of "certainty" as the "hinge" of cognitive practice rather than the foundation of "knowledge" can be seen as a natural continuation and deepening of his early thought [5]. Through this series of arguments, we hope to present a coherent image of Wittgenstein's philosophy, stripped of the atomist label, whose focus consistently lies in surveying the limits of expression and revealing the holistic conditions of human understanding.

## **2. A Misplaced Label: Critique and Clarification of the "Logical Atomism" Interpretation**

The view of Wittgenstein as a logical atomist originates from and is primarily justified by Russell's own accounts. Russell explicitly introduced the term "Logical Atomism" in works like *Mysticism and Logic* to name his philosophy and repeatedly claimed that his ideas derived from Wittgenstein [6]. For instance, he stated that his London lectures were "very largely concerned with explaining certain ideas which I learnt from my friend and former pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein." Many later scholars, such as von Wright and Hacker, have followed this genealogical judgment, considering the *Tractatus* as a main source of Logical Atomism or viewing Wittgenstein's early philosophy as a "logical atomist metaphysics."

The core of this interpretation is that it posits Wittgenstein and Russell as sharing a basic model of philosophical analysis: the world consists of simple objects (logical atoms) that combine into atomic facts, while language depicts these facts via atomic propositions (whose components are names corresponding to objects). Composite facts and propositions are logical constructions upon the atomic level. Therefore, the task of philosophical analysis is to find these ultimate simple components through logical reduction. Russell expressed this clearly: "The atoms that I wish to arrive at as the sort of last residue in analysis are logical atoms and not physical atoms.... Some of these atoms are what I call 'particulars'—such things as little patches

of colour or sounds, momentary things—and some of them are predicates or relations, etc." For Russell, logical analysis carries an ontological commitment, terminating in "logical atom things" as independent entities and "words" as units of meaning.

However, a close examination of Wittgenstein's text and his self-understanding reveals fundamental difficulties with this interpretation.

First, and most directly, Wittgenstein himself never identified as a "logical atomist." We find no trace of him using this term in his writings or recorded remarks. More telling are his later self-criticisms. Reflecting on his early work in 1929, Wittgenstein said: "Both Russell and I had expected to find the first elements, or 'individuals', and thus the possible atomic propositions, by logical analysis.... Our trouble was that we gave no examples of atomic propositions or of individuals." This statement is often cited as evidence of his atomist tendencies, but careful analysis shows his focus and regret lie in "giving no examples." This implies his realization that the kind of "simple object" or "atomic proposition" that could be specifically pointed to as a firm foundation of meaning is philosophically impossible to give directly [7]. This already harbors a suspicion of the Russellian project, which held that analysis could ascertain what these atoms are.

Second, Wittgenstein explicitly objected to Russell's summary of his book's main point. When Russell, in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, understood its main thesis to be that "the essential business of language is to assert or deny facts," requiring something in common between sentence-structure and fact-structure, Wittgenstein corrected him in correspondence, stating this was merely a "corollary." His real main point, he said, was: "What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence." This distinction is fundamental. Russell's introduction focused on the relation between language and the world within the sayable (precisely the domain of concern for his Logical Atomism), whereas Wittgenstein elevated the existence and showing of the unsayable to the status of "the cardinal problem of philosophy." This means that for Wittgenstein, philosophy's primary task is not first to construct a precise theory of how language depicts the world (like atomism), but to delimit the efficacy of language and acknowledge that beyond this limit lie crucial things that can only be shown.

Finally, and most importantly, the endpoints and purposes of their logical analyses differ essentially. Russell's endpoint is the "simple" or "indefinable" as the terminus of analysis; his aim is to critique Bradleyan Hegelian monism, argue for the externality and objectivity of relations, and thereby establish a pluralistic ontology. His analysis points towards determinate entities.

