UNIT 8: WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE GAMES

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8.1 LEARNING OBJETIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- discuss the universal form of language
- explain the essence of language
- describe the absolute simples
- analyse the concept of language games
- interpret the concept of family resemblance
- evaluate meaning as use
- illustrate the concept of private language

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to the concept of language games. It is undoubtedly a radical concept of philosophy of language and brings out the diverse functions of language by repudiating the picture theory of

language in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The other important concepts like family resemblance, meaning as use, private language etc. follows from the integral concept of language games.

8.3 THE UNIVERSAL FORM OF LANGUAGE

Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* holds that any proposition presupposes the universal form of language. An elementary proposition is a combination of names. And in order to understand the proposition one must 'know' the objects in some sense for which the names stand. Any proposition carries with it the whole of 'logical space'. This concept of Wittgenstein is concerned with the viewpoint that there is an essence of propositions. The essence of propositions is "the essence of all propositions, and thus the essence of the world." (T-5.4711) The essence of propositions is "the same as "the universal form of proposition" has been proved by the fact that all propositions 'must be foreseeable".(Note books p-89)

Wittgenstein's later work *Investigations* denounces the early view that each proposition carries with it the universal form of language. A sentence presupposes a 'Language game', but a language game will be a small segment of the whole of language. In *Investigations* (Sec.2) Wittgenstein gives an example of language-games, that is a builder and his worker. The building materials are blocks, pillars, slab, and beam. The builder utters one of the words and his helperbrings the building materials that he has understood by calling out his master. Wittgenstein names this process of actions and language through the example of a builder and his worker as language-games. In *Brown Book*, we find an analogy of someone's describing chess without mentioning pawns. And this act of describing chess without pawns is an incomplete language-game, but the description of chess as a game of playing is after all a simpler language game. (*Blue and Brown books*, p-77) This simpler language-game neither pre-supposes chess, nor a part of playing. On the other hand the example of a builder and a worker (Sec.2) implies its use in descriptions or questions.

8.3.1 The Essence of Language

Wittgenstein in *Tractatus* holds the view that there is the essence of language, just as it assumes that there is a universal form of language which is considered common to all numbers. But *Investigations* rejects this viewpoint. According to this viewpoint, there is nothing common to different forms of language games, just as there is not something common to all games like board game, cricket game, card games, ball games etc. One of the remarkable features of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that there is not a unique feature of language or there is not an essential structure of language out of which the different forms of language can be depicted. Therefore, the views of early Wittgenstein had been rejected by his later philosophy of language.

Early Wittgenstein held the view that ultimate elements of language are names that designate simple objects, but later *Investigations* did the view that the words either simple or complex have no absolute meaning. Rather they are used within a particular language-game, so the words in a language game can be simple or complex. As for instance, is one's visual image of a tree simple or composite? The answer to this question does not make any sense if we do confine our attention to the trunk or to the branches of the tree. When we stipulate our concentration to the trunk of the tree, then the idea will be simple. In contrast to this, the answer will be composite when we discuss the tree from the points of trunk and its branches. Through this example Wittgenstein attempted to show that the issues of simple and composite objects are relative to the concept of language game. The *Tractatus* idea is that the notion of simplicity is not a relative concept; rather all concepts of language are grounded on it. So, it is a super concept in *Tractatus*. In another sense, it is an image

concept, but the problem is that how to apply it, again no where in *Tractatus*we find the example of this absolute simple.

