

Wittgenstein and the Metaphysics of Silence: Teaching Without the Use of Words

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This paper explores the philosophical significance of silence in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, focusing primarily on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI). It argues that Wittgenstein's "metaphysics of silence" represents not a withdrawal from philosophical inquiry, but a reorientation of its aims and methods—one that has profound implications for how we conceive of teaching and learning. Drawing on interpretations from both resolute and mystical readings of Wittgenstein, the paper situates silence as a threshold concept that demarcates the limits of language while opening space for ethics, aesthetics, pedagogies, and the ineffable. It further contextualizes this silence within the broader philosophical and religious traditions of ineffability and simplicity, revealing new possibilities for Being in an era of information overload. The central thread that runs through the paper is the idea of "teaching without words"—a pedagogical stance that emerges from Wittgenstein's thought and is echoed in comparative traditions such as Daoism and Buddhism. By examining the role of silence in Wittgenstein's early and later work, and by placing it in dialogue with these traditions, we aim to show how silence can function as a transformative force in philosophical education and beyond.

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Introduction

At the boundary of language and life, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously declared: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” This enigmatic final proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 1922/1961, 7) signals not merely the closure of a logical treatise but the opening of a metaphysical inquiry—one that refuses to proceed in conventional philosophical terms. For Wittgenstein, silence is not a deficit or failure of language, but the threshold at which the limits of sense and the possibilities of meaning diverge.

Wittgenstein’s interest in silence is grounded in his early conviction that language can only describe facts about the world, while the most important aspects of human existence—ethics, the meaning of life, aesthetic value, the experience of the sublime—lie outside the domain of the sayable. These domains are not meaningless. On the contrary, they are deeply meaningful—but only in a way that resists propositional articulation. In this sense, silence is not the absence of meaning, but its condition. It functions as a limit concept that defines what philosophy can clarify and what it must revere.

Given these considerations, grasping the seemingly paradoxical yet profoundly significant notion of “silence” becomes essential to deciphering Wittgenstein. This paper examines the metaphysics of silence in his thought, framing it as a multi-layered philosophical gesture that spans ethics, mysticism, aesthetics, pedagogies, and spiritual life. Our aim is twofold: to offer a fresh lens through which to read Wittgenstein, and to propose a new mode of philosophical engagement.

With such concerns, this paper explores the philosophical significance of silence in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, focusing primarily on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI). It argues that Wittgenstein’s “metaphysics of silence” represents not a withdrawal from philosophical inquiry, but a reorientation of its aims and methods—one that has profound implications for how we conceive of teaching and learning. Drawing on interpretations from both resolute and mystical readings of Wittgenstein, the paper situates silence as a threshold concept that demarcates the limits of language while opening space for ethics, aesthetics, pedagogies, and the ineffable. It further contextualizes this silence within the broader philosophical and religious traditions of ineffability and simplicity, revealing new possibilities for *Being* in an era of information overload. The central thread that runs through the paper is the idea of “teaching without words”—a pedagogical stance that emerges from Wittgenstein’s thought and is echoed in comparative traditions such as Daoism and Buddhism. By examining the role of silence in Wittgenstein’s early and later work, and by placing it in dialogue with these traditions, we aim to show how silence can function as a transformative force in philosophical education and beyond.

1. The *Tractatus* and the Threshold of Meaning

Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922/1961) is often read as a foundational text of early analytic philosophy, structured around the idea that the world consists of facts, and that language can only meaningfully describe the arrangement of those facts. Yet beyond this formal logical structure lies a deeper metaphysical gesture—one that culminates in silence. This section argues that the *Tractatus* presents a vision of philosophy in which language is a ladder to be climbed and then discarded, and where the ethical, the aesthetic, and the mystical reside on the far side of what can be clearly said. The final movement of the *Tractatus* gestures toward what this paper refers to as Wittgenstein's "metaphysics of silence"—an orientation that simultaneously recognizes the power and the limits of language.

1-1 Logical Structure and the Sayable

The first five sections of the *Tractatus* outline a view of the world and language based on logical atomism. The world is comprised of facts, which are composed of objects standing in determinate relations. Language mirrors this structure through propositions that picture states of affairs. A proposition is meaningful if it shares a logical form with the reality it depicts (Wittgenstein, 1922/1961, 2.1–2.21).

This theory is underpinned by a strict criterion of sense: only propositions that represent logically possible facts can be meaningfully asserted. Thus, philosophy's traditional metaphysical, ethical, or theological claims—which do not depict facts in the world—are ruled out as literal nonsense. As Wittgenstein states, "Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical" (4.003). His aim is not to replace these propositions with others, but to dissolve them by clarifying what can meaningfully be said.

As such, language operates here as a scaffolding: a logical tool used to clarify thought by mapping the structure of reality, but one that must eventually be transcended. This structural clarity culminates in the idea that the limits of language are also the limits of the world (5.6). Beyond that, we encounter what cannot be spoken of—but which remains significant. Language serves as a system of signs representing both reality and thought—yet it remains inherently symbolic and metaphorical, never fully equivalent to either.