Wittgenstein's logical analysis, although also discussing objects and atomic propositions, has a different purpose. He explicitly stated: "How far my efforts agree with those of other philosophers I will not decide." He also explicitly rejected philosophical disputes about monism and dualism. So where does his analysis point? A key clue is in his phrasing: "Both Russell and I had expected to find the first elements, or 'individuals', and thus the possible atomic propositions, by logical analysis." The goal of analysis is "to find the possible atomic propositions," not Russellian "simple things." In Wittgenstein's system, the essence of an object (thing) is that "it can occur in states of affairs." They are formal, logical possibilities, their independence being "a form of connection with states of affairs, a form of dependence." Similarly, a name does not have independent meaning. "Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning." Therefore, his logical analysis is not to discover independent entities but to clarify the logical form of the propositional system, to elucidate how a proposition has sense as a whole. The terminus of analysis is not isolated atoms but the "atomic proposition" as the basic unit of the holistic web of meaning, and the sense of an atomic proposition itself derives from its place within the entire system of logical syntax.

In summary, equating Wittgenstein with Russellian Logical Atomism is a serious misunderstanding of his philosophical interest and theoretical focus. Wittgenstein's concern is not the atomic constitution of the world but the limits of the expression of thought; the goal of his analysis is not isolated simple entities but the holistic conditions for propositional sense. This fundamental divergence requires us to seek a label that better captures the character of his thought. We believe "Logical Holism" is a more fitting choice. To understand this holism deeply, we must first enter the cornerstone of his philosophical edifice—the doctrine of demarcating the sayable from the unsayable, particularly his special treatment of the key concept of "generality."

### 3. The "Showing" of Generality: The Metaphysical Foundation of Logical Holism

The core of logical holism is the view that the carriers of meaning and units of understanding are systematic wholes, not isolated elements. In Wittgenstein's early philosophy, this position is not an additional philosophical preference but a conclusion necessarily derived from his most fundamental logical and metaphysical principles. This principle is the famous demarcation between the "sayable" and the "unsayable." The best entry point for elucidating why this demarcation inevitably leads to holism is his unique treatment of the concept of "generality," which constitutes the metaphysical foundation of his logical holism.

One revolutionary contribution of modern logic, created by Frege and Russell, was a new way to express generality: through the combination of quantifiers (universal  $\forall$ , existential  $\exists$ ) with propositional functions, a proposition like " $\forall x (Fx)$ " is taken to express the general thought "For all  $x$ ,  $Fx$ ." In this classical picture, quantified propositions are the standard vehicles for expressing generality, and logic itself, as the science of truth, contains general truths.

Wittgenstein wholly rejected this classical treatment. He made a crucial distinction: separating quantified propositions from generality itself. He argued that universal quantified propositions " $\forall x (Fx)$ " and existential quantified propositions " $\exists x (Fx)$ " do not express generality; they are merely equivalent to logical products (conjunctions) and logical sums (disjunctions). That is, " $\forall x (Fx)$ " simply means " $Fa \wedge Fb \wedge Fc \wedge \dots$ ", the conjunction of all individual instances; " $\exists x (Fx)$ " simply means " $Fa \vee Fb \vee Fc \vee \dots$ ", the disjunction of all individual instances. They are truth-functions, their truth-values determined by the truth-values of their instances through logical operations. So, where does generality go?

Wittgenstein held that generality is not "said" by these quantified propositions but is shown through the bound variable in the proposition. He stated: "I separate the concept all from the truth-function. Frege and Russell introduced generality in connection with the logical product or the logical sum. This made it difficult to understand the propositions ' $\forall x (Fx)$ ' and ' $\exists x (Fx)$ ,' in which both ideas are embedded." The "difficulty" here lies precisely in the classical view where quantified propositions are taken both as truth-functions (logical product/sum) and as expressions of generality, causing confusion. Wittgenstein's solution is dissociation: quantified propositions are just truth-functions; generality, as the concept "all," is an unsayable formal concept, which can only be shown through the occurrence of the bound variable  $x$  in the propositional form.

Regarding how bound variables show generality, Wittgenstein pointed out that the essence of a generality-indication (the bound variable) is: "It must indicate a type of proposition; it must show of what type a proposition is, of which it is a constant part." Taking " $Fx$ " as an example, when  $x$  is a bound variable, " $Fx$ " itself shows the common form or "prototype" of a class of propositions ( $Fa, Fb, Fc, \dots$ ). This "prototype" is not a factual picture in the world (like  $Fa$ ), but the logical blueprint that generates all such pictures. It highlights the constant (the predicate  $F$ ) in the proposition and indicates that by substituting different constants (names  $a, b, c, \dots$ ) for the

variable  $x$ , concrete pictures (propositions) can be derived from this prototype [8]. Therefore, generality is shown in the repeatability and instantiation of propositional forms, shown in the logical possibility of moving from " $Fx$ " to innumerable concrete propositions like " $Fa$ ."

