

# Wittgenstein's Missing Map

Wasfi A. Hijab

---

## Abstract

Introducing Cambridge, you either walk around its streets for a few days, or give the newcomer a map, point to a spot on it, and say, "You are now here." This is how Wittgenstein used to lament missing a map that would shortcut and replace his slow and laborious technique. After defining metaphysics ostensively, and delineating Wittgenstein's bumpy road to truth, I present my attempt to develop such a map. It consists in a group of litmus tests for spotting and evading metaphysical muddles. The future of philosophy is then discussed in the light of Wittgenstein's concept of the new role of the philosopher as a street sweeper of conceptual muddles that hinder traffic in the thoroughfares of human thought.

## 1. Ostensive Definition Of Metaphysics

Metaphysics is ostensively defined as the common ingredient among some 50 thinkers discussed in Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. This group includes some of the finest minds in the history of mankind: Brilliant astronomers, mathematicians, physicists, biologists, theologians, and logicians, among others. In general, they contributed magnificently to their fields of competence. However, their common ingredient is this: They all crossed beyond their field of competence into speculation about such abstract concepts as reality, existence, time, and meaning. This extracurricular involvement is what qualifies them as philosophers.

Metaphysics shares with science its avowed goal to advance knowledge through appeal to reason; with mathematics, the semblance of a *priori* necessity of formal systems; with religion, an unshakeable faith in providing ultimate truth; with poetry, an aura of linguistic beauty; and with insanity, an absurd hallucination, if one takes seriously Kant's thing-in-itself or Zeno's denial of motion.

Yet, metaphysics is a linguistic mode all its own. It is a mode that has an ensnaring magical charm with which I fell in love during my undergraduate study of mathematics. In 1945 I abandoned my math career when I received a 3-year full scholarship to study philosophy at Trinity College and Cambridge University. This is where I met a certain Ludwig Wittgenstein, who put a brutal and traumatic end to this love affair.

## 2. My First Lecture With Wittgenstein

In the first few minutes, Wittgenstein emphasized punctuality, and his requirement of attending for the whole term. He pointed out that his course was really very dull, and fervently and repeatedly requested the students to drop it. Obviously, he was ill prepared. He was not sure of what to say, and kept jumping around various thoughts. Often there were long pauses of solemn silence. He was stern and stone-faced at all times.

In an earlier meeting with Wisdom, he asked me why I wanted to study philosophy. I gave what I thought was the obvious answer, "To find the truth." He struggled to suppress a desire to laugh out loud, and managed to say, "The Cambridge school of philosophy is not noted for finding the truth." But Wisdom was wrong. After my first lecture with Wittgenstein, I knew that this man could show me how to analyze concepts into their ingredients and how to synthesize those ingredients into the original concepts. He could show me how to find the truth.

Braithwaite was my first supervisor. He was proud of his own pragmatic decision to distance himself from Wittgenstein. After accepting my first assignment as part of my dissertation, he exhorted me not to shift to Wittgenstein as supervisor, as then there would be no dissertation. His prophesy was correct, but his advice came too late. After my first lecture with Wittgenstein I was fit only to sit at his feet and learn from his wisdom. My assignment was discarded as waste paper.

## 3. Metaphysics As An Idling Mode Of Language

When Wittgenstein used to be exasperated with me during the tutorials, he would say, "Listen, Hijab, can't you think of a *single* example?" Examples are the bread and butter of his technique.

I finally thought of a good one. When idling, the car's motor keeps running, but it remains stationary. Similarly, in metaphysics language is in an idling mode. Thinking is manifestly going on, but there is no corresponding advancement of knowledge.

Language can be employed in different modes. By definition, there is a difference in mode when a word or pronouncement is meaningful in one mode but is empty or nonsense in another mode. I use 'nonsense' here as a technical term to qualify any linguistic product that is empty and thus fails to advance knowledge.

In an astronomers' meeting T.S. Elliot's 'Do I dare, do I dare, do I dare disturb the universe?' is a palpable nonsense. In a poetry recital, he receives a standing ovation. Neither mode is more legitimate than the other. Novels and dreams are also modes that could change character of language from sense to nonsense.

Consider another example. Holding a cup of coffee, I say, "This is regular coffee." This familiar word 'regular' does not add to my knowledge before the discovery of decaf coffee. After that discovery we need a word like 'regular' to avoid ambiguity. Before that discovery we can ask, "Regular? As opposed to what?" Having no contrasting entity robs the word of meaning. The word is listed in the dictionary, but here it is empty and superfluous. Occam's razor chops it down as nonsense.