Wittgenstein in *Investigations* rejects the viewpoint of absolute simple, because *Investigations* view it as philosophical illusion. According to Investigations, an imaginary concept like absolute simple cannot satisfy our need played by a language game which can make a sharp boundary between games and activities. The imaginary or ideal concept does not make any connection between games and activities. Therefore, the *Investigations*raises the issue of generality or complete exactness, so the issue is, why should there be general or we talk about general? The concept of precision and exactness are relative to some particular purpose. As for instance,the guests are to arrive exactly at one o'clock, but this notion of exactness would not employ the instruments and measurements of an observatory. *Investigations* assertion is-"No single ideal of exactness has been laid down, we do not know what we should be supposed to imagine under this head." (Sec-88) It can be held the view that there are different kinds of exactness or precision for different purposes, so the concept of exactness or precision is stipulated to one purpose, rather it can have different uses in relation to different purposes. But the supposition isthat there is a certain state of complete exactness underneath of our everyday speech and that logical analysis can bring it to light. In this context the *Tractatus* view is that there is a complete analysis of proposition.

In case of searching for the ideal of perfect exactness, we will become dis-satisfied with ordinary words and sentences, because we do not find an actual or pure structure of language in our day to day language. Therefore, *Investigations* points out that "Do not think but look." There is not a hidden process in our language. So, Wittgenstein writes: "Philosophy simply puts everything before us and neither explains nor deduce, whatever is hidden is of no interest to us."

8.4 LANGUAGE GAMES

The conception that language is a picture has been replaced by Wittgenstein himself in his later thought that language has different functions. The term 'language game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or form of a life." (PI.23)

The examples of language games are: obeying and giving orders, describing the appearance of an objects, expressing sensations, giving measurements, constructing an object from a description, reporting an event, speculating about an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams, making up a stories; and reading it- playacting, singing catches, guessing riddles,telling jokes, solving a problem in practical with arithmetic, translating from one language into another, asking, cursing, greeting, and praying. These language games are examined in order to understand language. It can be viewed that the meaning of a word is determined by its use in a language game. The meaning of a language has a role in our form of life. That is why Wittgenstein means- 'To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.' There is no common feature involved incase of our language-game.

8.4.1 Family Resemblance

The most important question is: what is common to all these activities? The response is, instead of asking what is common to all these activities, rather it can be said that there is nothing common to all these activities and the activities are related to one another in many different ways. It is because of this relationship to all the different activities of language we call them all 'language'. As for instance, by the word games Wittgenstein means board games, card games, ball games, Olympicgames, and so on. What is common to all? Wittgenstein's reply is- Do not say "There must be something common, or they would be not

called "games". If you look at them you will not see anything common to all. In stead of common, you will see similarities among games or language. To find the answer of the question, Wittgenstein repeats-"Do not think, but look." As for instance, when we play games like board games, card games, tennis game, ball games etc. we find some common features or similarities with the other game, and also we find some features in one game which are absent in the other. Are all games dealt with winning or losing? Or does all games relate to competition among players? Or are all games concerned with amusement? Significantly, in ball games there is winning and losing, but in case of a child who throws a ball to the wall and catches it again, here the feature like winning or losing is absent. Again, we can make a comparison between chess and tennis. Here we find the difference between chess and tennis in case of skill and luck. Again, we can mention of the play of ringa-ringa-roses, here the features like winning and losing, competition among players, luck and skill is absent, on the other hand the feature like amusement is present and which is absent in the other games of tennis, ball-games etc., Therefore, it is said in the *Investigations* that we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss crossing: sometimes similarities of detail.

Wittgenstein in this context involves a most important concept that is family resemblance. Just as games have some features or similarities avoiding the common feature among them, so also in a family weget some features or similarities among the members in the context of colour of eye, hight, gait, temperament etc. Therefore, Wittgenstein holds that games form a family.

Wittgenstein's concept of language games has an affinity to Aristotle's concept of categories. According to Aristotle, categories are kinds of 'things that are to be said'. Aristotle holds the view that a statement makes sense only if it belongs to a category. Similarly, Wittgenstein also holds the view that a

statement or an expression makes sense only by its use in a context.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State whether the following statements are True or False

a) According to *Tractatus*, there is a universal form of language. (True/False)

b) The notion of simplicity in *Tractatus* is a super concept or image concept. (True/ False)

c) 'Do not think, but look' is a saying of early Wittgenstein. (True/False)

Q 2: What is language-game? (Answer in about words)

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Q 3: Write an important feature of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

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Q 4: Where does Wittgenstein mention 'simpler language game'? (Answer in about words)

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ACTIVITY : 8.1

What do you mean by the essence of all propositions?