As for why generality must be shown and cannot be said, Wittgenstein's philosophy provides three deep, interlocking reasons.

First, at the conceptual level, generality is a "formal concept." Wittgenstein strictly distinguished formal concepts (e.g., object, fact, function, number) from proper (material) concepts (e.g., red, greater than). Formal concepts characterize the logical scaffolding of the world, not properties within the world. He stated: "A formal concept cannot be represented by a function." Attempting to express a formal concept with a propositional function (e.g., " $x$  is an object") is nonsensical. Generality involves "all objects," "the totality of facts," "the world as a whole"—precisely such formal concepts. Therefore, statements about them (e.g., "There are infinitely many objects") are attempts to speak about the world's scaffolding itself, transgressing bounds, and are thus nonsensical. They can only show themselves in the logical form of symbols.

Second, at the logical level, attempting to "say" generality leads to self-reference and logical paradox. This is a profound lesson Wittgenstein drew from Russell's paradox. If the use of concepts like "all" is unrestricted, paradoxical formulations like "the set of all sets that do not contain themselves as members" arise. Wittgenstein believed the solution lay in adhering to the "vicious circle principle" and recognizing that the concept "term of a formal series" is itself a formal concept, which can only be shown by a variable, not described by a proposition. As soon as we try to use a proposition to say "how all propositions are...," we immediately fall into the vicious circle of self-reference. Therefore, consigning generality to the realm of the "unsayable" is a necessary condition for avoiding logical disaster.

Finally, and most fundamentally, at the metaphysical level, this is intimately connected to Wittgenstein's basic picture of the world and language. The world is "the totality of facts," it is "everything that is the case." This "totality" is given, complete. Language is a logical picture of the world. For a proposition to have sense, it must picture a possible state of affairs. However, "all objects" or "the world as a whole" does not itself constitute an additional state of affairs; it is the precondition for states of affairs being possible, it is "logical space" itself. There is no super-fact named "the whole world" waiting to be pictured. Therefore, any proposition attempting to state the generality or totality of the world attempts to speak from outside language and the world, which is doomed to be nonsensical. The logical form of the world, its wholeness, can only be shown through the overall structure of the propositional system, not said as the content of one of its propositions.

At this point, we can clearly see that Wittgenstein's treatment of generality is by no means due to ignorance of first-order logic techniques or deficiencies in symbolic expressive power, but a foundational choice of his entire philosophical system. By judging generality as "unsayable," he established the following fundamental principles: the logical wholeness of the world precedes any specific, sayable content; this wholeness cannot be reduced to an enumeration or summation of atomic facts; it constitutes the background and framework of sense, which can only "show" its existence in the actual use of symbols (such as propositions containing bound variables) [9].

This is precisely the metaphysical core of logical holism. It declares the bankruptcy of any form of reductive atomism. Russell's project attempted to "infer" the whole truth of the world by enumerating all atomic facts, which for Wittgenstein is futile, because the very notion "all atomic facts" involves unsayable generality, and the overall logical structure of the world (which makes atomic facts possible) can never be captured in a list of atomic facts. The unity of the world is not unity at the level of facts, but unity of logical form, a showing unity. From this

perspective on the unsayable whole, Wittgenstein constructed a corresponding holistic theory of meaning.

#### **4. Proposition and Logical Syntax: The Construction of a Holistic Theory of Meaning**

If the general whole of the world is "unsayable" and can only show itself, then what is the source and carrier of meaning within the realm of the "sayable"? Wittgenstein's answer points unequivocally to holism: not simple signs (names), but propositions; not isolated propositions, but the propositional system governed by logical syntax.

This stance forms a sharp contrast with Russellian atomism. For Russell, "Every word has meaning in a simple sense: it is a symbol which stands for something other than itself," and "the meaning of a statement follows as soon as the meanings of its component words are known." This is a typical atomistic or compositional view of meaning: words have independent, prior meanings; sentence-meaning is a function of word-meaning. Words, especially names, are the foundation of meaning and the primitive symbols of logic.

