

Wittgenstein's Contributions to Philosophy

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Das Lernen der Philosophie ist wirklich ein Rückerinnern. Wir erinnern uns, daß wir die Worte wirklich auf diese Weise gebraucht haben
(Wittgenstein, *Big Typescript* §89).

Any discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophical thought would be incomplete without taking notice of the method he employs. Often criticized for his style and organization, many feel that they are indicative of his state of mind; that such a lack of rigid argumentation betrays an inadequacy within the arguments themselves. However, criticism of Wittgenstein along these lines only serves to demonstrate a superficial reading of his texts. Not simply content (or even able) to just present us with the results of his investigations, Wittgenstein coaxes the reader into taking up an investigation of his own by means of an open dialogue. As a dialogue, we are not confronted with a traditional argumentative structure, i.e. the stating of theses and their subsequent defense. Rather, Wittgenstein attempts to draw the reader away from the obvious by means of an indirect method of discourse.

At first, the term method might be considered suspect. However, as I am using the term, "method" does not describe a singular approach to all problems, but serves as a general heading, under which a variety of different approaches are utilized for a variety of different kinds of problems. What remains constant throughout is Wittgenstein's lack of traditional philosophical argumentation, which is replaced by a constantly shifting perspective in relation to the philosophical problem at hand; the goal of which is to dislodge or disorient the reader from his previously held notions. Here, one recognizes Wittgenstein's appreciation for Kierkegaard extended beyond his profound religious and philosophic insights to his style and method.

No, an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed. If it is an illusion that all are Christians - and if there is anything to be done about it, it must be done indirectly, not by one who vociferously proclaims himself an extraordinary Christian, but by one who, better instructed, is ready to declare that he is not a Christian at all (Kierkegaard, pg. 24).

Wittgenstein, in much the same way as Kierkegaard, thought that any attempt to confront philosophy directly, i.e. through traditional means of argumentation, is already doomed to failure. Both held that arguing in this fashion was, in a sense, to succumb or expose oneself to the very illness they were attempting to remedy. Here, "the first step is the one that altogether escapes notice...the decisive movement of the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent" (Wittgenstein, *PI* §308). "We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it" (Wittgenstein, *PI* §104). As these passages point out, to utilize direct forms of argumentation would be a form of self-refutation.

Being denied access to the more traditional forms of argument, Wittgenstein proceeds to survey problems

from many different vantagepoints (although never in a direct manner), in an attempt to undermine rather than refute a given position. Since he cannot 'prove' philosophical positions wrong, he must demonstrate how this single-track mindset is inherently problematic. We must come to recognize for ourselves the "glasses" we unintentionally wear are responsible for our skewed relationship to the world, which tends to result in philosophical problems. We cannot simply give up the glasses, nor can we 'trade' them in for a better pair; for this kind of thinking presupposes that there is a 'better' pair somewhere out there. Instead, we must come to terms with the pair we already have; and this means the philosopher needs to give up his remote or disconnected view of the world.

Wittgenstein regards this perspectival misrelation between philosopher and world to be highly individualized, in that the misrelation does not apply to everyone in exactly the same way. For philosophy is not something in which individuals could partake in as one would a game of chess; rather Wittgenstein understands philosophy as what the philosopher 'does' [*macht*] when he loses his way within language. Here, the term philosophy designates something quite specific, and by giving the term a much narrower usage than perhaps warranted, Wittgenstein reserves this term for philosophy "traditionally" conceived. By traditional philosophy, Wittgenstein means those "philosophies" that do not understand the different functions of language, and thus never gain perspective of what they are actually doing. These approaches tend to be highly speculative, rigidly *a priori* logical in nature, and Wittgenstein thought, were very often typified by his earlier Tractarian view.

Lacking an understanding of how language works, the philosopher is prone to 'seeing' problems that require solving, because he does not know the proper use of words in question. The philosopher does not see the sheer variety and richness present in our languages; that language is not one homogeneous whole. Rather, it is comprised of an indeterminate number of language-games that reach every aspect of our lives. These language-games are based upon our different human activities, which constitute not only our experiences, but our existence as well. They come into and go out of existence corresponding to the changes in shared human activities. One consequence of this complex web is that the philosopher's error could be the result of any number and combination of language-games, thus complicating any attempt to untangle them. It also means, as Wittgenstein contends, that no one approach (to use one of his most beloved metaphors) could be used to successfully treat most, let alone all, cases. Every treatment/approach would have to be individualized to address the specific ailment under which the philosopher suffers. To this end, Wittgenstein utilizes an indirect method of discourse to guide the philosopher on his journey toward "getting a handle" on the problem. "The same or almost the same points," Wittgenstein writes, "were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made" (Wittgenstein, *PI*, *Preface*). This criss-crossing all through language and thought affords one the opportunity to encounter a problem from multiple

perspectives, and the possibility of getting clear about them.

