Harald Johannessen
University of Tromsø

A Void in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy

I am no scholar on Wittgenstein, nor on scholars on Wittgenstein. This needn't be said, as you are bound to discover yourself, but I thought it best to tell you, since, in a sense, I have come not to praise but to bury. The works I shall attend to are basically *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI).

Without perhaps being able to give a decisive argument, let me say that I go with those who hold there are deep-running agreements and similarities between the early and the later works of Wittgenstein. One may substantiate such a claim in several ways: biographically, Wittgenstein's *philosophical heart* was pretty constant, from the start to the finish his idol was Frege, given his temperament I would find that implausible unless he also admired Frege for his problems and philosophical depth (when he, late in life, *Zettel*, § 712 writes "The style of my sentences is extraordinarly strongly influenced by Frege. And if I wanted to, I could establish this influence where at first sight no one would see it.", this is no mere stylistic matter); thematically, there is a substantial overlap of central topics between *Tractatus* and later works, just spell out the list in the preface to PI (meaning, understanding, proposition, logic, foundations of mathematics, states of consciousness), furthermore, central positions remain in place, e.g. the adherence to meaning as truth conditional, and the view of logic, where logical relations are seen as revealed through the use of ordinary sentences, tautologies are neither pictures of facts, nor are logical truths the most general laws of nature, as Frege thought; finally, the character of

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Wittgenstein's remarks about philosophy, his 'metaphilosophy', has a constant core.

The plan I follow is this: first, I detail some features of what I take to be his metaphilosophy, and see them as spelling out the impossibility of giving explanations in philosophy (indeed of philosophy itself), not merely on the articulation thereof; secondly, I sketch the *Tractatus* answer to a particular problem, the one probably overshadowing every other in Wittgenstein's view, viz. the problem of linguistic meaning; thirdly, I argue that its replacement in PI, required, since he gave up the *Tractatus* answer, is strictly speaking not there (this is the void I found) and I go on to suggest what should take its place, in strict conformity with his metaphilosophy. ("Metaphilosophy" is my term, Wittgenstein himself, in PI § 121, denied that there is a second-order philosophy, it is all philosophy, on the same level as it were; I am just picking out those remarks that would be second-level if we were to use that word: remarks about philosophy, philosophers, etc.)

What then are his metaphilosophical pronouncements? Going by the *Tractatus* we have that the problems of philosophy are posed because the logic of our language is misunderstood. The proper consequence to draw from this, according to Wittgenstein, is that what can be said can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must be silent about, that is, we cannot think about it either.

This is from the preface. Later in the book we get such sentiments as that the whole of philosophy is full of fundamental confusions (3.324), that the deepest problems are not problems at all, that most propositions and questions in philosophy are not false but nonsensical, and arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language (4.003). As descriptions of philosophy, we get things like "All philosophy is a critique of language" (4.0031), and that it aims

at the logical clarification of thought. Philosophy is furthermore not a body of doctrines but an activity, consisting essentially of elucidations (4.111). And, from 6.54, we get that for anything to serve as elucidations means that those who understand them recognize them as nonsensical. A concomitance of this position on philosophy is, for Wittgenstein, that, even though philosophy is not one of the natural sciences (4.111), the correct method in philosophy is to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science (6.53). In 4.11 we hear that all true propositions belong to natural science, the place of philosophy is above or below natural science, setting limits to its sphere (4.113). On a more detailed level we have "in philosophy the question what we actually use this word or this proposition for repeatedly leads to valuable insights" (6.211). Finally, we hear that all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order (5.5563).

Much of this is found also in the *Philosophical Investigations*, in a subtly altered form.
The depth of philosophy is the depth of a grammatical joke. Problems that arise through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of depth, their roots are as deep as the forms of language. And, startlingly, their significance is as great as the importance of our language (§ 111).
The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of the bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language (§ 119). We suffer from an urge to misunderstand the workings of our language (§ 109).
Philosophy can only describe language, not interfere with it. It leaves everything as it is (§ 124).
If one tried to advance theses in philosophy it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them (§

128). Philosophy only states what everone admits (§ 599), is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language (§ 109) and aims at complete clarity, which simply means that all problems disappear (§ 133). But, philosophers are like savages, misinterpreting the expressions of civilized men (§ 194).