Although Wittgenstein also agreed that "A name means an object. The object is its meaning," he completely inverted Russell's principle of meaning composition. He denied that a name could be an independent, logically primitive sign with complete meaning. Instead, he proposed: "In logic there is only a single general primitive sign: the most general propositional form." A name's meaning is not self-sufficient; it depends entirely on the role it plays in propositions. "Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning." This is a fundamental reversal: it is not words that give propositions meaning, but propositions that give words reference. Understanding a name lies not in simply hooking it to an object, but in understanding how it is used in various possible propositions.

As for how a proposition acquires its independent sense, Wittgenstein's answer is: a proposition is a fact. "A propositional sign consists in the fact that its elements (the words) are combined in it in a definite way. The propositional sign is a fact. Only facts can express a sense, a set of names cannot." A proposition, e.g., "aRb," has sense not in the signs "a," "R," "b" themselves, but in the fact that these signs are combined in a specific way ("a" on the left, "R" in the middle, "b" on the right). This fact (the symbolic complex) pictures another fact (that object a stands in relation R to object b). Sense arises from the isomorphism of logical form between the symbolic fact and the pictured fact. And the possibility of this logical form is preordained by logical syntax.

Therefore, the sense of a proposition is ultimately rooted in the system of logical syntax. Wittgenstein had much to say on this: "If we know the logical syntax of any sign-language, then we have already been given all the propositions of logic"; "The general propositional form is the essence of a proposition. To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world"; "The truth-conditions of a proposition determine the range that it leaves open to the facts"; "If all true elementary propositions are listed, the world is completely described." This series of statements elevates logical syntax to the status of the ultimate ontological being.

Logical syntax is portrayed as the creator and determinant of the "logical world." "God can create everything, except what would be contrary to the laws of logic." Logical syntax is autonomous, "Logic must take care of itself. In a certain sense, we cannot make mistakes in logic." It constitutes an autonomous, normative framework within which all significant propositions must be constructed. In this sense, logical syntax is the ultimate source of sense. "When a system is constructed such that we can build symbols, then it is the system, and not the individual symbols, that is logically important." Individual word-signs, such as names, only have a derivative status subordinate to propositions and logical syntax [10].



Thus, we can outline the hierarchical structure of Wittgenstein's holistic theory of meaning:

- The system of logical syntax is the ultimate source. It prescribes the form of all possible propositions, the creator of the logical space of sense and the world.
- The proposition is the basic carrier of sense. As a symbolic fact, through its specific composition conforming to logical syntax, a proposition becomes the minimal unit with complete sense. An elementary proposition (atomic proposition) is a truth-argument of propositions, but an elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself, meaning its sense is obtained directly, not composed from simpler name-meanings. Compound propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions.
- The name is derivative reference. A name acquires its function of referring to an object only within the nexus of a proposition. Its meaning is entirely determined by the role it can play within the propositional system.

This picture resonates strongly with Frege's holistic thought. Frege emphasized: "It is only in the context of a proposition that words have meaning.... It is enough if the proposition as a whole has a sense; thereby its parts also obtain their content." Wittgenstein evidently inherited and radicalized this idea. His theory is not merely a semantic holism but a logical holism, for it anchors the holistic origin of meaning in the a priori system of logical form.

Now we can see clearly how logical holism connects with the doctrine of the "unsayable." Logical syntax, as the logical essence of the world, is itself a formal concept and is "unsayable." We cannot state in a proposition what logical syntax is, because any proposition attempting to do so already presupposes it. Logical syntax can only show itself through the totality of all logically well-formed propositions. Similarly, the essence of the world, the totality of objects—these unsayable formal concepts—can only be shown through the operation of the entire propositional system. Therefore, the task of philosophy is not to state these unsayable foundations but, through logical analysis, to make the sense of propositions clear, thereby letting these foundations show themselves. As Wittgenstein stated: "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.... The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions,' but to make propositions clear."

This holism, centered on "clarification" and "showing," with logical syntax as the ultimate framework and propositions as units of sense, completely transcends the logical atomism that takes atomic entities and words as its foundation. It not only redefines the nature of philosophy but also provides a new perspective for understanding the structure of human knowledge. When Wittgenstein later turned his attention from ideal logical language to ordinary language games, this holistic vision did not disappear but, in a more concrete, practice-oriented form, found continuation and deepening in his epistemological reflections.

