

Through the Looking-Glass: The Problem of Wittgenstein's Point of View

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The metaphor of the mirror plays a prominent role in Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that logic is not a theory, but a reflection of the world and that the logical form of the proposition cannot itself be put into propositional form, but is rather reflected in the proposition itself (4.121, 6.13). Thus, in the *Tractatus*, the metaphor of the mirror bridges the chasm (at least in thought) between what can be said in language and between what is ineffable, logical form and value. In his later philosophy too, Wittgenstein retains the metaphor, when he says in *Culture and Value* that he ought to be no more than a mirror, in which his reader should see all the deformities of his own thinking, so that, helped in this way, he can put it right (p.18e). In other words, one of the main aims of Wittgenstein's philosophical activity consists in holding up a mirror to his philosophically confused reader, so that they are able to recognise the sources of their "intellectual diseases" and as a result of this can correct their distorted way of thinking. This idea has deep ramifications for Wittgenstein's overall conception of philosophy, as it provides one of the main reasons why Wittgenstein believes that philosophy cannot advance any theses - a looking-glass merely "reflects", it "adds" nothing to the way things are and in this sense, it has no point of view. Philosophy is like a mirror, as, like the looking-glass, it "simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything" (PI §126). It is up to the hard work of the reader to correct the distorted reflection. Thus Wittgenstein's work always has an ethical point too.

To this day Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy remains controversial, as does the way this conception is to be interpreted. What causes most problems for commentators is Wittgenstein's revocation of all the propositions in the *Tractatus*, as well as his later view in the *Investigations* that "if one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them" (PI §128). It is the aim of this paper to show that the latter idea is a direct continuation of the reasons why Wittgenstein thought he had to revoke the *Tractatus* and that this conception of philosophy, which essentially remains the same throughout the development of Wittgenstein's work, is closely linked to, and can be understood in the light of, the above-mentioned metaphor of the looking-glass.

Before we look into this more closely, however, I would briefly like to comment on a highly sensitive and innovative account of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, which also makes use of the mirror metaphor, but which I regard as an essentially erroneous reading of the *Tractatus* (not, however, of the *Investigations*). In his article "Putting Two and Two Together", James Conant sums up the difference between Wittgenstein's Tractarian conception of philosophy and that presented in the *Investigations* in the following way:

Thus our predicament (as captives to an illusion) can be rendered visible through the construction of a single large mirror in which the entire etiology of our confusion is depicted. Wittgenstein, as we have seen, comes to distrust this strategy of authorship. But he also recants its underlying conception of the etiology of our confusion. For the later Wittgenstein, the etiology of philosophical confusion is as complicated - and as difficult to survey - as are our lives and our language. So the procedure of uncovering our individual confusions must remain a piecemeal one - one of constructing lots of little mirrors in which the reader can come to recognise himself in each of his moments of being tempted to insist emptily. (Conant 1995, p. 303)

What Conant is suggesting here is that the essential difference between the early and the late Wittgenstein is one of *style*, that Wittgenstein comes to mistrust the strategy of "deceiving the reader into the truth" in the *Tractatus* and rejects it in favour of a more piecemeal attempt of "rounding on his interlocutor at every point" (Conant 1995, p. 302) in the *Investigations*. In other words, Conant seems to believe that the "revocation" of the *Tractatus* is in some sense ironic, that Wittgenstein is offering something that has the appearance of a doctrine, only to undermine it from within. This is what the "deception" of the reader consists in - he believes that Wittgenstein is propounding a philosophical thesis, whereas in fact the *Tractatus* can be seen as a kind of *reductio* of any attempt to put forward a comprehensive "philosophical system", hence the kinship that Conant perceives between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. According to Conant, therefore, there is also no such thing as the ineffable in the early Wittgenstein, which the pseudo-propositions of the *Tractatus* are supposed to make manifest in some kind of way. Rather, the ineffable itself is perhaps the best example of what the "monstrous illusion" that the *Tractatus* is supposed to dispel consists of. Conant says,

The ladder is thrown away not because it has outlived its purpose of conducting the reader into the heights of a higher understanding, but because the reader comes to recognise that its rungs are unable to bear the weight they appeared to support. He comes to recognise that he has been captivated by an illusion of ascent, that the services of philosophy have furnished him with only an appearance of ethical or religious progress. (Conant 1995, p. 293)

I strongly disagree with this way of interpreting the ladder metaphor. Wittgenstein is not being ironic when he uses it at the end of the *Tractatus*, as he is not trying to dispel an "illusion of ascent". Rather, he is trying to resolve the unbearable conflict that lies at the heart of his dogmatic distinction between the "empirical" - that is, between what can be asserted in language - and the "higher" - all questions of meaning and value that cannot get a foothold in the empirical world and are thus relegated to the realm of the ineffable and hence ultimately to silence. The revocation is consequently the only possible solution to this dogmatic distinction which would otherwise lead to what a commentator has called Wittgenstein's "self-mate".