In addition to § 97, there are two other paragraphs extremely important as expansions on *Tractatus* 5.5563 (that our everyday language is perfectly in order), § 81 and § 194. Wittgenstein brings in the concepts of game, calculus and machine to show how we are tempted to think we measure language up against an ideal one, and that logic, as an instrument of assessment, is really descriptively true only of the ideal language. (The "when we do philosophy we are like savages" occur at the end of § 194.)

This stuff is very similar to the *Tractatus* material, one difference is that *Tractatus* has only marginal remarks about the philosopher. Another difference, very marked, is that science is virtually absent in PI. Wittgenstein seems to have interjected grammatical remarks between philosophy and science, evicting the latter from his concern. This shift seems due to a marked inclination to disfavour explanations as against descriptions. Grammatical descriptions seem important to Wittgenstein for two reasons, they evade the strictures on theses and explanations, and they are marked with truth, thus replacing the need for science. I shall ignore this shift, as the change is probably caused by his lack of belief in the possibility of giving relevant explanations. The best way of combatting that is to provide explanations. A marked similarity is that both works must consider philosophical activity to be a perennial one.This is due to the nature of the causes behind philosophy. That he, in the *Tractatus*, claimed to have found the truth, is beside the point. Even the truth may have to be found, and stated, again and again. It is here well worth remarking that even though Wittgenstein speaks of the philosopher

as a savage, it is not the philosopher who by his activity creates the misunderstandings underlying philosophy: both the *Tractatus* and PI make clear that it is us, humans (the chattering classes), who, by knocking up against the limits of language, misunderstand it, the philosopher is just the whipping boy. His remarks about *us*, that we (not the philosophers) are confused about language, misunderstand it, goes well with the notion that although language is perfectly all right, radical work needs to be done with us. What it goes less well with is the notion that it is philosophical thinking alone that needs to be stopped. As I read Wittgenstein, he is easily misread on this point. The therapy needed is not to stop us doing philosophy, but to stop us running up against the limits of language. ("The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to." § 133) Since this is not a philosophical discovery, what makes me capable? The answer is: whatever capable of removing the causes behind philosophy.

The picture theory

I assume most here know the *Tractatus*, so I shall not go into great detail. The salient points are these: sentences, as logical pictures of possible worldly circumstances, are themselves facts, these facts are propositional signs in a projective relation to the world. The propositions spell out their meaning by expressing their truth conditions. The curious, and important, thing about propositions is that because they contain everything but the projected, including their own projective relations, they vouch for their own meaningfulness. The projected is the propositional sense, so the proposition doesn't contain its own sense, but it includes the possibility of expressing its sense. (3.11; "The method of projection is to think the sense of the proposition.") When we entertain (think)

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a proposition, we think its sense. Elementary sentences cannot but help showing off their sense, so they cannot be misunderstood, there is no place for interpretation. (As we all know, Wittgenstein keeps this structural spot in PI.) Logic has set up the proposition, both in its relation to us and in its relation to the world, in such a way that its ability to picture the world is self-explanatory. As I see it, this is the crucial point, there is no problem about meaning because propositions impose on us their own meaningfulness.

When Wittgenstein came to disown the picture theory he did so because he rejected the way the theory made propositions contain the projective relation to the world, in other words, he came to reject the picture theory's explanation of its own meaningfulness. Rush Rhees is reported to have stated in conversation that Wittgenstein later said that in the *Tractatus* he confused the method of projection with the lines of projection. This is one way of distinguishing the explanatory part of the picture theory from what I shall later call the theory of meaning part. Wittgenstein must have come to realize that when he, in the *Tractatus*, believed he gave an account of meaning, he merely presented, in schematic form, which meaning a proposition would have.

