

A. Pichler & S. Säätelä:  
*Introduction to Wittgenstein*

13th lecture 20.11.2018:  
Wittgenstein's conception of  
philosophy

# Wittgenstein and philosophy

Grammar vs. “phenomena” (PI §383: **We do not analyse a phenomenon** (for example, thinking) **but a concept** (for example, that of thinking) ...

- To what extent does and can Wittgenstein’s philosophy / philosophy in general comply with the program of sticking to grammar rather than also describing extra-grammatical phenomena?
  - Have I in this lecture complied with this principle?

Surface vs. depth grammar (PI §664):

- To what extent is Wittgenstein’s analysis of the depth grammar of certain concepts (“knowing”, “understanding”, “thinking”, “meaning” ...) correct?

Descriptive vs. “reformist” philosophy of language (PI §§ 124-133 a.o.):

- To what extent is purely descriptive, ordinary language oriented, philosophy of language *enough*?  
(At least as a rule: No conceptual engineering in philosophy!)
  - Have I in this lecture complied with this principle?

No-theses vs. theses-philosophy (PI §128):

- Can Wittgenstein himself refrain from advancing theses?
  - Have I in this lecture complied with this principle?

No theses in (Wittgenstein's  
later) philosophy?

# «The later Wittgenstein does not advance philosophical theses»

PI §128: 128. If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.

LFM p.22: I won't say anything which anyone can dispute. Or if anyone does dispute it, I will let that point drop and pass on to say something else.

and other ...

# «Philosophical theses»

- The world consists of facts rather than objects.
- There is free will.
- There is no absolute or objective truth.
- All standards are relative.
- There is an external world.
- A good action is an action with good consequences.
- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
- Knowledge comes from our senses.
- All our knowledge is mediated by language.
- Our grammar is informed by grammar independent nature.
- ...

# Thus: No theses in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, only remarks about grammar?

- PI §43 – a thesis about the meaning of words?
- PI §133 – theses about the nature of philosophy?
- PI §206 – a thesis about human nature and communication?
- PI §580 – a thesis about the relation between inner and outer?
- ...
- Aren't at least Wittgenstein's views about grammar "positive" philosophical claims / views / *theses*?

# Wittgenstein's most contested “theses”

# «Theses have no place in philosophy – they belong into *science*»

- «Science gives us positive views about the world - philosophy is about our form of representation of the world (*Darstellungsweise*, PI §50), about our way of talking about / viewing the world. Philosophy is about our *grammar*.»
- But cf. naturalism: Philosophy is continuous with / part of science.
  - ≠ Wittgensteinian philosophy: The problem of free will cannot be solved by experiments in psychology / medicine ...

# «Philosophy is only critique of language»

- Philosophy investigates our ways of talking about the world («grammar»).
- Our ways of talking about the world have a surface grammar and a depth grammar level (PI §664).
  - All philosophy is a 'critique of language' (TLP 4.0031)

Radically «therapeutic» readings of  
Wittgenstein:  
There is no picture theory in the  
*Tractatus*, there is no theory about  
meaning in the *PI* ... there is at the  
end no philosophical thesis in  
Wittgenstein.

# Conant 2006: Resolute reading

- «What makes something “a resolute reading” (for the purpose of their dispute) is its adherence to the claim that **as long as we continue to ascribe to the author (as doctrines that he seeks to uphold) what these sentences (seem to) say then we have not yet completed the task of reading that he has set us**, and as long as we fail to realize this we fail to understand *him*.» (p. 180)
- If one attributes to Wittgenstein the following philosophical (realist) thesis / doctrine: «There are facts of nature / extra-grammatical factors which constrain / inform our concepts and grammar», then one is not a resolute reader.

# Conant 2006: Doctrinal schema

Resolute readers urge that any reader of Wittgenstein ought to be uncomfortable with the following sort of account of the relation between Wittgenstein's early and later thought: The *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are both trying to answer the same philosophical questions, but in each case in which early Wittgenstein aimed to show that the answer to a given philosophical question was  $p$ , later Wittgenstein aims to refute his earlier self and show instead that the answer to the question is really not  $p$ . Let's call this "**the doctrinal schema**". (p. 173)

# Conant 2006: Continuity view

... why things must go **wrong** if one's reading of Wittgenstein is organized around the following question: **“Which parts of the theory that the *Tractatus* aimed to put forward did later Wittgenstein think was wrong?** (p. 198)

# Resolute readings, applied to Wittgenstein's later philosophy

- Are there doctrines in Wittgenstein's later philosophy? What about the PI's key notions? Do they imply positive claims?
- Are there «language games»?
- Are there «forms of life»?
- Cf. Mulhall 2012

# Mulhall 2012: «Signature concepts»

“... the signature concepts with which Wittgensteinian work is so often identified (“language-game”, “grammar”, “ forms of life”) ... But if – like any other representational conventions – this set of signature concepts is sufficiently substantial or robust to acquire a life of its own, then they might on occasions stand between us and an ability simply to **acknowledge how things really are**; rather than helping to subvert our tendency towards the imposition of a philosophical “must”, they may actually subserve its further expression. And when a Wittgensteinian philosopher becomes so committed to the use of these signature concepts that he cannot conceive of another way of perspicuously representing the phenomena of our life with language when responding to a philosophical problem, then he has in effect imposed a set of philosophical preconditions on the reality he putatively aspires simply to describe.”