Wittgenstein holds in the *Tractatus* that the only correct method in philosophy would be to say nothing except what can be said, that is nothing, apart from propositions of natural science. It is certainly not coincidental that Wittgenstein makes this point at the end of the book and that it directly precedes his penultimate statement about using the *Tractatus* as a ladder to get beyond the propositions in this work. For, if all that can be said are propositions of natural science, then obviously all the propositions of the *Tractatus* must be nonsense, as they are clearly not propositions of natural science. The *Tractatus* itself is hence violating its own rules. However, the pseudo-propositions of this work have served their purpose, once we have come to recognise that they are in fact pseudo-propositions. Wittgenstein's sentences effect clarification precisely by making the reader see that they are nonsense (TLP 6.54). This does not make the propositions of the *Tractatus* superfluous, for, although they are nonsense, it is not possible to come to recognise that they are without first reading them. Therefore, although according to its own conception, 7 should have been the only proposition in the *Tractatus* ("whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent"), this proposition by itself would hardly have been sufficient to convey to the reader the right view of the world which is what Wittgenstein's remarks want to bring about.

Hence, contra Conant, the dogmatism of the *Tractatus* does not consist in a stylistic error, in its method being flawed in the sense that it creates the impression that things are being dogmatically asserted. Rather, the dogmatism of the *Tractatus* is traceable to certain conceptions of language and logic, which lead to the rigid distinction between what can and cannot be said. It is not *just* that Wittgenstein's method and style changes from his early to his later work, there is also a profound philosophical disagreement about language between the early and the late Wittgenstein. The early Wittgenstein believed that the really *deep* things, such as logic, ethics and aesthetics, cannot be articulated in language at all, as they are in some sense a *precondition* of language and the world, and whatever is a precondition cannot be expressed in language, but can only be *reflected* by it, that is, can only be *shown*, but not said. For the later Wittgenstein, the "preconditions of language" no longer have this mystical dimension. They rather become

the rules that are constitutive of our various language-games. For the later Wittgenstein, the "logic of our language" is not something transcendental that is reflected in the world and that is ultimately ineffable, as what is reflected in language cannot be expressed by language (TLP 4.121). For the later Wittgenstein there are no "limits of the world" in any sense, as there is no "beyond". There is no agreement between language and the world which is made possible by a transcendental logical form, rather there *is only language* and agreement in language (PI §241). For the early Wittgenstein language is ultimately a mirror that reflects a transcendental logical form that language and world mysteriously share, for the later Wittgenstein language is altogether more humble and no longer "reflects" anything that might "point" beyond it.

Despite the profound disagreement about language between the early and the late Wittgenstein, which caused the author of the Investigations to say, "The *preconceived idea* of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination round. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)"(PI §108), there is also something that remains constant throughout Wittgenstein's philosophical development and that is his *conception of philosophy*. In fact, it is precisely because the early and the later Wittgenstein agree that one must not advance theses in philosophy that the early Wittgenstein gets into the predicament about ineffability in the first place. Had Wittgenstein believed that philosophical theses can be articulated, then he would not have had to revoke the Tractatus at all, for then the Tractatus could have been read like a conventional philosophical treatise. The inherent tension that led to the revocation, however, consisted in the fact that, despite claiming that the result of philosophy is not philosophical propositions, but the elucidation of propositions (TLP 4.112), the early Wittgenstein did actually have *philosophical* views about language, which had to be made explicit in some way. Consequently, the only path open to Wittgenstein, was to state these "philosophical propositions" and then to revoke them. Therefore, the revocation is not so much a *stylistic* device, a way of "deceiving the reader into the truth", as Conant supposes, but rather a *philosophical necessity* without which the Tractatus would have fallen to pieces.

The author of the Investigations does not have this problem, as he no longer holds any philosophical views about language and his aim in philosophy is to describe, rather than to "explain" (PI §109). Wittgenstein perhaps summed up the difference between the author of the Tractatus and the author of the Investigations in the most succinct way when he said, "For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison - as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.)"(PI §131) The dogmatism

Wittgenstein speaks of here is the dogmatism of the *Tractatus*. While the author of the *Investigations* is content to simply describe our actual practices and to try to make the reader see how and why we are "bewitched by language", the author of the *Tractatus* tried to show how things *must* be, which is of course also why he claimed in the preface to have solved all philosophical problems definitively. In other words, while the later Wittgenstein, by using models (language-games) merely as objects of comparison, is in fact content to simply hold up a mirror to the reader in which they can see all the deformities of their own thinking, the early Wittgenstein tried to construct a looking-glass that would ultimately reflect what *he* wanted to see.

In conclusion, therefore, the "rotation of the axis of reference" in Wittgenstein comes about for philosophical, rather than for stylistic reasons, or more precisely, the style of the *Investigations* is a direct reflection of Wittgenstein's central idea that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" (PI §124); that it clarifies what we do and say, but does not interfere with our actual practices. The author of the *Tractatus* had the same views about the role of philosophy, but produced a work that was both philosophically and stylistically *inconsistent* with these views (hence the need for the revocation). In the *Investigations* this tension disappears, as Wittgenstein is no longer pursuing the ideal of the "crystalline purity" of logic and language, but is content with actual "reflection". Hence the "ineffability" of logic in the *Tractatus* completely dissolves in the diverse practices of our myriad language-games in the later philosophy. As Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, "Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it." (OC §501)

References

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