

Blinded By Words: Philosophy As The Mirror Of Confusion

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I

In an autobiographical essay Donald Davidson (1999: 41) informs the reader about his encounter with the manuscript for what was to become Quine's *Word and Object*. We are told that Quine's central point, the idea that there can be no more to meaning than what can be learned by being exposed to the linguistic behaviour of speakers, made a great impression on Davidson. He regards the appreciation of this idea as constituting the biggest step forward in our understanding of language since the onset of 'the linguistic turn'. The idea has to do with how we should understand the relationship between words and meaning, and Quine's way of monitoring the linguistic behaviour of speakers is seen by Davidson as a contribution to detach our conception of language from a mythology about meanings. After reading Quine, the idea that words have some wonderful thing called a meaning to which those words have somehow become attached, and, accordingly, that the learning process is seen as just putting the learner in touch with that meaning, no longer has any strength. Davidson then adds that the perspective fleshed out by Quine doesn't seem so startling to anyone who has read the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*.

In *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) § 340, Wittgenstein comments "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that", and in *PI* § 43 we find the famous and often quoted phrase about meaning as use. Remarks such as these can be read as concentrated expressions of a recurring theme in Wittgenstein's philosophy: the importance of paying attention to the use of language. But, how should we understand the notion of use that plays such a prominent part in Wittgenstein's philosophy? Isolated from its surroundings - that is, Wittgenstein's remarks on his own philosophical procedures - the sign saying 'use' can be seen as pointing in many different directions. One of these directions takes the notion of use as an insistence that the only fact relevant for evaluating claims about meaning or for developing proper ways of talking about meaning, are facts about use. Here, the remarks on use are, so to speak, transformed to tracks whose main function is to lead us toward a philosophical view of meaning.

According to some commentators these tracks terminate in what one could call a naturalistic region. Seen from this particular place - a place that has gained a strong position within the modern philosophical community - it might be tempting to conclude, as Davidson seems to do, that Wittgenstein's view is related to points put forward by a philosopher like Quine. Decoding Wittgenstein's notion of use as a reflection of a naturalistic desire to understand meaning in terms of the linguistic behaviour of speakers within a language community, is echoed in some of Quine's own writings - for example, when he says that "[Wittgenstein] stressed (...) that there is no more to the meaning of an expression than the overt use that we make of the expression. Language is a skill that each of us acquires from his fellows through mutual observation, emulation, and correction in jointly observable circumstances. When we learn the meaning of an expression we learn only what is observable in overt verbal behaviour and its circumstances" (1987: 130).

Other commentators will regard this move as a serious blunder. These commentators will emphasise that Quine and Wittgenstein are not just words, but worlds apart. Wittgenstein's stressing of the normative aspects of language-use are seen as contesting the empiricist reductionism defended by Quine. The lesson drawn from the rule-following consideration establishes a point of view that involves an opportunity to undermine Quine's 'norm-free' view of language, a point of view where Quine's position, in H. J. Glock's words, "reduces itself to absurdity" (1996: 222). Another way of understanding the notion of use that has a kind of affinity with the lines suggested by Glock, draws attention to the 'priority-of-practice'.¹ In this kind of interpretation the concept of 'practice' becomes the axis in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, it plays the leading role and replaces 'theoretical understanding' as the key terms when the philosopher is about to reveal the deepest and most fundamental layers of how meaning and understanding are possible.

II

With some significant readings of Wittgenstein in mind, I think it is fair to say that one can detect an inclination to interpret the notion of 'use' both as a moment in a philosophical explanation of meaning and/or as a stepping stone for drawing substantial philosophical conclusions. But can Wittgenstein's remarks be transformed into philosophical slogans that are somehow capable of summarising central aspects of his teaching? I think that most commentators on Wittgenstein's philosophy would answer such a question with a flat 'no'. But saying this, I would also like to add an impression that often strikes me when I read comments on Wittgenstein. The impression I have in mind has the form of a paradox. It could be expressed as having to do with the

possibilities for moving in opposite directions at the same time. I see this as being a part of the problem of how one should understand the relationship between Wittgenstein and what one, in an imprecise manner, could call the philosophical tradition - the drifts, the aims and claims, that seem to function as presuppositions for much work done within different areas of the philosophical tradition. The paradox has two related aspects. The first aspect has to do with in what sense, and to which degree, there are resources in Wittgenstein's philosophy for continuing deeper into the philosophical terrain, to follow the paths that open up through what one could call 'philosophical questions'. The second aspect has to do with the character of Wittgenstein's remarks, what kind of mandate or scope these remarks are intended to have.

