'The *riddle* does not exist': Wittgenstein's Philosophy Revisited in the Context of the *Ignorabimus*-Dispute *

Andrea Reichenberger, University of Paderborn, Germany

It is generally accepted that Ludwig Wittgenstein figures amongst the most prominent philosophers of the bygone century who executed the *linguistic turn*. The phrase 'linguistic turn' was coined by Gustav Bergmann and became a slogan when Richard Rorty (1967) used it as a title for his famous anthology. According to the traditional view, the *linguistic turn* based on the conviction that philosophical problems are 'problems of language' that can be solved, or dissolved, either by reforming language (ideal language philosophy) or by understanding more about the language we speak in our everyday discourses (ordinary language philosophy). It is often said that Wittgenstein put forward these two philosophies: the ideal language philosophy in his early work and the ordinary language philosophy in his later work. As opposed to the widespread view of 'two-Wittgensteins', other studies, in past and present, try to give evidence for the continuity of Wittgenstein's philosophy. My aim is to throw new light on the problem of continuity and discontinuity in Wittgenstein's thought by focusing on Wittgenstein's philosophy in the context of the so-called *Ignorabimus*-Dispute.

In 1872, Emil Du Bois-Reymond, a famous experimental physiologist, closed his address *On the Limits of the Knowledge of Nature* with the following dramatic pronouncement: 'In the face of the puzzle over the nature of matter and force and how they should be conceived, the scientist must, once and for all, resign himself to the far more difficult, renunciatory doctrine, "Ignorabimus".' (ibd., 464) Du Bois-Reymond maintained that natural science, based on Newtonian mechanics, cannot explain everything and will never be able to do so.[1]

Du Bois-Reymond's lecture triggered a storm of papers, among them many critical voices giving the wrong impression that the *Ignorabimus* meant nothing more than rigorous scientific scepticism. Nevertheless, this picture is wrong. Although Du Bois-Reymond maintained that scientific knowledge has its limits, he added self-confidently: 'Inside these limits, the scientist is lord of the menor' (1872, 460). According to Du Bois-Reymond, everything outside these limits was a private matter of individual belief of which science has not to take care. The concept of the soul, for instance, would be outside the scope of natural sciences because of its subjectivity. The belief in the existence of the soul might be of religious or moral importance, at least for some people, but the question whether the soul exists was irrelevant and without sense within the scientific context.

At a first glance, Du Bois-Reymond's liberal agnosticism implied a gesture of modesty and a plea for tolerance toward different worldviews, e. g. toward religion and science. In fact, Du Bois-Reymond's argumentation involved a diplomatic strategy which was neither a matter of armchair philosophy nor a purely academic matter, but the object and weapon of politics. He emphasized the integrity of all natural sciences and rejected both the anti-scientific cultural tendencies prevailing among many intellectuals and anti-modernist trends within science, like spiritualism, occultism and a cult of miracles dulling the mind of the masses.

One of the most disputed issues of the *Ignorabimus*-Dispute was the *demarcation problem*, i. e. the problem of how and where to draw a boundary line between science and non-science, e. g. between science and religion or between science and pseudoscience. In the second half of the 19th century a fallibilist, agnostic and relativized view of science emerged which might be interpreted as a 'loss of certainty' or '*Wahrheitsgewissheitsverlust*', to use Schiemann's German term. It raised a number of difficult questions regarding to the demarcation problem, among them the question as to what crtiteria could distinguish science from non- or pseudo-science, and who should have the responsibility for establishing such criteria.

The debate about the epistemic privilege of scientific knowledge was in full swing, when at the end of the 19th century the scientific optimism of the old generation (Hermann von Helmoltz, Emil Du Bois-Reymond, Heinrich Hertz, Ernst Mach et al.) started to fad. The conviction of the high problem-solving effectiveness of science came under attack, 'bankruptcy of science' became a slogan and a Nietzschean nihilism and pessimism was very popular. In his article 'Ignorabimus', published in the German newspaper *Die Zukunft* (1898), the physicist Walther Rathenau made a comment on Du Bois-Reymond's lecture in which he turned the tables. Du Bois-Reymond had conceded that science cannot explain everything; on the other hand, he had emphasized that everything which is 'unknowable' is not a matter of science; 'unsolvable riddles' were irrelevant within the scientific context. Rathenau held against (ibid., 527):

> [science] does not tell us anything about the big questions that are impressing on the world now and in the future; not a word of the human, moral, economic, social and national matters, not a word of the nature of matter and mind and their connection.