## 5. From "Logical Syntax" to "Forms of Life": The Continuity and Development of Holism in Epistemology

Wittgenstein's later philosophy is often described as a "break" from his early thought. However, if we understand the core of his early thought as a logical holism based on the sayable/unsayable demarcation, rather than Logical Atomism, then the continuity between the two becomes clear. This continuity lies not in the inheritance of doctrines but in the deepening and transformation of problem-consciousness and methodological orientation: from the transcendental investigation of idealized "logical syntax" to the descriptive study of concrete "grammar" and "world-picture" rooted in "forms of life" [11]. This is particularly evident in the domain of epistemology.

During the Tractatus period, epistemological issues were deliberately marginalized. Wittgenstein even asserted: "Epistemology is the philosophy of psychology." This shows he was

following Frege's antipsychologism at the time, rejecting the study of inner processes of the cognitive subject, holding that philosophy should focus on the logical form of propositions. However, this does not mean he lacked epistemological concern. His picture theory can be seen as a logical explanation of how scientific knowledge (the totality of sayable, meaningful propositions) is possible: knowledge is the totality of true propositions, and a true proposition is a logical picture of the world. But at this stage, the issue of "certainty" was not yet thematic. Logical propositions (tautologies) possess logical necessity, while the certainty of empirical propositions is only contingent, derived from logical derivation from other propositions.

In his later period, especially in *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, epistemological issues returned in a radically new way. Here, the concept of "logical syntax" is replaced by the concept of "grammar." "Grammar" no longer refers to a priori rules of logical form but to "the actual use of words in language-games" [12]. The task of philosophy becomes "grammatical investigation," that is, dissolving philosophical confusions—including epistemological ones—that arise from misunderstanding grammar, through meticulous description of how words are used in specific contexts.

Wittgenstein's grammatical investigation of the word "know" vividly illustrates the continuation of his holistic method. He opposed seeking an essential definition for "knowledge" (e.g., "justified true belief"), considering "know" a "family resemblance concept." More importantly, he profoundly analyzed the misuse of the expression "I know." For instance, in discussing sensations, he argued that saying "I know I am in pain" is odd and nonsensical, because "doubting whether I am in pain" makes sense for others, but not for oneself. "'Only you can know if you had that intention.' ... Then it means: that is how we use it [13]. (And here 'know' means that the expression of uncertainty is senseless.)" The insight here is that the use of "I know" is interwoven with concepts like "doubt," "certainty," and "evidence" within a language-game. Its meaning depends on its place within the entire network of concepts and practical activities, not on pointing to some private, inner state of justification. This continues the early holistic spirit that "meaning is in use," but transfers it from the relation between proposition and logical syntax to the relation between words and life-practice.

This holistic epistemology reaches its zenith in *On Certainty*. The core of this late work is a re-examination of the relation between "knowledge" and "certainty." Wittgenstein proposes a revolutionary view: "'Knowledge' and 'certainty' belong to different categories." Traditional epistemology treated certainty as a property of knowledge (the highest degree of belief), but Wittgenstein elevates certainty to a precondition and foundation that makes knowledge possible. Those propositions we do not doubt, which we take for granted—he calls them "hinge propositions"—do not constitute our knowledge but constitute our "world-picture" or "scaffolding," upon which all inquiry and reasoning depends [14].

"That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.... If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put [15]." These hinge propositions, such as "I have a body," "The world existed a long time before my birth," "Objects do not vanish when no one is observing them," are not beliefs acquired through evidence or inference. They are part of a whole body of beliefs we inherit and which is continuously reinforced in our life practices. We do not first verify them and then begin to know the world; on the contrary, we are always already within this whole body of belief, which makes any specific cognitive activity (including raising doubts) possible.

This thought exhibits a profound structural correspondence with the early logical holism:

- From "Logical Syntax" to "World-Picture": The early "logical syntax" as the ultimate framework of sense, which is unsayable, transforms in the later period into the "world-picture" or "form of life" as the background of cognitive practice, which is immune to doubt.



Both play a foundational, normative role and cannot be verified or falsified by propositions within the system. Logical syntax "must take care of itself"; the world-picture is "the substratum of all my inquiring and asserting," itself not subject to doubt [16].