1-2 The Unsayable: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Mystical

Wittgenstein writes to Ludwig Ficker with conviction, stating that the point of *Tractatus* "is an ethical one". He also believes that "where many others today are just gassing, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it" (Janik & Toulmin, 1973, 192). The final propositions of the *Tractatus* (6.4–7) take a decisive turn from the logical to the metaphysical. Here, Wittgenstein introduces domains that lie outside the limits of language: ethics ("how things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher," 6.432), aesthetics ("the sense of the world must lie outside the world," 6.41), and the

mystical (“there is indeed the inexpressible,” 6.522). These are not meaningless in a dismissive sense, but unsayable—they show themselves rather than being stated.

The proposition “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists” (6.44) reveals the sense of wonder that animates Wittgenstein’s early vision. Ethics is not a doctrine or a set of maxims but the orientation toward the world as a whole. Likewise, the mystical is not another domain of facts but a form of attunement, a limit-experience in which one confronts the contingency and givenness of the world. This aligns with Wittgenstein’s claim in his *Notebooks 1914–1916* that “the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem” (Wittgenstein, 1984, 27e)—a resolution not by explanation, but by transformation.

Scholars such as James Conant (2002) and Cora Diamond (1991) have argued that these concluding remarks should not be read as mystical doctrines, but as part of the Tractarian method of showing the limits of language. On this “resolute” interpretation, the *Tractatus* is not advancing ineffable truths but leading the reader to recognize the urge to speak metaphysically as a temptation to be overcome. Yet others—like A.J. Kenny (1973) and D.Z. Phillips (1992)—have defended a more religious or mystical reading, suggesting that Wittgenstein’s silence points toward a transcendent reality that underlies human experience.

Whether one accepts the resolute reading or the ineffability reading, both agree that the *Tractatus* presents a metaphysical gesture of withdrawal. In stating, “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it)” (6.54), Wittgenstein likens philosophy to an ascetic path. The reader, having understood the structure of language and seen its limits, no longer needs the propositions themselves. The final insight is silence—a silence not of ignorance, but of philosophical clarity with everlasting spiritual tranquility.

This metaphysical silence is the intentionally “negative” space in which ethics, aesthetics, and spirituality find their resonance. In refraining from metaphysical claims, Wittgenstein paradoxically allows the most profound dimensions of life to come into view—not as doctrines, but as lived realities. As such, the *Tractatus* does not end in failure, but in a gestural metaphysics: a silence that speaks.

2. Re-visiting the Interpretations of Wittgenstein’s Silence

The silence that concludes *Tractatus* has generated one of the most enduring and contentious debates in modern philosophy. Does it indicate a metaphysical commitment to ineffable truths, or does it signal the dissolution of such metaphysical aspiration altogether? This section examines two major interpretive frameworks—what are often called the ineffability reading and the resolute reading—to explore how scholars have understood the philosophical and ethical stakes of Wittgenstein’s silence. Though these interpretations diverge sharply in their

readings of the *Tractatus*, both converge in recognizing Wittgenstein's silence not as an absence, but as a philosophical gesture of transformation—a limit-marking that defines the contours of meaning, ethics, and human understanding.

2-1 The Ineffability Reading: Mysticism and Metaphysical Restraint

The dominant interpretation for much of the 20th century held that Wittgenstein's concluding silence in the *Tractatus* points to truths that lie beyond the expressible—ethical, aesthetic, and mystical realities that cannot be articulated within the limits of logical language. This ineffability reading treats the Tractarian silence as a boundary that demarcates what is “unsayable” but nonetheless real and profoundly meaningful.

On this account, propositions such as “The sense of the world must lie outside the world” (6.41) or “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical” (6.522) are not merely nonsense but gestures toward metaphysical insight. A. J. [Kenny \(1973\)](#) interprets these closing remarks as signaling a form of transcendental idealism, where the logical structure of the world implies an unseen ethical or spiritual dimension. Similarly, D. Z. [Phillips \(1992, 2001\)](#) argues that Wittgenstein's silence resonates with religious and contemplative traditions, such as Christian apophatic theology, in which the divine is accessible only through negation and silence. Phillips emphasizes that for Wittgenstein, the most important things in life—values, the ethical attitude, the experience of wonder—cannot be stated, only shown in how one lives.

This reading situates Wittgenstein within a longer lineage of mystical philosophy, akin to thinkers like Meister Eckhart or Plotinus, where philosophy ends not in discursive knowledge but in contemplative awareness. As [Janik and Toulmin \(1973\)](#) observe in *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, Wittgenstein's upbringing and intellectual milieu were steeped in fin-de-siècle spiritual anxiety and ethical introspection, deeply influencing the ethical silence of the *Tractatus*. In this view, silence is not merely linguistic—it is moral, existential, and even spiritual.