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8.4.2: Meaningas Use

Wittgenstein in *Investigations* rejects the picture theory of meaning that is the central of the *Tractatus*. Both early and later

work of Wittgenstein was concerned with the question, how can a sentence say something, how can a language represent reality? The first sentence of the *Blue Book* is, what is the meaning of a word? This also relates to the question that is 'what is the meaning of a sentence?"-both early and the later work of Wittgenstein concentrates on the same question, but the later view of Wittgenstein is entirely different from the early work that he made. In stead of accepting the early view that language has a meaning because it is a picture, his remarkable or revolutionary viewpoint is that the 'meaning of a sentence is its use" explains that use determines the meaning of a sentence.

Wittgenstein mentioned the use of a sentence in many places. For instance, "But doesn't the fact that sentences have the same sense consist in their having the same use?" (Investigations, sec.20); there are "countless, different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences' (sec 23).

Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is a critique of his early work. He says that we do not always understand a sentence even if the sentence is grammatically correct and also the words used in the sentence we understand. For example, "if someone says, 'this is here", he should ask the question in what circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense." (Sec. 117)Similarly, "A philosopher says that he understands the sentence 'I am here"-he means something by it thinks something, even when he does not think at all how, on what occasions, this sentence is used."(Sec:514)

Wittgenstein in this context opines that sentences have sense only in special circumstances, because we do not understand the sense in those circumstances.

Here Wittgenstein's later view is totally different from the early view, because early view holds that an elementary proposition is a combination of name, if we able to understand the names that refer to, then only we understand the sentence. Here,

the subject of circumstances does not come into account like the later view forwardedby*Investigations* in *Tractatus*. The sentence, 'I am here', itself does not show the meaning unless it is used. Again by simply looking at the sentence we cannot determine its meaning unless it is used by someone in a context. So, Wittgenstein denies the early view that is "we understand the sense of a propositional sign without its having been explained to us." (Tractatus, 4.02) Wittgenstein does not hold the view that the words- meaning and use are synonymous. By the 'use' of an expression he means the special circumstances, the surroundings in which it is spoken or written. The use of an expression means the language game in which it plays a part. It is a mistaken idea that by the use of an expression Wittgenstein means the ordinary use of an expression or its correct use.Their view is that he was an ordinary language philosopher. But it can be viewed that Wittgenstein studied any use of language, real or imaginary which may stimulate a philosophical problem. For instance, he involved language games which did not correspond to any actual use of language. (Blue and Brown Book, pp.103-104)To Wittgenstein, "Language games objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dis-similarities." (Inv. Sec.130)

The *Tractatus* points out that language is composed of names. And the meaning of a name is simple object. And, therefore, the sense of a sentence emanates from the names that compose it. One name stands for one thing, another for another thing and the combination of objects pictures a state of affairs. So, naming is prior to the sense of…….. A sentence says something because it is composed names that stand for things. There are two objections found in *Investigations* against the priority of names. Firstly, the meaning of a word is never the