- From "Propositional System Shows Form" to "Grammatical Practice Shows Certainty": Early, the logical form of the world is shown through the structure of the entire propositional system. Later, our basic certainties (hinge propositions) are not expressed through isolated "I know" statements but are shown holistically through all our words and deeds in language-games—how we question, verify, act. "My beliefs form a system, a structure."
- The Continuity of Holism: Both knowledge and certainty can no longer be decomposed and reduced to more basic, independently justified foundational beliefs (a rejection of foundationalism). The justification of knowledge occurs within the system of beliefs, but the system itself is not a purely logical coherentist web; it is rooted in shared human forms of life and practice (also transcending pure coherentism) [17]. This is an externalist, contextualist holism: standards of cognitive rationality are embedded within concrete practices and historical traditions.

Therefore, Wittgenstein's late epistemology can be seen as a concretization and practical unfolding of his early logical holism within the realm of the "sayable" (i.e., the domain of human cognitive practice). The early "unsayable" (logical form, the world as a whole) transforms into the "undoubted" (world-picture, forms of life). The task of philosophy also shifts from clarifying propositions through logical analysis to show logical form, to describing practices through grammatical investigation to show our cognitive foundations. The aim in both is not to construct theories but to eliminate misunderstanding through clear presentation, to attain a "perspicuous view."

From this coherent perspective, the holistic thought established in the *Tractatus*, characterized by "delimitation" and "showing," is not abandoned but gains new life in broader, more human-experience-near domains. It moves from the logical analysis of an ideal language to the grammatical description of everyday life, while its consistently upheld core spirit—including opposition to reductive atomism, emphasis on the decisive role of the holistic background, and insistence on the descriptive and limit-conscious nature of philosophy—remains constant throughout.

## 6. Conclusion

Early Wittgenstein's philosophy cannot be properly subsumed under Russellian "Logical Atomism." They differ fundamentally in philosophical aim, analytical method, theory of meaning, and ontological commitments. Russell's Logical Atomism is a metaphysical program that takes simple entities as its foundation, reductive analysis as its method, and aims to construct a pluralistic picture of the world. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* project, however, is centered on "linguistic critique"; its primary task is to delimit the limits of the expression of thought, distinguishing the "sayable" from the "unsayable."

Within this framework of demarcation, Wittgenstein developed a profound Logical Holism. This holism has three tightly interconnected dimensions: First, on the metaphysical level, by judging "generality," "the world as a whole," etc., as unsayable formal concepts, he rejected the atomistic picture that the world could be reduced to a sum of atomic facts; the unity of the world is a unity of logical form, a showing unity. Second, on the level of the theory of meaning, he established the priority of the proposition (and the underlying system of logical syntax) over the word; the basic unit of meaning is the proposition as a symbolic fact, from which the meaning of words is derived—a thoroughgoing semantic holism. Third, this holism is grounded in an autonomous, normative system of logical syntax, which is the ultimate source of meaning and possible worlds.

More importantly, this early-established holistic paradigm provided a coherent problem-consciousness and methodological tone for his entire philosophical career. When he later turned to the study of ordinary language and epistemology, "logical syntax" transformed into "grammar" and "forms of life," the "unsayable logical form" transformed into the "undoubted world-picture," and "the showing of the propositional system" transformed into "the showing of practical activity" [18]. His revolutionary theory in *On Certainty* concerning "certainty" as the "hinge" of cognition is a brilliant demonstration and deepening of logical holism in the epistemological domain. It shows that our knowledge is not built upon individually secured "atomic" beliefs but floats within a whole "river-bed" constituted by shared practices and beliefs immune to doubt.

Therefore, discarding the easily misleading label of "logical atomist" and understanding Wittgenstein as a unique thinker who takes "delimitation" as his starting point, "the whole" as his kernel, and "showing" as his method, not only better accords with his texts but also better helps us grasp the internal thread and enduring vitality of his thought from early to later. His work consistently aims at one goal: through continuous clarification and description, to let us see clearly how we express, think, and know, and in this process, learn to maintain reverence and silence towards the limits of our language and understanding. And this, perhaps, is the most lasting legacy he leaves to philosophy.

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