Yet this interpretation raises a methodological tension: if Wittgenstein himself regards these propositions as nonsensical, how can they simultaneously be carriers of truth? It is this tension that fuels the alternative, more radical, reading of Wittgenstein's method.

2-2 The Resolute Reading: Nonsense, Therapy, and Ethical Awakening

The resolute reading, developed by scholars such as Cora [Diamond \(1991\)](#) and James Conant (2002), challenges the ineffability view by emphasizing the self-consuming nature of the *Tractatus*. According to this approach, Wittgenstein does not seek to gesture beyond language toward hidden truths, but rather aims to expose the illusion of metaphysical meaning. On this view, the *Tractatus* functions as a kind of philosophical therapy, leading the reader to confront and ultimately abandon the temptation to speak nonsensically.

Diamond argues that to understand Wittgenstein is not to extract ineffable doctrines from nonsense propositions, but to recognize the logical impossibility of saying certain things. The

realization is ethical: it requires the reader to change their orientation toward language and toward philosophical problems. As Wittgenstein himself puts it in *Notebooks 1914–1916*: “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (Wittgenstein, 1984, 47e). For Diamond and Conant, the silence at the end of the *Tractatus* is not a portal to hidden meaning, but a moment of clarificatory release—the reader sees the nonsense for what it is and is no longer misled.

This reading also emphasizes that Wittgenstein’s method in the *Tractatus* mirrors the ascetic structure of transformation: the propositions serve a ladder-like function (6.54), leading the reader to insight before being discarded. In this way, the *Tractatus* does not transmit mystical content but produces ethical clarity—an ability to live without being seduced by metaphysical confusion.

Importantly, the resolute reading is not necessarily reductive. It does not deny the ethical seriousness of Wittgenstein’s work but reframes that seriousness in non-metaphysical terms. Ethics is not a body of unsayable truths, but an attunement—a change in how we live and speak, in our refusal to confuse grammatical constraints with ontological limitations.

2-3 Convergence and Divergence

Though these two readings differ in whether Wittgenstein’s silence reveals ineffable truths or therapeutic clarity, they converge on a core insight: silence is not absence but presence. It is the culmination of a philosophical path that acknowledges the limits of language and the importance of what lies beyond it—not as knowledge, but as orientation. As such, both readings capture the radical redefinition of philosophy that the *Tractatus* implies: not as system-building, but as a practice of discerning the difference between sense and illusion, and living accordingly.

Whether interpreted as mystical restraint or as rigorous logical therapy, Wittgenstein’s silence has continued to inspire and perplex generations of philosophers, theologians, and poets. It stands as one of the most powerful gestures in 20th-century thought—affirming that some things, perhaps the most important things, cannot be said, but can only be lived.

While previous scholars have thoroughly examined Wittgenstein through diverse interpretive strategies, deeper questions persist: Why can silence—a seemingly negative category—provoke such profound philosophical inquiry? Does it touch upon the very nature of thought and existence? Or might it function as a living, metaphorical expression of the universe’s ultimate reality?

3. The Pedagogical Implications of Silence in Wittgenstein’s Philosophy

Having established the role of silence in Wittgenstein’s early and later thought, we now turn to its implications for teaching and learning. The concept of “teaching without words” is not explicitly developed by Wittgenstein as a pedagogical theory, but it emerges naturally from his treatment of silence. In this section, we explore how Wittgenstein’s philosophy—both early and late—can inform educational practice, particularly in domains such as philosophy, ethics, and

the humanities. We also acknowledge the contextual nature of language-games and the need for pedagogical flexibility, as highlighted by the reviewer.

We begin by drawing on the *Tractatus* and the interpretations discussed in Section 3, showing how both the ineffability and resolute readings contribute to a pedagogy of silence. We then turn to the *Investigations* to develop the idea of therapeutic silence in philosophical pedagogy. Throughout, we emphasize that silence in teaching is not about the absence of speech, but about creating the conditions for genuine understanding to emerge.

3-1 Pedagogical Insights from the *Tractatus*: Two Readings

The two major interpretations of the *Tractatus*—the ineffability reading and the resolute reading—offer distinct but complementary perspectives on the role of silence in teaching. According to the ineffability reading, silence points to truths that cannot be articulated but are nonetheless important. In a pedagogical context, this suggests that some aspects of learning, especially in ethics and aesthetics, cannot be conveyed through propositions but must be shown or experienced. In this scenario, the teacher's role is to create opportunities for students to encounter the ineffable, perhaps through contemplative practices or experiential learning.

On the resolute reading, silence is the result of recognizing nonsense and abandoning the attempt to say what cannot be said. This has a therapeutic aim: to free the student from philosophical confusion. In teaching, this might involve guiding students to see the limits of language and to let go of misguided questions. The teacher uses silence not to indicate a hidden truth, but to mark the dissolution of a problem.