There is, by the way, an overkill in the transition from the *Tractatus* to PI. Wittgenstein has two rejections of the picture theory, the first in the *Tractatus* itself. His metaphilosophy alone is sufficient to reject the picture theory. But the actual rejection (caused by Sraffa's Neapolitan gesture, if folklore is to be trusted), suggesting that his metaphilosophy is idling, seems to have been brought about by a change in his views on logic: logic cannot show that propositions satisfy the intelligibility conditions put on propositions, not in the way required by the picture theory. What *Tractatus* claimed was that propositions and suitable parts of the world share the same logical

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form, thereby explaining the existence of language, since we, when thinking the sense of a proposition, project it onto the world. Such an explanation doesn't, strictly speaking, account for the existence of language, the sheer existence of the signs is not accounted for, but, that apart, the picture theory explained meaning. When Wittgenstein later, in PI, tried to explain the role of truth, see e.g. paragraph 136, he introduced two expressions and tried to contrast them: belong to and fit. The bad picture is to imagine that since "a proposition is whatever can be true or false", the concept of truth fits a proposition in such a way that we could use it "to determine what is and what is not a proposition." But, "what a proposition is is in one sense determined by the rules of sentence formation (in English for example), and in another sense by the use of the sign in the language-game. And the use of the words "true" and "false" may be among the constituent parts of this game; and if so it *belongs* to our concept 'proposition' but does not *fit*' it." Put *logic* in for the *truth values* and we get a perception of what Wittgenstein saw as wrong with the picture theory.

What I suggest is that he didn't reject the picture theory's notion of what meaning is, an issue I shall return to. Wittgenstein's rejection of the picture theory was a rejection of something else: the explanation of meaning. The picture theory is, or has the form of, an explanation, it satisfies the condition: if true, it explains (accounts for) whatever it purports to be an explanation of. With hindsight we can say that the explanatory part of the picture theory is the negative part of Wittgenstein's view, it showed itself not to be the truth, by showing what unutterable, philosophical nonsense it was. So, having lost the picture theory, we are short of an explanation of meaning. What in PI does do that? My answer, in short, is, nothing.

I said a moment ago that Wittgenstein held on to the *Tractarian* view on meaning, basically the view that meaning is given by spelling out the truth conditions of propositions. To do so is the work of a theory of meaning. (Please put no stress at all on *theory*.) Let me first spell out the ground rules. The thing of importance to be accounted for in a theory of meaning is *semantic value*, a notion fairly close to Fregean *Bedeutung*. A theory of meaning for a given language gives us the semantic values, for expressions (or utterances) of that language, where expressions range from sentences down to the smallest meaning-contributing features of the language. Classically, sentential semantic values are the truth values, and designators have objects as semantic values. Linguistic meanings, as ordinarily understood, contribute to the fixing of values, so a large part of a theory of meaning is the lexicon and syntax. A theory of meaning thus purports to give us the actual ties between linguistic expressions and the world. But, the theory of meaning, by itself, does not tell us how there came to be *these* ties, nor how there came to be ties at all. In other words, a theory of meaning does not, as such, contain an explanation of meaning. (I prefer here to state this as a problem about how something actually exists "how does language exist", rather than as a problem about transcendental conditions "How is language possible".)

As I have said, the picture theory gives both a theory and an explanation of meaning, what Wittgenstein basically gave up when he dropped it, was the answer it gave to the second, the existence question. But, to drop such a reply doesn't, in itself, entail that it is impossible to give an explanation of meaning, only that philosophy cannot give any, says the metaphilosophy. My claim is further that we haven't been given an alternative explanation in the *Investigations*. So, by looking at an example, let us see what he does do in PI.

