'Description Alone' and the Future of Philosophy

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Many philosophers take exception to Wittgenstein's bold injunction that, "…we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place." (PI 119). This is often regarded as nothing short of betrayal of philosophy; a lowering of our sights. For many it is seen as the abandonment of a much more creditable and noble end; that of distinguishing appearance from reality, of getting at the true nature of things.

Prima facie, it would seem that his self-avowed method of clarification, by which sense and nonsense are to be distinguished, amounts to just this. For in an important sense, during both his early and late periods, his aim was not the traditional one of apprehending reality but the therapeutic one of, "…working on oneself" (CV: 16). Remarks that belie this purpose surfaced in different ways and places throughout his career. For example, he stressed that his work was not meant to spare his readers from thinking and would only have the appropriate affect on those who had had the same or similar thoughts themselves and who approached his writings in the correct spirit (PI: viii, TLP: 3, CV: 7e). Thus he writes that, "I ought be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that helped in this way, he can put it right" (CV: 18).

In alarming contrast to the endeavors of most contemporary philosophers we are warned that, "In philosophy we do not draw conclusions. 'But it must be like this!' is not a philosophical proposition. Philosophy only states what everyone admits (PI §599, cf. CV: 6e). Or more precisely, philosophy only states what everyone would admit, if they were not held captive by a theory or picture. For, as he reminds us, "…when …we have got a picture of our ordinary way of speaking...we are tempted to say that our way of speaking does not describe the facts as they really are" (PI § 402).

Of course, even if we accepted that this were the only legitimate end of philosophy, it would be wrong to suggest, as Wittgenstein does that philosophy, "…leaves everything as it is" (PI §124). Genova offers to make sense of this and vindicate him of the charge of excessive pessimism by focusing on his views on seeing aspects. For when we see aspects, it is clear that, "…reality does not change, only our attitude towards it" (Genova 1995: 14).

This seems right. Indeed, his thinking on these matters is deeply rooted. We find echoes of it in his earliest writings. For example, in the *Notebooks* he was attracted to a vision of transcendental will that enters the world from without. It is strongly distinguished from the psychological will, in that the former is not to be understood as being within the world. Thus, "The thinking subject is surely mere illusion. But the willing subject exists" (N: 5.8.16, 80e). To understand this aright we must see that the Will equates to the ethical attitude of the subject to the world. Thus he asks: "But can we conceive of a being that isn't capable of Will at all, but only of Idea (of seeing for example)? In some sense this seem impossible. But if it were possible then there could also be a world without ethics" (N: 21.7.16: 77e).

In drawing this line between the world and our attitude towards it, the world (the totality of facts) was regarded as being akin to an alien will. He was inspired by the idea that nothing that happens in world is ultimately under our control. Whereas we are responsible for our attitudes, we cannot be held responsible for the world.

Similar views were expressed in the *Tractatus*. Once again, our attitudes alone are seen as the locus of value. Only they can be influenced. For example, we can come to see that the meaning of life cannot be found in the world. It cannot come in the form of a proposition (TLP 6.52). Thus, we are told that there is no value in the world. Hence, "What is Good or Evil is essentially the I, not the world" (N 5.8.16: 80e). This relates to his famous remark:

> 6.43 If the good or bad exercise of the will does not alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts - not what can be expressed by means of language.
> In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole.
> The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.

Of course, in the context of the early writings, these remarks generate a host of difficult questions. Why is it that our attitudes are not regarded as merely contingent facts, in the same fashion as thoughts and other psychological episodes? How can the transcendental will, which stands 'outside' of the world, be moved in any way? How is it that we can be held responsible for our attitudes, but not other events and happenings?

Nevertheless, it is against this background we can begin to better understand a likely source for his claim that philosophy leaves everything as it is. For as he saw it, all that is possible in philosophy is that we affect a change in our attitude toward things, not a change in how things stand in the world. Indeed, we find him espousing something very like this doctrine, as late as 1946 when he writes:

> If life becomes hard to bear we think of a change in our circumstances. But the most important and effective change, a change in our attitude, hardly even occurs to us, and the resolution to take such a step is very difficult for us. (CV: 53e).

But, given this, why should Wittgenstein talk in the later writings as though philosophy brings about no effect at all? As we have seen, he was originally prepared to allow that a change in the way one sees things changes *everything*, for one comes to inhabit an 'entirely different world'.

To properly understand how these views connect with his views about 'description', we must realise that in the later writings forms of life play essentially the same role that logical form played in the *Tractatus*. Crucially, both govern 'the bound of sense' and remain outside the scope of the explicable, strictly sayable or articulable. Neither logic nor grammar can make any pronouncements, as they are the transcendental limits to sense. For this reason, these limits cannot be stated or positively charted.