Both readings, therefore, support a pedagogy that values silence as a means of fostering deep understanding, whether by pointing beyond language or by clarifying its limits.

3-2 Silence as Epistemic Demarcation and Beyond

As discussed above, Wittgenstein's early work establishes silence as a critical epistemological boundary in the *Tractatus*. The demarcation between the sayable and the ineffable carries profound implications for pedagogical practice, especially in philosophical and ethical education. Certain philosophical inquiries—particularly those concerning metaphysical, ethical, or aesthetic domains—often represent category errors rather than genuine questions. Recognizing this does not simply deny the possibility of learning but instead opens another door to it.

The pedagogical application of this insight requires a fundamental reorientation of the dynamic interaction between teaching and learning, though it is not intended as a universal method. Rather, it invites educators to consider when and how silence might serve as a corrective to linguistic confusion. Rather than engaging in exhaustive explanations of conceptually confused questions, the educator cultivates in students the capacity for what we might term “diagnostic silence”—a contemplative pause that allows for the recognition of linguistic misconstrues. This approach fosters what contemporary educational theorists call

“metalinguistic awareness” (Tunmer & Herriman, 1984), which further enables learners to distinguish between meaningful inquiry and conceptual bewitchment.

Moreover, Wittgenstein’s concept of language-games (PI 23) suggests a pedagogical model where silence functions as an essential component of participatory learning within specific forms of life. In this framework, understanding emerges not through passive reception of explanations but through active engagement in meaning-making practices. As he observes, “Explanations come to an end somewhere” (PI 1), highlighting the limitations of propositional teaching methods. What is most important in teaching often cannot be said but only shown through practice and example.

It is worth noting a certain tension here: Wittgenstein’s own pedagogical practice—whether in his Cambridge lectures or his earlier elementary teaching—often involved extensive speaking, dialogic probing, and a proliferation of examples. This does not undermine the philosophical significance of silence as a limit-concept, but rather illustrates that pedagogy, like language-games, is context-dependent. Silence, in Wittgenstein’s sense, may manifest not as literal muteness, but as moments of reflective pause, rhetorical restraint, or the cessation of metaphysical questioning.

Therefore, teachers ought to attend not only to the vocal but also to the interstitial silences. Moreover, such silence can be categorized into two types: naturally occurring pauses and intentional pedagogical silence—the latter holding particular instructional significance. Within the teaching-learning ecology, critical questions emerge: “How does one teach someone to read silently to himself? How does one know when he can do so? How does he himself know that he is doing what is required of him?” (PI 375). These considerations constitute vital dimensions of deliberative teaching practice.

3-3 Therapeutic Silence in Philosophical Pedagogy

Wittgenstein’s later work in *Philosophical Investigations* develops silence as an active therapeutic instrument. His characterization of philosophical problems as a kind of “mental process” suggests an educational approach that prioritizes dissolution over refutation. Silence can be employed as a “disruptive pedagogy” —a strategic interruption of habitual thought patterns that creates the phenomenological space for conceptual reorganization.

Consider the paradigmatic Wittgensteinian intervention: “How can I even attempt to interpose language between the expression of pain and the pain?” “What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I *am* in pain?” (PI 245-246). The power of such questions lies not in their propositional content but in their ability to induce what educational psychologists might call “cognitive dissonance” —a state of productive discomfort that precedes conceptual realignment. The educator’s subsequent silence becomes a crucible for transformation, a hermeneutic pause that allows for the emergence of new perceptual frameworks.

The implementation of this acumen calls for a new pedagogy of carefully designed learning experiences where students participate in meaning-constitutive practices with minimal didactic intervention. Silence in such contexts is not abdication of responsibility but rather a sophisticated pedagogical strategy that creates space for the “internalization through practice.” Only knowledge and experience truly internalized by learners can endure and hold profound meaning.

3-4 Toward a Hermeneutics of Pedagogical Restraint

Wittgenstein’s philosophical trajectory culminates in what we might characterize as a “hermeneutics of restraint.” His reflection in *Culture and Value* (34e) – “Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself” – speaks directly to the pedagogical imperative of resisting the didactic impulse. Wittgenstein suggests “epistemic patience,” recognizing that, as noted in *Zettel*, the difficulty “is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it”, and that “the difficulty here is: to stop” (Wittgenstein, 1967, 58e).

This approach represents a fundamental challenge to conventional pedagogical models. He continues to interrogate, “Why do you demand explanations? If they are given you, you will once more be facing a terminus. They cannot get you any further than you are at present.” (Wittgenstein, 1967, 58e). The most sophisticated educational practice may consist not in the accumulation of explanations but in the cultivation of phenomenologically attentional practices—ways of seeing that emerge through meaningful silence rather than discursive elaboration.