First, and very shortly, allow me to suggest something about the way to understand the early remarks in PI, those where Wittgenstein plays down talk of meaning, in favour of talk of use of words. I agree that these paragraphs are to be read as constituting an attack on the picture theory. But, my suggestion is that these remarks are directed at that part of the picture theory I claim he wishes to give up, the part that explains meaning. Wittgenstein gives up the 'glassy essence of logic', thus the stress on variety, differences in use, lack of one essential feature to all circumstances, etc. His target is therefore not meaning as such, notice the seemingly innocuous §§ 10 and 13, where he admits that talk of signification needs to be accounted for and explained. When Wittgenstein, in paragraph 10, says "Now what do the words of this language *signify*? — What is supposed to shew what they signify, if not the kind of use they have? And we have already described that.", he doesn't deny that words signify, he claims that determining the use of the word shows us its signification.

Having just said that, to the example. My focus shall be on the very first language game in PI, the shop example. This is fairly complicated, involving three (or, a bit perversely, two) persons, and two situations. Someone sends someone shopping, that is the first, (don't read "else" with the second "someone" and we may have two persons). Then the shopper enters the shop and engages the shopkeeper, that is the second situation. The shopper delivers a slip with three words written on it, and the shopkeeper acts on them. I shall here disregard the fact that the words were written down, and not uttered, by the shopper, we could pretend the words were said, it doesn't matter. The words are "five red apples". My central contention is this: Wittgenstein is mistaken if he believes that the meanings of the words dictate that the shopkeeper act. If the utterance was not the utterance of an order his actions would be

misplaced. (As they would be if, say, his daughter came in to show she could pronounce the words. If she came in 'playing shop', he would go through the motions.) So the words do not direct the shopkeeper to act, the speech act of ordering goods does. The words merely dictate what he does, how he complies with the order. It is therefore essential to the example that someone goes shopping.

In the early part of PI too much stuff has been freighted from the speech act domain towards the semantic one, Wittgenstein talks sometimes as if words do not have a specific limited set of meanings, but as if they have many, as many as the ways they are used. I believe this is a mistake, (but given what I have suggested goes on in those remarks, I can understand why the text gives that impression). Most, if not all, words certainly have more than one meaning, but occasionally none are operative, as they would be in our example, if the words were uttered by the shopkeeper's daughter. However, when the meanings are not idle, then the words bring with them, into the situation, definite, relevant meanings.

People might think that I, in my estimate of the shopping example, grossly underplay the stress put by Wittgenstein on the speech act character of that incidence, and of linguistic intercourse in general. But that is not my complaint at all. As a matter of fact, I believe it is natural to give Wittgenstein two reasons for putting the words on a slip of paper, (1) it gives a commonsense look to the situation, as if the shopper is, say, a mother sending a child carrying the slip, (2) handing over a piece of paper seems more of an action than uttering a few words. (Wittgenstein's stress on actions can also be seen in the important place given to bedrock (§ 217), when we turn the spade after reaching the end of justifications. This has taken the place occupied in *Tractatus* by the concept of interpretation not being applicable to elementary sentences.) What I really complain of is that

we are given no explanation of how the speech acts themselves came to be. The picture theory explained meaning because of its own structure, the speech act aspect in PI doesn't explain meaning because it doesn't explain itself, it lacks the self-explanatoriness of the picture theory. By that, I mean we will not have accounted for the speech act of ordering goods, or the language game of shopping, or what not, by saying that it is a game we play, or by saying that the utterance of the words is integrated into activities. By saying this we haven't explained why, or rather, how, we came to perform such actions, or be involved in such activities. *This is what we do* is no explanation. So, what would an acceptable explanation look like?