thing, if there is one that corresponds to the word. (Sec: 40) Secondly, before one can find out what a name stands for one must already have mastered the language game to which the name belongs. In order to learn the name of a colour, a direction, a sensation, one must have some grasp of the activities of placing colours in an order, of reading a map, of responding to the words, gestures, and behaviour which are expressions of sensation. By regularly pointing at something and saying it does not mean that we get the meaning, rather it can be said that the meaning of a word comes through use and special circumstance under which it is used.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that words are pictures of reality and words that picture the reality are fit to indicate the meaning of proposition with words and in contrast to thisthe words which does not picture the reality is false. It is like cognitions that do not mesh. *Investigations* mentions-"When a sentence is called senseless it is not as it were its sense that is senseless." (Sec. 500) In stead of saying the proposition, 'my head is asleep', is dealt with the clash of meanings, or the word 'head' is incompatible with the meaning of asleep, it can be said in the *Investigations that*we do not perceive a clash of meanings. But we do not know what behaviour and circumstances go with this sentence. It is not that it cannot have a use. The fact is that it does not have a use, we do not know in what circumstances one should say it. "Look at the sentence as an instrument, and at its sense as its employment." (Sec 421) Another most important criticism of the picture theory of meaning is that how we should apply the picture. Suppose, someone showed you a 'drawing picture of a cube' and request you to bring him a one of those things related to the picture of a cube, and to pleze him at your effortyou bring him a triangular prism instead of a cube. There is not only one way of taking the drawing was possible, rather we

can take it in other way also. Again, we can interpret the drawing of a cube in diverse ways. As for instance, there is a picture in a room represents an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick? But the question is that could we interpret or explain the picture of an old man as sliding down the hill in that position? The second picture is more natural than the first one and the important thing is that there is not anything intrinsic related to the picture. To be clear, the picture of a green leaf can be understood not only in one way; rather we can understand it to be a representation of the colour green, or of a specific shade of green, or of a leaf shape in general, or of a particular shape of a leaf, or of foliage in general, and so on. Therefore, the meaning of the picture theory that a sentence is a picture, cannot be the fundamental explanation of the sense of sentences. Wittgenstein holds that meaning of a language does not consist in a picturing relation between words and things. Rather he holds that meaning of a word is determined through its use in different contexts. Therefore, language has no single or unique function of language which can determine the meaning of expression or statement.

Wittgenstein in *Tractatus* views that philosophical problems arise when we misunderstand the logic of our language. While *Investigations*says that 'philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.' The remedy is not found by constructing a systematic philosophical theory. Rather the remedy is to look at how language actually works. Philosophical problems are not empirical problems; rather philosophical problems are solved by looking into theworkings of our language. Wittgenstein remarks, what is your aim in philosophy? To show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. Wittgenstein in this context makes a difference between surface grammar and depth grammar. By the word 'grammar' he means logic which is associated with the logic of a given linguistic activity. There are

many kinds of linguistic activity; therefore there are many different ways in which the 'grammar' of language works. This is known as depth grammar.To Wittgenstein, philosophers become trapped in the fly bottle, because they notice only the 'surface grammar'. By the word 'surface grammar' Wittgenstein means grammatical similarity or hidden structure of language. It forbids us to think of the diverse functions of language. Wittgenstein calls the grammatical Investigations as 'Grammatical enquiry'.

Wittgenstein rejects the empiricist view that meaning is grounded in sensory experience. There are two reasons of rejecting this view. The first one is- one does not teach the meaning of words by setting up an association in the learners mind between the word and an experience of some object or situation. Secondly, our attaching meaning to an expression on different occasions of using it does not consist in having the same experience or going through the same mental process each time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Whether the following statements are True or False

a) Language is a part of an activity or form of life. (True/ False)

b) There is a unique feature found in language game. (True/ False)

c) Wittgenstein holds that games form a family. (True/ False)

d) Investigations rejects the picture theory of meaning. (True/ False)

e) Wittgenstein is an ordinary language philosopher. (True/ False)

f) According to Wittgenstein, words are pictures of reality. (True/ False)

Q 6: Who says, "Do not think but look".

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Q 7: What is family resemblance? (Answer in about words)

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Q 8: Do you find any link between Wittgenstein's concept of language games and Aristotle's concept of categories? (Answer in about…… words)

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Q 9: What do you mean by the use theory of meaning? (Answer in about…… words)

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Q 10: ''Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday"- state the meaning of the statement. (Answer in about….. words)

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Q 11: Make a distinction between surface and depth grammar. (Answer in about….. words)

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ACTIVITY : 8.2

Is use theory of meaning the best explanation of meaning? Explain

Ans……

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8.4.3 Private Language

The idea that the content of a rule can be fixed only by a practice provides a transition to one of the most important subtle topics of the *Investigations* that is the concept of private language.