I am, of course, aware of the fact that an interpreter has to be impatient in his approach to Wittgenstein if he doesn't notice Wittgenstein's consistent rejection of theory construction. But, while most interpreters more or less approve of this aspect, it is often followed by an inclination to draw very general conclusions on behalf of Wittgenstein. These conclusions are meant as saying something substantial about 'language', about 'meaning', and so on. Although one often finds these conclusions prefixed as not 'doctrinal' or 'theoretical', they do seem to bear a close resemblance to the conclusions drawn in more traditional regions of philosophy. Many of these so-called "Wittgensteinian" conclusions can, I think, be put forward and read as alternative answers to 'standing' questions in the philosophical debate, they can be, and often are, cashed in as genuine philosophical insights. That is, as insights that can compete with other philosophical insights, and even, perhaps, be seen as expressions of a 'better' or 'stronger' philosophy of language.

Although the conclusions drawn by those who perceive Wittgenstein as expressing a message that can be cashed in as naturalistic currency, and the conclusions drawn by various interpreters within contesting (anti-naturalistic, normative, practice orientated, etc.) paradigms are in conflict, these conflicting interpretations seem to be driven by a common force. I do not know how much these conclusions can tell us about Wittgenstein's conception of the philosophical activity, his conception of the character of a philosophical problem. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that the conclusions can be perceived as symptoms of a tendency to let one's confrontation with Wittgenstein's work be guided by what I would like to call strong philosophical impulses. These impulses have been cultivated within what I have been calling the philosophical tradition. They have to do with what philosophy is seen as being about, what the philosopher has to aim for when doing philosophy, etc. It can be appropriate to see these impulses as having their life in a trusting or confident attitude towards what one might call 'great questions'. By the term 'great questions' I'm alluding to PI § 65, and I have in mind questions like 'What is the essence or nature of X'; 'How is X possible', etc. These impulses

presuppose a 'constructive' view on philosophy. Although the constructive view is mostly seen as a part of 'theoretically orientated' philosophy, I often get the impression that the constructive view, in a kind of 'de-theoretical' or 'anti-theoretical' form, is given as a premise when reading Wittgenstein. The point could be put forward by saying that these readings follow the paths of the 'craving for generality' by emphasising Wittgenstein's aims as having to do with answering, for example, questions involving "the very possibility of meaningful discourse" (Glock 1996: 223).

Under the direction of these impulses it can be hard to detect, and easy to neglect, the tone of voice that permeates Wittgenstein's remarks. It can be easy to hear it as a strange 'anti-theoretical' murmur. I will not deny the first part of this conception; the tone of voice in Wittgenstein's writings is 'strange', especially when measured against most of the other voices heard within the field of philosophy. But I'm not so sure about the second part. I think one makes it too easy for oneself if one denotes it as 'anti-theoretical'. By insisting on the anti-theoretical dimension it becomes easy to miss the level that Wittgenstein is trying to expose us to in his investigations. Following Goldfarb (1997: 78), I will call this 'the proto-philosophical' level.

III

Perceiving Wittgenstein's work as investigating, and working-through, the proto-philosophical level will have consequences for the status given to 'philosophical questions', and Wittgenstein's insistence that there are no theses and no questions in philosophy can, I think, also be handled with a greater degree of sensitivity. (As I have tried to indicate, the status of these questions doesn't seem to be contested by many readers of Wittgenstein. The main motivation, the point of the work, is rather seen as articulating alternative and better answers to these questions than the tradition has been able to produce).