The replacement

Is it possible to replace the discarded part of the picture theory? And, doesn't he himself argue against the necessity, and possibility, of a replacement? I shall not enter the debate whether Wittgenstein argued thus, apart from what I have said earlier about the absence of science in PI and its replacement by grammatical statements. (It is of course boringly true that they replace the elucidations.) I shall restrict myself to two claims: one, a replacement is needed, languages exist, people communicate, how this came to be is explainable; two, I believe an explanation exists, at least one on the right lines. This brings me to the theme of this conference, because the explanation I shall mention for you belongs in modern American philosophy of language: in the works of Ruth Millikan, first and foremost in her book *Language, thought, and other biological categories*. At the outset Millikan has an excellent question: "If we can understand why singing fancy songs helps song birds, why emitting ultrasonic sounds helps bats, why having a seventeen-year cycle helps seventeen-year locusts, why having ceremonial fights helps

mountain sheep, and why dancing figure eights helps bees, surely it is mere cowardice to refuse even to wonder why uttering, in particular, *subject-predicate sentences, subject to negation*, helps man. Surely there is some explanation for this helping that is quite general and not magical." (pp 7-8)

In order to find an explanation Millikan sets up, among other things, a system of theoretical concepts, which, by trading on analogies between biological and sign devices, are meant to cover both. Her strategy, then, is to identify, at least some of, the proper functions such devices serve. The usefulness of these functions then accounts for the proliferation of devices capable of carrying out these functions. All this enables her, among other things, to explain the formation of content within an historical, evolutionary framework (content as in mental content and propositional content), and to account for intentionality in naturalistic terms. It is, however, my intention *not* to discuss Millikan's work here, only to introduce her as someone who does do what Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy advises us to do: deliver statements conforming to science. But, let me throw you one morsel. Millikan's theory is opposed to the figure of the meaning rationalist, she calls meaning rationalism a syndrome, and claims that virtually every thinker on the topic of meaning suffers from the syndrome. *Tractatus* might be called the typical meaning rationalistic work. A meaning rationalist sees meanings as a Cartesian sees ideas, they are available for introspection, virtually infallible introspection. The exploratory work into them is armchair work. In short a meaning rationalist, though admitting that we may have false beliefs, utter false statements, nails to his mast the claim that we cannot err in thinking that we think. According to Millikan, this is precisely what we may, on occasion, be doing. Millikan believes that one may, quite literally, engage in what one believes is thinking about the world, and be mistaken in that belief. For her

false beliefs, or false thoughts, or propositions, relate to true ones as a defective heart is related to a healthy one. This is a view of the relation between the true and the false very different from that of the meaning rationalist, which comes out like this: "The sense of a proposition is determined by the two poles *true* and *false*." (Notebooks, page 97)

For Millikan, Wittgenstein is as I said, a representative meaning rationalist, but this refers mainly to the author of the *Tractatus*, what about the so called later Wittgenstein? As far as I can judge, he seems fairly unimportant. At the same time, some consider Wittgenstein to have had basically a naturalistic project. Is Wittgenstein at all thinking along such lines? Darwin is mentioned once in *Tractatus*: "Darwin's theory has no more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis in natural science." (4.1122) This is rather cryptic, slightly better is "Everyday language is a part of the human organism and no less complicated than it." (from 4.002). But I am afraid that the context of the remark removes any punch it might otherwise possess. In later works, the reference to Darwin, in *Culture and Value*, is less then helpful: "What a Copernicus or a Darwin really achieved was not the discovery of a true theory but of a fertile new point of view." (p 18) And, in the powerful passage Part II, xii, when Wittgenstein says "But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts; since we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history — since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes", one feels that he has gone off the boil. Surely this is precisely what he should be doing, — if he wanted the truth.

There are some other remarks I ought to mention, even though I, in the final analysis, do not believe they are relevant against the above estimate. Earlier I referred to the paragraphs where Wittgenstein

introduces the concepts of machine, game and calculus. Well, late in part I of PI he has some remarks where he touches on what I believe to be very much the same topic, but which might give a different impression, the remarks are §§ 490-8.

"To invent a language could mean to invent an instrument for a particular purpose on the basis of laws of nature (or consistently with them); but it also has the other sense, analogous to that in which we speak of the invention of a game." (§ 492)

"We say: "The cock calls the hens by crowing" — but doesn't a comparison with our language lie at the bottom of this? — Isn't the aspect quite altered if we imagine the crowing to set the hens in motion by some kind of physical causation?