But was I trying to draw someone's attention to the fact that he is capable of imaging that? - I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have only changed his *way of looking at things* (Wittgenstein, *PI* §144).

Wittgenstein's later work is not an attempt to free others from the task of thinking. I contend that his intention is to put the philosopher on his own path of inquiry; making available a method capable of providing the 'clear view' (following Stern's interpretation) necessary for such a shift. This change of perspective is not an easily accomplished feat; for our "craving for generality" exerts a powerful grasp on us. This constant movement helps jostle us loose from what can be that hardest to see, i.e. that which is directly in front of our faces. Wittgenstein contends that we take for granted what we are given, our primary assumptions upon which we build our worldview, effectively blinding us to the ramifications of our misrelationship. This is why the investigation must proceed in this way, because we have a tendency towards settling down into a perspective. While this last characterization would apply to many figures in the canon, Plato, Aristotle, and Husserl to name a few, what distinguishes Wittgenstein is his emphasis upon language.

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. - Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just understanding which consists in 'seeing connexions'...[this is significant for us, because] it earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?) (Wittgenstein, *PI* §122).

To what end does Wittgenstein invoke this investigation of language as a critique of philosophy? This is a difficult question to answer, because he intended his critique to be open-ended, i.e. to be commenting on many different problems and issues. And while there is no one specific problem, most of the problems do share something in common i.e. an inadequate understanding of language. As mentioned in the quotation above, our lack of perspicuity [*Übersichtlichkeit*] has the tendency to leave us locked into a way of looking at things. In order to counter this effect, Wittgenstein needs to break us free or "turn our whole examination round" (Wittgenstein, *PI* §108).

The problems encountered in philosophy are really only grammatical fictions of our own creation. As mentioned earlier, these grammatical fictions or illusions, do not stem from mere inattention, but instead result, in part, from "our craving for generality...our preoccupation with the method of science" (Wittgenstein, *Blue & Brown*, pg.18). Philosophers get caught up in a certain way of looking at things, with a particular grammatical picture. In so doing, they inadvertently lay down the groundwork to misinterpret these pictures as representing reality; the nonsense that such a mistake generates is germane to philosophy. But why only philosophers?

While it seems entirely possible for someone in another profession to confuse different language-game applications, philosophy does not dispute the objectivity and eternity of its subject matter. The philosophical truths, regardless of difficulty in stating, possess an objective status. Philosophers who operate under this directive proceed to do philosophy with a definite

conceptual model in mind -- the "scientific" model of philosophy. J.C. Edwards recounts the distinctive features associated with this model. First, philosophy's goal is the development of theories capable of collecting information (philosophical truths) in an objective manner consistent with those of the "hard" sciences, e.g. physics and chemistry. Second, since the information uncovered is objective in nature, we should be able to build upon them as in the sciences. Lastly, philosophy should be capable of giving explanations, as well as, descriptions regarding our conceptual understanding of the world. On this view, traditional philosophy should be a discipline able to solve problems -- uncovering the truths hidden from us. Although clearly having analytic philosophy in mind, Wittgenstein's critique has much further reaching consequences, e.g. Plato's doctrine of the Forms or Kant's notion of the 'thing-in-itself.' While the problems of science are solved through empirical analysis, philosophical problems are deemed logical ones. Through logical analysis, utilizing objective truths, we would be able to overcome the difficulties.

Wittgenstein, however, rejects the underlying assumptions of traditional philosophy. This idea of "philosophy as science" seems right only if we accept that our problems, as well as language, function in only one way. We see how the sciences collect data, form hypotheses, and in turn, solve their problems. Philosophers are under the mistaken conception that *all* problems are of the same kind; thus they believe that a similar method is required -- understanding them to be solved in the same manner.

Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really is 'purely descriptive' (Wittgenstein, *Blue & Brown*, pg. 18).

Unlike science, Wittgenstein believes the task of philosophy should be to assemble reminders regarding the way different language-games operate. For there are no true "problems" in philosophy, only confusion about how our language works. "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (Wittgenstein, *Big Typescript*, §89). When a philosopher is confronted with, for example, unfamiliar language-games, he has little or no understanding of their actual applications. However, he does have knowledge of how other disciplines (language-games) deal with difficulties, i.e. how science deals with problems, and analyzes the problem along these lines; and this is precisely where the trouble begins. Wittgenstein characterizes the philosopher's mentality with a rather unflattering image. "When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it" (Wittgenstein, *PI* §194).

The only way to resolve the philosopher's predicament, to regain his perspective, is to show him how the word is used in the proper language-game(s), and hence in the language as a whole. Once the philosopher is oriented as to how a language-game operates, in the same way as giving someone a map, they are no longer troubled, and the problem disappears. We are not merely presenting "remarks on the natural history of human beings" (Wittgenstein, *PI* §415), we are gaining insights into our language, which should serve as cathartic ends, and not symptomatic beginnings.

References

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