With this approach, an educator transitions from merely imparting knowledge to facilitating epistemic encounters—structured experiences in which silence fosters the conditions for profound conceptual transformation. In an educational landscape dominated by what Freire called the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1996), Wittgenstein’s approach offers a radical alternative—one where silence becomes the medium through which authentic understanding emerges. This potentially leads to a genuine liberation from within, both for the educators and the learners.

4. Later Wittgenstein: From Metaphysical Silence to Philosophical Therapy

Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, most notably articulated in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/2009), marks a decisive shift in style, tone, and method from the rigorously structured *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. While the *Tractatus* culminates in a silence shaped by the limits of logical form, the later work reconceives the task of philosophy altogether. In place of constructing a theory of meaning grounded in logical atomism, Wittgenstein turns to the ordinary use of language and develops a method that treats philosophical problems as grammatical confusions to be untangled, not resolved by metaphysical assertion. In this context, silence remains central, but it is no longer metaphysical; it becomes therapeutic. Philosophy,

for the later Wittgenstein, aims to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle—not by delivering new truths, but by revealing when and why we must fall silent. This therapeutic approach has direct implications for teaching, as it suggests that the role of the educator is not to provide answers but to help students dissolve their own conceptual confusions.

4-1 Language-Games and the Ordinary

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that words gain meaning through reference to atomic facts. Instead, he proposes that meaning is use: words derive their significance from the social activities—or “language-games”—within which they operate (PI 23). Rather than seeking an underlying essence of meaning, Wittgenstein emphasizes the multiplicity and fluidity of language in everyday life. This move from formal logic to ordinary language reshapes his philosophical approach: the role of philosophy is no longer to construct an ideal language but to describe the use of language in our shared forms of life.

This reorientation has profound implications for the idea of silence. If philosophical problems arise from misunderstandings of language, then the resolution of such problems involves learning when speech ceases to function meaningfully. Wittgenstein writes: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” (PI 109)

In this battle, silence emerges not at the edge of metaphysical insight, but at the moment when clarity is restored, and the need for philosophical speech falls away. Silence here is not a gesture toward the ineffable, but the endpoint of a grammatical therapy.

4-2 Philosophical Therapy and Quietism

The notion of philosophy as therapy is one of the most distinctive features of Wittgenstein’s later thought. He describes philosophy as aiming not to contribute anything new, but to leave everything as it is (PI 124)—a radical departure from the idea that philosophy must discover or assert foundational truths. Instead, its purpose is to dissolve philosophical confusion, to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI 116). The goal is not explanation but recognition—a return to the ordinary that restores intelligibility and removes the need for speculative speech.

In this context, silence becomes an expression of philosophical completion. Once the confusion is resolved, nothing remains to be said. The philosopher becomes like the therapist who, having helped the patient work through the illusion, withdraws. Wittgenstein’s later style—fragmentary, dialogic, and exploratory—enacts this therapeutic ethos. There is no final doctrine, only the unfolding of linguistic understanding and the cessation of philosophical craving.

This move has often been described as a form of “quietism”, a view in which philosophy is stripped of theoretical ambition and reduced to elucidation. While critics such as [Peter Hacker \(1999\)](#) and [Hilary Putnam \(1992\)](#) have questioned whether such a stance leads to philosophical

paralysis, defenders like Stephen [Mulhall \(2001\)](#) argues that Wittgenstein's quietism is ethically charged: it is not an escape from the world but a deeper engagement with its grammar. The philosopher's silence, in this sense, is not apathy, but attentiveness.

The therapeutic silence of the later Wittgenstein, therefore, offers a model for teaching that is less about transmission of information and more about guiding students to a place of clarity where they can let go of misguided questions. This aligns with the idea of "teaching without words" in that it prioritizes the student's own process of coming to understand over the teacher's explanations.

4-3 Ethics Without Metaphysics

Wittgenstein's later reflections suggest that the ethical significance of silence lies not in its reference to another world, but in its capacity to transform our relation to this one. As Cora [Diamond \(1991\)](#) and D.Z. [Phillips \(2001\)](#) have emphasized, Wittgenstein moves away from an ethics of metaphysical transcendence toward an ethics grounded in practice, form of life, and attentiveness to the human. Silence becomes part of this ethical sensibility—not because it points to something beyond, but because it marks the end of confusion, the restoration of clarity, and the acceptance of limits.

This idea echoes Simone Weil's notion of attention as the essence of ethical life. Just as Weil sees attention as the act of making space for the other without projection or imposition ([Weil, 1999, 2024](#)), Wittgenstein's therapeutic silence creates room for the ordinary to speak—for the grammar of life to be heard without distortion. In both thinkers, silence is not empty but pregnant with moral significance.

4-4 From Saying to Dwelling

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein turns philosophy from a problem-solving activity into a mode of dwelling with language. This shift echoes Heidegger's later idea of *Gelassenheit*—a letting-be that replaces technical mastery. For Wittgenstein, to know when to stop speaking is itself a form of wisdom. As [Mulhall \(2001\)](#) puts it, Wittgenstein's later work enacts a form of existential patience, a willingness to stay with the tensions of ordinary language rather than seeking metaphysical resolution.