Rathenau argued that there might be questions outside the scope of science, e. g. religious, ethical or moral questions. Nevertheless, they were important and relevant questions of our life. Therefore, we had to ask who was competent to answer them, if not science. Similar to Rathenau the early Wittgenstein stressed how little was achieved even though all scientific questions would be solved one day, because our problems of life would remain entirely untouched by science: 'We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.' (TLP 6.52)

---

[1] Du Bois-Reymond gave three concrete examples for 'unsolvable riddles': the nature of matter and force, the genesis of motion and the origin of consciousness. Criticising the *Ignorabimus*, Heinrich Hertz 'proposes that, instead of giving a direct answer to the question: "What is force?", the problem should be dealt with by restating Newtonian physics without using "force" as a basic concept' (Monk 1990, 26). The remarkable result of Hertz' criticism was its 'picture theory' which teaches us that theories are models. Wittgenstein extended 'Hertz's analysis of *Bilder* and *Darstellung* in the language of physical science, using Frege und Russell's propositional calculus as the framework for this extension' (Janik/Toulmin 1973, 191).

The *Ignorabimus*-call was well-known in fin-de-siècle Vienna. Its impact is obvious in almost all intellectual Viennese circles of the late 19th and early 20th century. Ernst Mach, for example, called Du Bois-Reymond's 'riddles' meaningless 'pseudo-problems' (*Scheinprobleme*), a notion which was adopted from the members of the Vienna Circle. In their 1929 manifesto they declared that the scientific conception of the world did not admit unsolvable riddles (Verein Ernst Mach 1929, 15) – echoing a famous proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'The *riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all, then it can also be answered.'[2] (TLP 6.5)

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein intended to fix the limits of world, thought and language by distinguishing between sense and nonsense (see TLP, Preface). The term 'nonsense' is somewhat confusing, because Wittgenstein distinguishes between 'not having sense' on the one hand and 'being nonsensical' on the other. According to the 'picture theory', propositions have sense insofar as they picture (represent) states of affairs or matters of empirical facts. Thus, only propositions of natural (or empirical) science have sense. The propositions of logic – tautologies and contradictions – do not have sense because they do not picture (represent) states of affairs. They are, in Wittgenstein's terms, senseless (*sinnlos*), but not nonsensical (*unsinnig*). Propositions are nonsensical if they transgress the boundaries of sense. Wittgenstein banished traditional metaphysics to that area, as well as religion, ethics and aesthetics.

As opposed to the members of the Vienna Circle, however, Wittgenstein did not classify everything beyond the boundaries of sense and propositional knowledge as irrelevant. He even considered the 'higher' concerns the really important problems of our life. In a well-known letter to Ludwig von Ficker, whom he had hoped to publish the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote: 'My work consists of two parts, the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important point. For the ethical gets its limit drawn from the inside, as it were, by my book; [...] I've managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.' (PT, 16)

Wittgenstein preaches silence as regarding anything that is of importance; that is the central concern and the 'last principle' of the *Tractatus*: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'[3] (TLP 7) This is a bold claim indeed. However, this was not Wittgenstein's last word. Wittgenstein's later work is directed against central theses he favoured in the *Tractatus*. To be more precise, Wittgenstein doubted his earlier thesis that the purpose of language was only to make claims about empirical facts. Furthermore, he criticised the picture-theory which presupposes an isomorphic structure between world and language.

One can regard the following remark as the *locus classicus* of Wittgenstein's practical turn: 'For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the

word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.' (PI §43) In order to address the countless multiplicity, diversity and varieties of language uses, their un-fixedness, and their being 'part of an activity', Wittgenstein introduced the key concept of 'language-game'. He never explicitly defined it since this new concept is made to do work for a more fluid perspective on language. Another way of saying this is to state that 'form of life' in some way underlies and precedes 'language-games'.