The conception that a sentence is a picture was replaced in Wittgenstein's thought by the conception that the sense of a

sentence is determined by the circumstances in which it is used. As for instance, swinging a stick is a strike and pushing a piece of wood is a movement in the circumstances of games. Similarly, saying some words is making a decision in certain circumstances. In one set of circumstances saying a particular sentence would be asserting something; in other words saying those words would be asking a question, again others it would be repeating what someone had said.

Wittgenstein'stechnique was to describe different cases of deciding, asserting, intending, expecting, and so on. The purpose of this was to show that when one utters some words that express, for instance, a decision one cannot pick out anything that occurred (for example, a thought, an image, some spoken words, a feeling).

Wittgenstein rejects the case of mental occurrence with an argument. If a decision or expectation or sensation were state or event that was logically independent of the circumstances, there none or not even the subject of the supposed event could ever determine that it had occurred.

Firstly, how would we learn what deciding is? In reply it can be viewed that as circumstances are supposed to be irrelevant, one could not learn it by observing it. One would have to learn what deciding is from one's own case. Wittgenstein remarked, 'If I knew it only from my own case, then I know only what I call that, not what anyone else does." (Inv. Sec.347) It would be unverifiable whether two people refer to the same phenomenon by the word 'deciding'. Again one cannot be satisfied by saying that "I know what I call deciding". Again we cannot determine right or wrong in case of private object. Wittgenstein holds that "the private object constantly changes but you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you." (Inv. P-207)

Wittgenstein's rejection of private language is an outcome of his new conception of meaning. Language requires rules, and by

following a rule we imply a customary way of doing something. It cannot be the case that only once in a life time a rule is to be followed. (Sec-195) According to the concept of meaning, an expression has a meaning only if there is a regular, auniform, connection between saying the expression and certain circumstances. A person can be guided by a sign post only if there is a regular way of responding to signpost.The meaning of an expression is its use means that meaning is determined by its use. Wittgenstein made a significant connection between the nature of meaning and his attack on 'private' mental contents by saying that following a rule is a practice and therefore one cannot follow a rule "privately" (Sec. 202)

It is true that there are mental events like feelings, images etc. involved in our language, but it might be the case that they are absent in language when we hear a sentence. That is why, the act of saying that the mental events constitute understanding cannot be accepted. Understanding cannot be considered as a process. As for instance, understanding language like knowing how to play chess is a state rather than a process. But, it is not a state of some hidden mental mechanism. According to one version of mental mechanism doctrine, to understand the meaning of a word means to call up an appropriate image in connection with it. As for instance, 'bring me a white flower', it indicates that we must have already an image in our mind regarding the words we use in a sentence. It is true that mental images pass through our minds. But it is not the case that they render meanings on the words we use. The images are nothing but the pictures illuminating a written text in a book. The other version of the mental mechanism doctrineshows that meaning is a mental process. And it involves the concept of private language found in Wittgenstein's book *Philosophical Investigations*.

The concept of ostensive definition has played a crucial role in the epistemology of Russell and logical positivists. Private

language is indirectly connected with knowledge by acquaintance. But Wittgenstein clears that knowledge by acquaintance is not the same thing as knowledge of the word's meaning. Acquaintance with the object will not be adequate in case of getting the meaning of a word. As for instance, we may explain the word 'tove' by pointing to a pencil and say that this is 'tove'. This explanation would not be satisfactory because by the word 'tove' we may understand that 'this is a pencil', 'this is round' or 'this is wood', and so on. The acts of confronting and uttering a sound are not sufficient in case of naming something. On the other hand it can be viewed that the acts of asking and giving names can be performed only in the context of a language game. As for instance, we can take the word 'pain'. The word 'pain' acquires its meaning according to person's own private experience. But Wittgenstein shows that we cannot get meaning of a word in this way. Wittgenstein means that in case of private occurrence the word of correctness and incorrectness is irrelevant. Wittgenstein's argument is that there cannot be a language whose words can only be known to the individual speaker of the language.