But we have to be careful when calling anything nonsense. Suppose I produce my own brand of coffee, and I find that calling my brand 'regular' helps my sales. Here 'regular' is no longer pointless. It acquires an advertising function. It may not add to my science, but it does add to my profits. This advertising mode reconfers meaningfulness to it, even before the discovery of the decaf coffee.

#### **4. Wittgenstein's Bumpy Road To Truth**

Wittgenstein grew up in a very rich but a very tragic family. I surmise that he and his brothers were exceptionally serious, and inherited money hit them as tainted and corruptive. They sought a meaningful destiny for themselves and faced Hamlet's dilemma of 'To be or not to be'. His brothers chose the second alternative and they all committed suicide. Ludwig, however, found his salvation in seeking the truth.

He sought the truth at first in engineering, then in mathematical logic. The latter field was passing through an exhilarating period of innovation and discovery. Somehow it toppled him into the metaphysics of the *Tractatus*.

We probably can derive more insight into Wittgenstein's thought by reading the prefaces of his two books than by reading the books themselves. Paraphrasing, the Preface to the *Tractatus* says, "... traditional philosophy tried to draw a limit to thought. ... But the aim of my book is to draw a limit to the expression of thought. It will therefore only be in language that a limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense."

In the Preface to the *Investigations* he says, "For since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, ... I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book." Thus, he realized that drawing a limit in language to the expression of thought is equally reprehensible. In his lectures, Wittgenstein often used his committing these mistakes as the *raison d'être* for his ongoing investigations.

A press release about an international chess tournament reported that the white king had been always moving one square at a time. A bunch of truth seekers showed that report to Wittgenstein and complained bitterly, "Wittgenstein, this is what you have done

in the Tractatus. It is your gravest mistake. It is an admixture of fact and logic, without knowing which is which, It is impossible to extricate these two distinct modes of language. *It is a muddle!*" Wittgenstein responded, "I know, I know. That is why I asked you to use it as a ladder and then discard it as nonsense." Their response was, "Wittgenstein, don't you think it is time to give up this infantile ploy of a ladder?" Wittgenstein responded, "Stop this. Just stop it! I have to withdraw all by myself and figure out this whole thing again." Actually, the bunch of truth seekers consisted in only one person, and that person was Wittgenstein himself.

I surmise this realization by Wittgenstein had been very traumatic. His road to truth was now blocked and he was faced with deciding what to do next. He would not consider suicide, for he had courage. He volunteered for the army and was decorated for bravery. But he did take an extremely drastic step by giving away his huge wealth, and withdrawing to teach an elementary school in an isolated small village, and later as an assistant gardener.

## 5. Major Discoveries Of Wittgenstein

Some time during his vow of silence and after he moved to Cambridge Wittgenstein made the following discoveries:

-1- The reason why a truth seeker is beguiled into the metaphysical mode is that he becomes entrapped by paradigms and precursor concepts that are deeply ingrained in our language.

-2- It would not help to launch a frontal attack on the Tractatus. This would merely lead to shifting to the other horn of the dilemma and producing another metaphysics. This has been the pattern of events in traditional philosophy.

-3- He developed a brand new technique to defuse the entrapment or, if you prefer, to exorcise the metaphysical devil. Simply stated, the technique consists in replacing the implicated concepts by their corresponding language games.

The language game of an utterance is defined as the overall delineation of how we use it, how we learn it, how we teach it, how we verify it, as well as displaying some of its more primitive precursors. The technique also marshals innumerable carefully chosen examples, and it would resort to ridicule, scorn and sarcasm when needed.

In characterizing Wittgenstein's technique, it is easy to see how he is often misunderstood as a behaviorist, as a logical positivist, or as a linguistic analyst. He is none of the above, because he carried out these investigations not for their own sake, but for dispelling the ensnaring power of some paradigms of language. Without the

Tractatus there would never have been an Investigations. It is really Wittgenstein, not Kant, who had a fateful awakening from his metaphysical slumber.

## 6. Developing Wittgenstein'S Missing Map

Wittgenstein used to say there were two ways of introducing Cambridge to a newcomer. Either walk around the streets for a few days, or a much shorter way of providing a map, pointing to a spot on it, and saying, "Now, you are here!" He lamented missing such a map to replace his slow and laborious technique. But there is no need to despair. I am presenting below selections from a manual for spotting and evading metaphysical muddles.