It is notoriously difficult to find consensus among interpreters of Wittgenstein's work, and this is particularly true concerning the works after the *Tractatus*. But I think Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin have drawn our attention to a crucial point of Wittgenstein's lifelong wrestling with the great philosophical questions and their existential status in our life, e. g. in their following comment (Janik/Toulmin 1973, 233):

> At the outset, we argued, Wittgenstein's two main preoccupations – with 'representation' and the problem of 'the ethical' – were related, yet distinguishable. The conclusions of the *Tractatus* had the apparent merit of satisfying both preoccupations at the same time; for his formal mapping of *die Grenze der Sprache* effectively thrust the whole of ethics, values, and 'the higher' too, outside the boundaries of the 'sayable' [...]. From 1930 on, we find him still adhering to the same ethical standpoint, yet in a new philosophical context; and it is not clear that his new account of *language* continued to provide any longer the kind of support for his *ethical* point of view that the *Tractatus* position had given.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein said: 'It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental.' (TLP 6.421) In his *Lecture on Ethics* (1929), Wittgenstein held on the opinion that facts had to be distinguished from values, and science from ethics: 'Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.' (ibid., 12)

Wittgenstein always drew a boundary between religious belief and ethics on the one hand and science on the other. Nevertheless, 'the later Wittgenstein' was to generalize the behavioural account of 'meaning' presenting all linguistic expressions as being meaningful because of their role as part of our actions and behaviour. This account, however, has its downsides. Firstly, the accentuation of the common and social character of our language games is hard to reconcile with the position of an unexpressible ethical and religious individualism. Secondly, if it is true that religious and ethical language games are, in their own ways, as verbalizable and meaningful as any others and have their own proper sphere of application, the answer to the demarcation problem Wittgenstein had given in the *Tractatus* does no longer hold.

To sum up, the starting-point of my considerations was the question in which sense the view of 'two-Wittgensteins' is tenable. By focusing on Wittgenstein's philosophy in the light of the *Ignorabimus*-Dispute and its main disputed issue, the so-called demarcation problem, my answer to the question is as follows: Du Bois-Reymond had asked whether science can explain everything and his answer was 'No'. He declared that there are limits of

---

[2] Brian McGuiness (1988, 38) points out that Rudolf Wittgenstein's copy of Emil Du Bois-Reymond's *Die sieben Welträtsel* remained on Gretel's shelves (Margarete Stonborough Wittgenstein). Therefore, one can assume that Ludwig Wittgenstein was familiar with the debate about the *Ignorabimus*. Furthermore, Fritz Mauthner, whose influence on Wittgenstein is well-known, criticised Du Bois-Reymond (see Mauthner 1923/24, 270, 279).
[3] This is the Ogden-translation. Another translation often used is the Pears/McGuinness-translation: 'What we cannot speak about, we must pass over silence.' See also Paul Engelmann's comments on the *Tractatus* which are very helpful for a better understanding of the mystical side of Wittgenstein's philosophy (Engelmann 1970, 74-97).

scientific knowledge. Wittgenstein's response to the *Ignorabimus*-thesis was not its negation, i. e. 'Non-Ignorabimus', but its rejection by distinguishing between 'question' and 'problem'.

According to Wittgenstein, every question is a linguistic formulation and every meaningful question is part of our propositional knowledge. But not every problem has to be a (well-formulated) question. On the contrary, the problems of our life, however important they were, cannot even be expressed, let alone be answered. This is the position one can find in the *Tractatus*. In his later years Wittgenstein became more and more aware of the naivety of his earlier view of science only telling us something about facts, whereas the 'rest' was a matter of the 'unsayable'. His later philosophy teaches us that science cannot be reduced to a corpus of descriptive sentences about facts. By using several examples, Wittgenstein illustrates the important role of the so-called 'tacit' knowledge or 'knowing-how' as being constitutive for playing language games.

All I have tried to do was to look at Wittgenstein's argumentation from a historical point of view by relating it with the *Ignorabimus*-Dispute. Within this context, we have to take account of both, of the continuity and discontinuity of Wittgenstein's thought. There was one question which troubled Wittgenstein all his life long, namely the demarcation problem. What Wittgenstein modified was his answer to it. Admittedly, it is another matter to discuss Wittgenstein's 'responses' to the *Ignorabimus* from a systematic point of view. It's simply true, if not trivial, that *know-how* cannot be written on the blackboard. Nevertheless, the distinction between different kinds of knowledge gives us no answer to the problem as to what criteria we can and should distinguish knowledge from belief, science from non-science. Maybe the answer to the demarcation problem simply is this: 'Who cares?' With Wittgenstein in mind, one might say: 'This language game is played.' In my opinion this answer is not satisfying. We also have to ask whether we *ought* to play this or that language game. In a passage of the source manuscripts published in the German edition *Vermischte Bemerkungen*[4] Wittgenstein made a similar remark: 'is this game to be played at all now and what would be the right game to play?' (1994, 63)

References

Bayertz, Kurt 1998 "Die Herkunft des Wittgensteinschen 'Rätsels'. Zu einigen Denkmotiven des Tractatus", *Preproceedings of the 21th International Ludwig Wittgenstein Symposium* VI/1, Kirchberg a.W.: ÖLWG, 68-73.