Wittgenstein's attack on private definition through language games leads to the rejection of solipsism and the possibility of private language depends on the existence of the public and social world.

8.5 CRITICISM

Alfred Ayer in his *Problem of Knowledge* offers a criticism of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. He upholds the view that this is a good analogy, but he asserts that Wittgenstein is wrong to derive the conclusion that games do not have any one thing in common. To Ayer, the question of whether things have something in common differs from whether there are resemblances between them. The difference

between the two questions is in formulation only. If things have a resemblance to one another sufficiently, which is considered the same and thought to be present among them as useful to apply, there is something common among them cannot be ignored immediately.

Norman Malcolm in *Encyclopedia piece* criticizes Wittgenstein's concepts of the relation between meaning and use, the possibility of a private language, and the objectivity of rules. The recent debate has been forwarded by the writers of Michael Dummett and Saul Kripke.Dummett raised the use of antirealist theory of meaning against the Wittgenstein's concept of meaning of language. On the other hand Kripke has argued that Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* presents a new skeptical problem and skeptical solution to it in the context of following rules in case of determination of meaning of language. The responses to these important issues have made clear the importance of reading Wittgenstein's philosophy in new perceptive. It also focuses on the misunderstandings of his philosophy out of which philosophical problems involve.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: Whether the following statements are True or False

a) Private language is one of the most important topics of Investigations. (True/False)

b) The concept of meaning is the basis of the rejection of private language.(True/False)

c) To Wittgenstein, one can follow a rule privately. (True/False)

d) The issue like solipsism is connected with private language. (True/False)

e) Meaning is determined by its use. (True/False)

Q 13: How does Wittgenstein reject the private language argument? (Answer in about words)

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Q 14) What is ostensive definition? (Answer in about words)

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8.6 LET US SUM UP

- Wittgenstein in *Tractatus* holds that any proposition presupposes the universal form of language. This concept of Wittgenstein holds the opinion that there is an essence of propositions. The essence of proposition indicates that there is a universal form of language has been replaced by later Wittgenstein through the concept of language-games or uses of language in different contexts.
- By rejecting or denouncing the essence of all propositions Wittgenstein holds the view that there is not a unique feature or common feature of language. Rather language has diverse kinds of functions by involving the concept of language game in a different style.
- The *Tractatus* idea is that the notion of simplicity is not a relative concept; rather all concepts of language are grounded on it. So, it is a super concept in *Tractatus*. In another sense, it isan image concept.
- The *Investigations* rejects the viewpoint of absolute simple, because *Investigations* view it as philosophical illusion. According to *Investigations*, an imaginary concept like Absolute simple cannot satisfy our need played by a language game, which can make a sharp boundary between games and activities. The imaginary or ideal concept does not make any connection between games and activities. That is why, the Investigations raises the issue of generality or complete exactness.

- Perfect exactness or ideal exactness does not advocate ordinary words or sentences, because we do not find an actual or pure structure of language in our ……..Therefore, Investigations points out "Do not think but look".
- There are different functions of language.As for instance, giving orders, constructing an object from a description, play an event, play acting etc. Language games held that the meaning of a word is determined by its use in language game. Apart from this it also holds that there is no common feature inherent in language.
- Wittgenstein views that meaning of a language does not consist in a picturing relation between words and things. Rather he holds that meaning of a word is determined through its use in different contexts. Therefore, language has no single or unique function of language which can determine the meaning of an expression or statement.



8.7 FURTHER READINGS

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