The guiding principle in these tests is the following: "Beware! When you are tempted to talk about reality and existence or to use such words as whole, all, everything, and limit, when that happens beware! The moment you start talking about the whole of reality is probably the moment you are about to lose touch with reality!"

-1- "WHAT IS X?" muddle

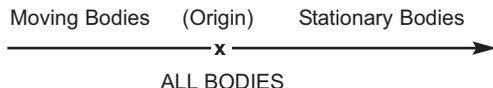
EXAMPLE; "What is space?"

SOLUTION; The concrete ancestral concept is that of a container. Increasing its size to hold more things pushes us into a container with no shell, which is a contradiction. This contradiction is what endows the question with its enchanting and mercurial character. Think up examples like Wittgenstein's "What is Oxygen" to remind yourself of cases where this type of question is working.

-2- "EVERYTHING IS X" muddle

EXAMPLE; "Everything is stationary."

SOLUTION; Draw, say, a 10 cm line segment, add an arrow on the right end and add an origin at its center. Above the line write 'stationary bodies' on the right and 'moving bodies' on the left.



Search for the principle of the dichotomy. Zeno's test, "A body is stationary if it covers zero distance in an instant." This test is ineffective, since a moving body also covers zero distance in an instant. This should be replaced with, "A stationary body covers zero distance in an interval of time, but a moving body covers a non-zero distance in an interval of time.' Thus the source of the muddle is confusing an instant of time with an interval of time. May be in Zeno's time, the concept of an instant was more

primitive and covered both an instant as well as an interval. This analysis is also pertinent to Bergson's muddle.

EXERCISE; Illustrate above steps by dividing the 24-hour day into daylight and night. Note that here the origin as well as the criterion for division change with latitude and season.

HOMEWORK: Repeat the above steps for 'Everything is mental', and thus resolve the Mind and Body problem.

-3- "X IS ALL OF Y'S,," muddle

ILLUSTRATION: The Barber of Seville Paradox.

EXAMPLE; "The world is the totality of facts."

SOLUTION; This is more difficult, since it is not apparent that this is a muddle.

Draw a rectangle to include all the y's, and write 'x =' at the left of the rectangle.



Now ask, "Is the world a fact?" and generate a Barber of Seville type of paradox. Note that the resolving of the Barber's paradox by ejecting him outside the universe of discourse is not available here, since here is no outside in this muddle. Now apply Occam's razor.

-4- "EXISTENCE OF A NECESSARY BEING" MUDDLE

EXAMPLE 1: 'Justice Idea exists, instances are appearances'.

SOLUTION: Plato is a frustrated Euclid who tried to force what I call rope concepts into one of two paradigms: (i)the concept of the general term of a sequence, or (ii)the concept of a variable ranging over a set. A rope concept is defined as the concept of a long rope that is made of a large number of much shorter strands of twine that are weaved together by Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance's.

EXAMPLE 2: The physicist's muddle of 'Aether must exist.'

SOLUTION; May be light is neither corpuscular nor a wave. Wave mechanics was invented to handle such cases.

-5- "THE WHOLE OF REALITY IS X". This is left as an exercise!

## 7. The Future Of Philosophy

Some think that there is a conspiracy of silence by professional philosophy regarding the Wittgenstein of the Investigations. It is really more a case of ignorance is bliss. I may be

wrong, but I believe that professional philosophy has not yet understood the later Wittgenstein, and therefore does not know how to teach him or what to make of him. His thought is really difficult, and I do not think that I would ever have understood him by only reading the Investigations. Rereading the Tractatus and then perusing the Investigations as a correction of the mistakes of the Tractatus might help. Even with my extensive exposure to his thought, I needed many years of reflection to assimilate its full significance.

You are the present of philosophy and therefore the precursors of its future. I ask you, "What do you do in philosophy?"

Throughout the history of thought, philosophy has been the R&D department, the research and development department, for mathematics and science. It has been the cutting edge of research where new and more powerful concepts are manufactured, That is why it has also been the breeding ground of paradoxes and controversy. But this is a very slippery road, and you could also be helpless captives at the wrong end of Wittgenstein's inverted bottle.

Wittgenstein thinks that the new philosophy that he invented to replace the traditional one does not advance knowledge and, therefore, it is not important. In his new role the philosopher is a street sweeper who clears away the muddles that hinder traffic along the thoroughfares of thought. Thus each of you should find your own broomstick and try to clear up muddles in your chosen field. Otherwise, leave philosophy and find something honest and useful to do, like an elementary school teacher or an assistant gardener.