In this light, silence becomes the mark of philosophical maturity. It is not the silence of withdrawal or resignation, but the silence of someone who, having understood, no longer needs to speak. It is a silence that allows the world to be as it is, and ourselves to be at home within its grammar.

5. Comparative Perspectives: Wittgenstein, Religion, and Mysticism

Wittgenstein's relationship to religion and mysticism has long attracted the attention of scholars interested in the inexpressible dimensions of human experience. Although Wittgenstein has a complex and somewhat ambiguous stance in religious belief, his reflections—especially in the *Tractatus*, the *Notebooks 1914–1916*, *Culture and Value*, and some of his *Lectures and*

Conversations (Barrett, 1967, 53–72)—suggest a deep affinity with traditions that treat language as limited and silence as spiritually significant. This section explores how Wittgenstein’s metaphysics of silence intersects with various religious and mystical traditions, including Christian apophatic theology, Daoist teaching beyond words, Buddhist non-conceptual awareness, and existential-mystical ethics. These comparative perspectives do not imply that Wittgenstein was a theologian or mystic in any doctrinal sense, but they reveal how his thought resonates with broader practices of philosophical and spiritual silence. Moreover, these traditions often embody a form of “teaching without words” that can enrich our understanding of Wittgensteinian pedagogy.

5-1 Apophatic Theology and the Ethics of Unsay

One of the most striking parallels to Wittgenstein’s early philosophy is found in the Christian tradition of apophatic theology, particularly in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*. These thinkers argue that God is beyond all conceptual comprehension and therefore can only be approached through negation, paradox, and silence. Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, writes of a “divine darkness” where all affirmations collapse into a transcendence that cannot be spoken (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987). Wittgenstein’s statement that “whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” (TLP 7) echoes this impulse, positioning silence not as ignorance but as a reverent acknowledgment of the ineffable.

D.Z. Phillips (2001) emphasizes that Wittgenstein’s attitude toward religion is best understood not as skepticism or theological commitment, but as a hermeneutics of contemplation. For Phillips, Wittgenstein invites us to attend to the forms of life within which religious language gains meaning—practices of devotion, prayer, and moral transformation—rather than viewing religious belief as a set of metaphysical propositions. In this view, religious silence is not the absence of meaning but a condition of reverent understanding, akin to what Wittgenstein calls “a way of living.”

Such an approach reorients the philosophy of religion away from epistemology and toward ethics and form. This tradition of unsaying has pedagogical implications: the teacher does not impart doctrinal knowledge but guides the student toward a direct experience of the divine through practices of negation and silence.

5-2 Non-coincidental Resonances: Wittgenstein and Daoist Philosophy

The Daoist philosophy reserves particular attention to the function and limits of language. “Teaching without the use of words” (Lau, 2011, 84, 126; Watson, 2013, 34, 177, 235) stands as a core pedagogical proposition for traditional Daoism, suggesting that the most profound lessons often emerge not from explicit instruction but from observation, experience, and intuitive understanding.

Speaking of the relations between the meaning and words, Zhuangzi gives an analogy that just as the fish trap is forgotten when the fish is caught, so words are forgotten when the meaning

is realized. He further elucidates that “Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning. Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down” (Watson, 2013, 106, 233). Such philosophical stance inspired many latter artists, as Tao Qian, the fifth-century Chinese poet, wrote: “Herein lies true meaning, but words fail when I try to express it” (Tao, 2018, 59-60). This indeed represents an ideal state of harmony—one that transcends attachment to language, resists forceful interpretation, and leaves the spirit undisturbed.

Most remarkably, the profound conceptual convergence between Wittgenstein and Daoist philosophy manifests most vividly in their respective textual centerpieces—revealed through these striking parallelisms:

<i>Tao Te Ching</i>	<i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i>
The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; The name that can be named is not the constant name. The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the myriad creatures. (Lau, 2011, 83; the first chapter)	Its whole meaning could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. (Wittgenstein, 1961, 27, 189; preface and the last proposition)

While to “be said clearly” recognizes the effect of language as a powerful representational system, passing over in silence is not the end, instead it implies a new start of philosophizing. What we can say are of great limitation comparing to the infinity of the universe (confluence of boundless time and boundless space), as the purpose and manner of the “universe” do not solely align with the finite perceptual faculties of humans. There are always certain “existences” that not only transcend the range of human sensory perception but also remain imperceptible even with any conceivable amplification, enhancement, or extension of human sensory capabilities (Li, 2024). Therefore, learning to listen the “sound” of silence opens novel realm of meaning, while we should keep aware of that “the great not is rarefied in sound” (Lau, 2011, 124). The Daoist emphasis on teaching without words aligns with Wittgenstein’s idea that what is most important cannot be said but only shown. In both cases, the teacher’s role is to create conditions for the student to discover meaning for themselves.