Bayertz, Kurt 2000 "Das leidige 'Ignorabimus'. Ein Abgesang auf den naturwissenschaftlichen Materialismus des 19. Jahrhunderts", in: Andreas Arndt and Walter Jaeschke (eds.), *Materialismus und Spiritualismus. Philosophie und Wissenschaften nach 1848*, Hamburg: Meiner, 189-202.

Du Bois-Reymond, Emil 1872 "Über die Grenzen des Naturerkennens", in: Estelle Du Bois-Reymond (ed.), *Reden von Emil Du Bois-Reymond* 1, Leipzig: Von Veit & Comp., 441-473.

Du Bois-Reymond, Emil 1880 "Die sieben Welträtsel", in: Estelle Du Bois-Reymond (ed.), *Reden von Emil Du Bois-Reymond* 2, Leipzig: Von Veit & Comp, 65-98.

Engelmann, Paul 1970 *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Briefe und Begegnungen*, Wien/München: Oldenbourg.

Hertz, Heinrich 1884 *Die Constitution der Materie. Eine Vorlesung über die Grundlagen der Physik aus dem Jahre 1884*, ed. by A. Fölsing, Berlin [et al.]: Springer 1999.

Hertz, Heinrich 1894 *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik in neuem Zusammenhange dargestellt*, ed. by J. Kuczera, Leipzig: Akad. Verl.-Ges. 1984.

Jacquette, Dale 1998 *Wittgenstein's Thought in Transition*, West Lafayette: Ind. Purdue University Press.

Janik, Allan and Toulmin, Stephen 1973 *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Mach, Ernst 1882 "Die ökonomische Natur der physikalischen Forschung", in: Ernst Mach [4]1910 *Populärwissenschaftliche Vorlesungen*, Leipzig: Barth, 217-244.

Mach, Ernst [2]1906 *Erkenntnis und Irrtum. Skizzen zur Psychologie der Forschung*, Leipzig: Barth.

Mauthner, Fritz 1997 *Wörterbuch der Philosophie: neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, nach der 2., verm. Aufl. von 1923/24, Wien: Böhlau.

McGuinness, Brain 1988 *Wittgenstein, a Life: Young Ludwig (1889-1921)*, London: Duckworth.

Monk, Ray 1990 *Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Duty of Genius*, London: Cape.

Rathenau, Walther 1898 "Ignorabimus", *Die Zukunft* 22, 524-536.

Rorty, Richard 1967 *The Linguistic Turn. Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Schiemann, Gregor 1997 *Wahrheitsgewissheitsverlust: Hermann von Helmholtz' Mechanismus im Anbruch der Moderne. Eine Studie zum Übergang von klassischer zu moderner Naturphilosophie*, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges.

Stern, David 2005 "How Many Wittgensteins?", in: Alois Pichler and Simo Säätelä (eds.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works* (Working Papers from the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen 17), Bergen: Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, 164-188.

Verein Ernst Mach (ed.) 1929 *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung. Der Wiener Kreis*, Wien: Wolf.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1922 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. by Ch.K. Ogden, trans. by Ch.K. Ogden und F.P. Ramsey, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Hypertext of the Ogden Bilingual Edition available at: http://www.kfs.org/~jonathan/witt/tlph.html [Apr. 2006].

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1961 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1965 "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics", *The Philosophical Review* 74, 3-12.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig [3]1968 *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1971 *ProtoTractatus – An Early Version of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. by B.F. McGuinness, T. Nyberg and G.H. von Wright, trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1994 *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, ed. by G.H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman, revised ed. by A. Pichler, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1998 *Culture and Value*, ed. by G.H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman, revised ed. by A. Pichler, trans. by P. Winch, Oxford: Blackwell.

---

[4] The English translation of the edition used above was published 1998 under the title *Culture and Value*. Both, the German and the English version, are revised editions of earlier publications edited by Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman. The manuscript-number of the source quoted and translated above is as follows: MS 118 20r: 27.08.1937.