([http://www.nordicwittgensteinreview.com/article/view/NWR-1\\_2012-Mulhall/html](http://www.nordicwittgensteinreview.com/article/view/NWR-1_2012-Mulhall/html))

An alternative to both  
resolute and «theses»  
readings

# D.G. Stern 2006: Three debates

The paper maps out and responds to some of the main areas of disagreement over the nature of Wittgenstein's philosophy:

- (1) Between defenders of a **“two Wittgensteins”** reading (which draws a sharp distinction between early and late Wittgenstein) and the opposing **“one Wittgenstein”** interpretation.
- (2) Among “two-Wittgensteins” interpreters as to **when the later philosophy emerged**, and over the central difference between early and late Wittgenstein.
- (3) **Between those who hold that Wittgenstein opposes only past philosophy in order to do philosophy better and those who hold that Wittgenstein aimed to bring an end to philosophy and teach us to get by without a replacement.** (p. 205)

# D.G. Stern 2006: A tension in Wittgenstein himself

- Pyrrhonian Wittgensteinians ... see Wittgenstein's contribution as therapeutic, a critique of all philosophy, including his own. According to these interpreters, Wittgenstein aims to get us to give up all philosophical views, not provide a better philosophy. On this reading, Wittgenstein offers us a form of scepticism that is aimed not at our everyday life, but at philosophy itself, with the aim of putting an end to philosophy and teaching us to get by without a replacement. Glock has called this the “no-position position”.
- What is really interesting about both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is neither a metaphysical system, nor a supposedly definitive answer to system-building, but **the unresolved tension between two forces: one aims at a definitive answer to the problems of philosophy, the other aims at doing away with them altogether.**
- **The split between non-Pyrrhonian and Pyrrhonian Wittgensteinians, between those who read him as “doing philosophy” and those who see him as “stopping doing philosophy”, arises out of an unresolved tension in Wittgenstein's writing**, a tension that helps to explain why each side finds ample support in his writing, yet neither side is able to make sense of the whole. Part of the problem is that both sides understand themselves in terms of a conception of philosophy that is itself in question in his writing. (p. 217 ff)

# «Trivial theses» in philosophy: Grammar or Nature - or both?

\*PI §128: If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.

# Glock 1991: Two possibilities

- If the 'no-position'-position is inadequate, can we find a more plausible interpretation of the 'triviality thesis'? That 'thesis' is obviously linked to PI §126, which claims that there are no philosophical discoveries, since what concerns us in philosophy is not hidden but open to view. No new information is needed and controversies are excluded since we 'constantly move in a realm where we all have the same opinions' (AWL p. 97). The first step is therefore to clarify the nature of this uncontroversial but nevertheless philosophically relevant realm. More specifically, **what types of expressions might fit the characterization of trivial theses** in §§126-9?

There are two possible answers. (p. 76)

# Glock 1991: Truths of *grammar*

- **Another possibility is that the pre-empirical realm of philosophy is grammar, the rules we use in determining the correct use of words. In this case, the triviality would not be due to the pervasive nature of certain facts but to the logical antecedence of grammar, which determines the distinction between sense and nonsense, to experience, which settles matters of truth and falsity (PG p. 88; PI §90). Grammatical rules are norms of representation. They cannot be true or false since they determine the prior question of what it makes sense to say. ... According to this 'grammatical' interpretation, the trivial theses of philosophy turn out to be grammatical propositions, or expressions of these rules. (p. 77)**

# Glock 1991: Truths of *nature* (*Realism*)

- According to the first, trivial theses are statements about **framework conditions** of our language games. These are **facts** which render certain rules (im-)practical or even inapplicable, without constituting the content of these rules (PI §§240-2). **For example, our concepts of measures are useful only in a world with relatively stable rigid objects**; but this is not laid down in the rules of, for instance, metric measurement. A 'framework-reading' of §§126-9 is suggested by the fact that Wittgenstein claims, for both these **'very general facts of nature'** (PI p. 230) and the aspects described by the trivial theses of philosophy (PI §129), that they go unnoticed precisely because they are so familiar and general – a 'miss the wood for the trees' effect. (p. 76 f)

# *Nature versus* **Grammar?**

Remarks on human natural history

# Remarks on the natural history of human beings

415. What we are supplying are really **remarks on the natural history of human beings**; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes.

25. ... Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much **a part of our natural history** as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (PI §25)

Zettel at PI § 142: What we have to mention in order to explain the significance, I mean the importance, of a concept, are often **extremely general facts of nature**: such facts as are hardly ever mentioned because of their great generality.

(PI “Part II”) xii: If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in **that in nature which is the basis of grammar?** — Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between concepts and **very general facts of nature**. **(Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.)** But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history—since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

# A. Janik (2018)

«Although Wittgenstein insisted that he was not doing natural history, natural history plays a crucial role in his elaboration of the nature of human thinking. Abstract language tempts us to see thought and language as having “a life of their own” as it were apart from human action/practice/life. Thus he came to conceive his task as one of “assembling reminders” (1958, § 127) of **how concept formation is rooted in nature**. In doing so he was careful to emphasize that developing that view he was not advocating a “scientific” or naturalistic view of knowledge but simply “assembling reminders” of the rootedness of thinking in the life of the kind of animal that uses language.»

“The Dichtung of Analytic Philosophy: Wittgenstein’s Legacy from Frege and Its Consequences”, in: *New Essays on Frege: Between Science and Literature*. Editors: G. Bengtsson, S. Säätelä, A. Pichler