5-3 Buddhist Thought and Non-Conceptual Awareness

Striking parallels also emerge between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Buddhist traditions, especially Theravāda mindfulness and Zen non-duality. In early Buddhist thought, the notion of *prajñā* (wisdom) includes insight into the constructed nature of concepts and the cessation of clinging to views. Silence, in this context, is not merely abstention from speech but a cessation of attachment to discursive thought.

In Zen Buddhism, the use of *koans*, paradox, and ritualized silence is intended to short-circuit conceptual grasping and induce direct awareness. Similarly, Wittgenstein holds that things

simply are “as they are”—resisting binary categorizations or reductive descriptions (neither reasonable nor unreasonable). It is no coincidence that two seminal texts, the *Diamond Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, each employ strikingly similar and profoundly resonant core metaphors, juxtaposed below.

<i>The Diamond Sutra</i>	<i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i>
A Bodhisattva should not seize on either a dharma or a no-dharma. Therefore this saying has been taught by the Tathagata with a hidden meaning: “Those who know the discourse on dharma as like unto a raft, should forsake dharmas, still more so no-dharmas” (Conze, 1988,34)	My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) (Wittgenstein, 1961, 189)

As a famous metaphorical teaching in the *Diamond Sutra*, the dharma is like a raft: indispensable for crossing the river, yet to be forsaken once one has reached “the other shore” of liberation — the same realm as of the Buddha. Crucially, the sutra extends this renunciation even further, demanding that one abandon not only dharmas but *no-dharmas* as well, foreclosing the temptation to mistake negation for wisdom. This is precisely mirrored by Wittgenstein’s own caution in the closing pages of the *Tractatus*: his propositions are ladders to be climbed and finally discarded, recognized in retrospect as senseless by the very reader who has been carried by them. Where the raft moves horizontally — from bondage toward release — the ladder ascends vertically, from confusion toward clarity; yet both images converge on the same radical gesture: the tool of understanding must ultimately be surrendered to complete the understanding itself.

Stephen Batchelor (2015), drawing from both Wittgenstein and Buddhism, argues that the silence of the enlightened or awakened person is not withdrawal but full presence—an attentiveness to the here-and-now unclouded by metaphysical fantasy. Similarly, Wittgenstein’s later work points toward a kind of linguistic soteriology, in which liberation comes not from knowledge but from disentanglement. More profoundly, if we approach “silence” from a Zen Buddhist perspective, it concurrently implies silence in speech, stillness in action and limpidity in mind, and above all, the spontaneous forgetting of all methods and efforts so as to rest in *Nirvana*, the ultimate enlightenment free from all sufferings (Li, 2020). Similarly, in Zen Buddhism, the teacher uses silence and paradox to break the student’s attachment to concepts, pointing toward direct experience. This is akin to Wittgenstein’s therapeutic use of silence to dissolve philosophical confusion.

There is, beneath this structural parallel, a deep affinity between Wittgenstein’s therapeutic quietism and Buddhist emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Both traditions resist the impulse to construct positive doctrines in place of the ones they dissolve; both locate the error not in holding the wrong beliefs, but in the compulsion to hold beliefs at all where language has already reached

its limit. Liberation, in each case, is not achieved through metaphysical speculation but through a kind of disciplined relinquishment — a willingness to fall silent precisely where the urge to speak is strongest. What remains after the raft is abandoned, or the ladder thrown away, is not a void, but the open possibility of a different, wordless relation to the world.

5-4 Mystical Ethics and Existential Silence

Wittgenstein's reflections also find echoes in modern mystical ethics, particularly in the work of Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas. For these thinkers, ethics emerges not from a system of norms but from a posture of attention, silence, and response to the other. Weil's concept of attention as the purest form of generosity—"suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated"—resonates deeply with Wittgenstein's ideal of philosophical clarity achieved through silence (Weil, 1952). Both understand the ethical gesture not as assertion but as restraint, a readiness to let meaning show itself.

Levinas similarly identifies ethics with the face-to-face encounter in which the self is summoned by the vulnerability of the other. Though Levinas is critical of Wittgenstein's linguistic focus, the two converge in treating language as secondary to relation. Wittgenstein's metaphysics of silence, especially as read by Diamond (1991), is not just logical but existential—a form of life in which speaking responsibly requires knowing when not to speak.

In the later *Culture and Value* (1980), Wittgenstein writes, "The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known." This is a form of mystical ethics, not because it reveals divine secrets, but because it returns us to the depth of the everyday—to life lived with attentiveness, humility, and clarity. Silence is not the conclusion but the condition of such a life. These ethical traditions emphasize attention and responsiveness over propositional knowledge, suggesting a form of teaching that is modeled on ethical relation—one that is receptive and silent, rather than didactic.