This is ultimately why we must eschew explanation in favour of description. This is completely in line with the therapeutic task of clarification. Thus we are told:

> A philosopher is a man who has to cure many intellectual diseases in himself before he can arrive at the notions of common sense (CV: 44e).

Barring other differences, this can look as if the later Wittgenstein's grammar might serve as a substitute for Kantian *synthetic apriori* categories. But there is an important difference. For although grammar is essence it would be wrong to think of 'commonsense' concepts and categories as defining a fixed, settled and positive limit to the bounds of sense (cf. McDowell 1998: 277-278). Nor is there a single commonsense description that could replace our misleading philosophical pictures. Once we get back to the rough terrain, we need to describe many different landscapes by noting similarities and differences. At its heart, the move from logical form to forms of life was a move away thinking what is transcendental necessary in static terms as opposed to dynamic ones. Moreover, it was also recognition of the social character of the norms that underwrite meaning and conceptual development (see Hutto forthcoming).

Wittgenstein had a much more fluid vision of what drives conceptual change and fixes boundaries of sense. He bids us to realise that, "...the extension of the concept is not closed by a frontier...For how is the concept of a game bounded?...Can you give the boundary?" (PI §68). Thus, "We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all" (PI §69, cf. also §79-80). Concepts get their lives from our practices, not *vice versa*.

His point is not that there is some singular untainted commonsense view of the world that we must try to regain. In reminding ourselves of what we have always known we are reminding ourselves about our practices as they are. Moreover, because these practices develop and evolve there can be no transcendental setting of limits to sense in advance or once and for all. It for this reason that philosophers cannot theorise from the general to the particular, but must instead merely describe and be vigilant of transgressions of sense. We cannot explicate the nature of our forms of life, the basis of grammar, *via* theory any more than a proposition could simultaneously represent some state of affairs and its means of representation.

But, even if we take seriously the idea that our concepts not fixed once and for all, we might wonder why Philosophy's task couldn't, indeed shouldn't, be more than just descriptive. Why shouldn't it play a part in changing our way of seeing by steering conceptual development. It may be thought that changing our 'way of seeing', or our attitudes, can be achieved by changing our collective view of the world as a whole.

Churchland advances an extreme scientific naturalist version of this idea when he claims that, "Our best and most penetrating grasp of the real is still held to reside in the representations provided by our best theories. Global excellence of theory remains the fundamental measure of rational ontology" (Churchland 1989: 151). The follow-up thought is that the best theories are those which are developed wholly within the bounds of natural science.

Brandom advances a much more modest version of the view in *Making It Explicit*. Although he identifies with much in Wittgenstein, in particular he rejects, "…his theoretical quietism…" (Brandom 1994: xii). Thus he proposes to develop a theory of meaning that reveals how both the pragmatic and semantic aspects of meaning are united. Yet, unlike scientific naturalists he stops short of a reductive attempt to 'theorise' about meaning, since he denies that norms exist outside of human societies. Nevertheless, he hopes to understand the norms that constitute our socially instituted practices as by expressing the way in which they confer *commitments* and *entitlements* to participants in various language games. Ultimately, he regards this as producing an 'expressive theory of logic'. For despite its being embedded in the world and language, "Logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness…" (Brandom, 1994: xix). This is important since, "The formation of concepts - by means of which practitioners can come to be aware of anything at all - comes itself to be something of which those who can deploy logical vocabulary can be aware" (Brandom, 1994: xx). But even if we were to endorse this quasi-rationalist position, according to which it is an explication of logic that enables us to chart the inferential relations between commitments and entitlements, philosophy would still be unable to play a substantive role in guiding the development of

concepts. It could not, for example, help us to choose, from on high, between better and worse concepts, even if it could reveal conflicts and contradictions in our thinking. Hence, other than performing this important role, it would not provide an authoritative insight into how our concepts ought to develop.

The point is that both these approaches ultimately flounder for the same reason. For in both cases there can be no 'external' explanation or justification of the particular initial commitments we adopt or of the general commitments to science or rationality. By comparing Wittgenstein's approach with these two neo-Hegelian ones, we can better understand just what he found objectionable in the idea that philosophy can provide a rational basis for conceptual progress. With this in mind, it is thus easier to see precisely where he stops and why. For him, unlike science, philosophy should not aim to provide us with collective general knowledge. This is why, for him, the important focus is always our individual attitudes. Moreover, once we recognise that philosophy's task is ultimately therapeutic in this way, it becomes clear what is involved in 'description alone', which is hardly easy, and just how far can it take us.

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