But if we were shewn how the words "Come to me" act on the person addressed, so that finally, given certain conditions, the muscles of his legs are innervated, and so on — should we feel that that sentence lost the character of a *sentence*?" (§ 493). The answer to the last question is, I take it, no.

"Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs." (§ 496)

"When I say that the orders "Bring me sugar" and "Bring me milk" make sense, but not the combination "Milk me sugar", that does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect. And if its effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don't on that account call it the order to stare and gape, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce." (§ 498)

Wittgenstein is probably doing quite a few things here. First, I read the passages as giving a natural law governed compulsion, as an alternative to the machine rails from § 218. And that passage is, of course, a part of the debate about rules and the way they can be said

to direct and govern meaning and behaviour. Secondly, I read him as saying that if we were said to react in this way, no matter, because the rigidness of the natural law rule is perceived in comparison with our language. The concept of language is strong enough to hold together both the idea of game and the idea of natural law governed processes, they are compatible. So Wittgenstein thinks he is disarming the attack he presents and replies to in these paragraphs.

Perhaps I ought also to mention a paragraph in the middle of the debate about rules, viz. § 198, the second part of which reads: "I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it.
But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom."

Wittgenstein is quite clear here that meaning is not a one-off happening, that it requires training into customary behaviour. But this is still far from what, I claim we need to look for. And, the reason why I am, finally, not too impressed with Wittgenstein here is that the crux has not been touched: content and intentionality have not been explained naturalistically. To say that individuals are trained into meaningful behaviour is not to say anything explanatory about how such meaningful behaviour arose. Meaningful behaviour, linguistic or otherwise, doesn't come into being because it is behaviour people are trained to do, much nonsensical behaviour is of such complexity that it takes practice to master it. If linguistic devices are to operate meaningfully in behaviour, it is because they are meaningful devices, most likely operable over a broad spectre of

contexts. For Millikan, it is possible for something to be a meaningful device because the device has stabilizing functions, functions evolved over time. The linguistic devices have proved their usefulness, so over time they have become standardized and stable. There is a tag in biology: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, but in linguistic matters the training an individual goes through to become a speaker does not carry that speaker through the stages his words have been through, nor are his word tokens carried through those stages. But his words, the words he uses, are meaningful because they have been through those stages.

Why didn't he come closer than he did? My final suggestion is that something held him captive, and to indicate what, I should like to read you two passages from someone he so misquoted, St Augustine. The passages come from Book X of the *Confessions*, on memory, which for Augustine meant much more than the faculty for remembering. By the way, God is referred to by the expressions "Power of my soul" and "Truth".

Paragraph 1. "May I know you, who know me. May I 'know as I also am known'. Power of my soul, enter into it and fit it for yourself, so that you may have and hold it 'without spot or blemish'. This is my hope, and that is why I speak."

Paragraph 65. "Truth, when did you ever fail to walk with me, teaching me what to avoid and what to seek after when I reported to you what, in my inferior position, I could see and asked your counsel?...... Without you I could discern none of these things, and I found that none of these things was you. Nor was I you, though I had made these discoveries. I traversed everything, and tried to make distinctions and to evaluate each entity according to its proper rank. ... you are the abiding light by which I investigated all these

matters to discover whether they existed, what they were, and what value should be attached to them. I listened to you teaching me and giving instructions. ....And sometimes you cause me to enter into an extraordinary depth of feeling marked by a strange sweetness. If it were brought to perfection in me, it would be an experience quite beyond anything in this life. But I fall back into my usual ways under my miserable burdens. I am reabsorbed by my habitual practices. I am held in their grip. I weep profusely, but still I am held. Such is the strength of the burden of habit. Here I have the power to be, but do not wish it. There I wish to be, but lack the power. On both grounds I am in misery." (I have used the translation by Henry Chadwick, Oxford 1991.)