6. Ethical and Existential Implications: Silence as New Orientation

Wittgenstein's philosophy, especially as interpreted through the lens of his metaphysics of silence, leaves us not with a system of doctrines, but with an altered stance toward life, language, and thought. Across both his early and later works, the thread of silence weaves together an ethical disposition, a form of attention, and a critique of philosophical ambition. Whether one reads the *Tractatus* as gesturing toward ineffable metaphysical insight or as dismantling the illusion of metaphysics altogether, what emerges is a non-dogmatic, transformative vision of philosophy. This vision is deeply ethical—not in the sense of prescribing rules, but in its demand for self-restraint, clarity, and responsibility in how one speaks, thinks, and lives.

6-1 Living at the Limits

For Wittgenstein, silence is not a void to be filled but a limit to be inhabited. The philosophical task is not to say what cannot be said, but to recognize where sense ends and to respect that boundary. This recognition, while ostensibly technical or logical, has profound existential consequences. It teaches us to live with limits, to resist the temptation of speculative closure, and to accept the fragility of understanding. In a world increasingly obsessed with explanation, information, and totalizing systems of control, Wittgenstein's silence becomes a form of intellectual modesty—a refusal to overreach.

This has direct implications for ethics. As [Cora Diamond \(1991\)](#) and [D.Z. Phillips \(2001\)](#) have argued, Wittgenstein's focus on what cannot be said shifts ethics away from theory and toward responsiveness. Ethical life is not constructed from universal principles, but from how we attend to the world and others—from our willingness to allow meaning to emerge in relationship, in gesture, in silence.

6-2 Philosophical Humility and the Practice of Restraint

Silence, for Wittgenstein, is thus a practice: a discipline of self-limitation. It marks a refusal to colonize the inexpressible with inadequate concepts. As [Stephen Mulhall \(2001\)](#) puts it, Wittgenstein's silence is not an abdication of philosophy but its highest form—philosophy that knows when to stop. This stopping is not failure; it is a sign of philosophical maturity, akin to what Simone Weil calls attention, or what Buddhist philosophy calls mindfulness.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's therapeutic method involves dissolving problems by returning words to their ordinary use. Here, the silence that follows is not metaphysical awe but a kind of peacefulness—a condition where philosophical craving has ceased. One no longer needs to speak because the illusion that demanded speech has evaporated. Silence becomes a marker of sufficiency: things abide in their “self-so-ness” (*ziran* in Daoist sense), and need not be otherwise.

6-3 Toward a Contemplative Philosophy

The broader implication of Wittgenstein's metaphysics of silence is a call for a contemplative mode of philosophy—not quietism in the sense of withdrawal, but a philosophy rooted in listening, patience, and ethical responsiveness. This mode resists the logic of mastery and embraces the possibility that the deepest truths are not conclusions to be articulated but orientations to be cultivated.

In this light, Wittgenstein's concluding proposition—“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”—is not a nihilistic limit but a generative horizon. It points us beyond the reach of language not to abolish meaning, but to awaken our sensitivity to what lies beyond articulation yet within experience. In an age where large language models can generate syntactically perfect utterances without remainder, Wittgenstein's silence acquires renewed

urgency: it marks precisely the threshold that statistical pattern cannot cross—the lived, the singular, the unsayable weight of a particular existence.

Conclusion: The Sound of Silence

To read Wittgenstein through the metaphysics of silence is to encounter a philosophy that teaches how to stop—how to see clearly, to let go, and to dwell meaningfully within the ordinary. In both his early and later work, Wittgenstein invites us to consider the possibility that silence is not the opposite of meaning, but one of its deepest forms. Silence is not merely the absence of words, but the presence of attunement, restraint, and reverence. This philosophical stance has profound implications for how we conceive of teaching and learning. The idea of “teaching without words” emerges as a unifying thread that connects Wittgenstein’s early and later thought, and links it to comparative traditions in religion and mysticism.

In the *Tractatus*, silence marks the limit of language and points toward the ineffable, suggesting that some truths can only be shown, not said. In the *Investigations*, silence becomes therapeutic, a way to dissolve philosophical confusion and return to the ordinary. In both cases, the role of the teacher is not to provide explanations but to guide students toward a place of clarity and understanding that lies beyond words. This is echoed in the Daoist, Buddhist, and mystical traditions, which also value silence as a means of teaching and learning.

On a vaster spatio-temporal scale, silence is primordial—an eternal continuum without origin or end, whereas sound emerges as finite interruptions fragmenting this unbroken expanse. The cosmic plenum transcends all human linguistic demarcations; its essence eludes the very frameworks of mundane epistemology, demanding we question whether objectification can ever capture its nature. In this light, silence and its epistemic depth may indeed point more faithfully to the veritable ground of “Sein”.

In an era defined by information saturation, ideological noise, and metaphysical overreach, Wittgenstein’s silence speaks with renewed urgency. It reminds us that some things—perhaps the most important things—can only be lived, not said or even thought. And in the context of education, it challenges us to reconsider the value of silence and the possibilities of teaching without words and any other representational systems

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