I will try to give some content to this perception of Wittgenstein - a perception that one, for lack of a better word, could call 'therapeutic' - by reflecting upon Wittgenstein's appeal to the use of language as the place for looking at, and understanding, the life we lead with words. This appeal can be seen as put forward as a remedy for what Wittgenstein describes as our urge to misunderstand the workings of our language. An urge, that is, whereby we become subjected to various moods, fantasies, etc., where forms of words are heard as proposing genuine and pressing questions that we must answer. The urge is often portrayed as connected to the philosopher's way of dealing with conceptions of how things must be. Or, as a tendency to - from the standpoint of philosophy - direct scenarios, and then perceive the workings of our language from within these imposed and restricted scenarios, without noticing the inherent limitations

that the scenarios involve. Wittgenstein's way of pursuing different philosophical attractions from within, his way of letting temptations that often have the form of demands, be spelled out and brought to light in highly original and unexpected ways through the internal dialogical reflection that pervades his investigations, is, of course, an important part of Wittgenstein's philosophical method. Throughout his writings he presents numerous examples of how this approach can unravel tangled webs, of how different forms of attractions that we trust can be seen with their limitations on their sleeves. If the reader is able to glimpse his own impulses reflected in Wittgenstein's remarks, i.e., if the reader can be drawn into the course of the investigations, then the reader might see the emptiness or limitations at the heart of the pictures that he trusted, and by doing this see the attraction, what he took himself wanting to say or felt himself committed to say, as a source for confusion, and thereby "[p]ass from disguised nonsense to patent nonsense" (*PI* § 464). Seeing the works of Wittgenstein as such mirrors where "the reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right" (1980: 18) implies at least two points. The first has to do with the pressing questions that are asked within philosophy; the second point is related to the first, and it has to do with how one should consider these questions.

I will use a passage from *PI* as an example of what I see as involved in this strategy. In *PI* § 432, Wittgenstein confronts us with a question that has to do with the life of the sign: "Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life?". He then presents something that looks like an answer by responding: "In use it is *alive*". But this apparently direct answer is accompanied by "Is life breathed into it there? Or is the *use* its life?". By letting something that looks like a direct answer be followed by two further questions, which go unanswered, the answer changes character; it is no longer an answer in a straightforward sense.

Reading the exchange is like being led one step forward and then, struck by the words that ends the exchange, being thrown back. But when thrown back the reader isn't necessarily thrown back upon the level constituted by the initial question. The force of the words that end the exchange leads, or at least can lead, the reader beyond the initial question. It can expose the reader to the idea or the conditions that breathe life into the initial question: the idea of the sign by itself. From this position one can see the question with fresh eyes.

Monitoring the phenomena of language from the point of view indicated by the initial question can be seen as an effective way of creating a need for philosophical theorising, for explanatory accounts of meaning, for explanations of the possibility for communication. But what is the status of this point of view? Is it more than just a particular, and indeed possible, way of looking at signs that can be helpful for particular purposes? Or is it, perhaps, *the* point of view, the one that gives us an opportunity for

seeing how signs really are - a neutral, natural and unavoidable view that we are committed to as a starting point? Since the idea of linguistic expressions as in reality no more than, or nothing but, meaningless objects - 'sounds and marks' as the terminology used within much contemporary philosophy likes to have it - has won the status of being an innocuous idea among many philosophers, it might be of great value to pay attention to the moves suggested by Wittgenstein when he confronts the questions concerning the life of the sign. Unravelling these questions is a work that is done by Wittgenstein, but this work doesn't accept the force of the initial question. It tries to confront the question by not following the path that the question itself suggests, but by moving, so to speak, in a totally opposite direction. This move doesn't involve giving an answer to the question, but it involves seeing the proper limits and the possible force of the question. I wouldn't call this an anti-theoretical move, neither would I call it a theoretical move. I would call it a move in search for clarity. This move has its difficulties. It can be difficult to diagnose and defuse philosophical impulses - to avoid nourishing the impulses by feeding it with answers. And it might sound, at least in the ears of the philosopher who feels at home in the traditional struggle between competing philosophical positions, as a grand betrayal of the philosopher's duty to search for answers.

References

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Endnote

- 1 Cf. Stern (1995).