

Philosophy as Development of Conceptual Technologies

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1. Wittgenstein's technique of philosophical problem-solving

One of Wittgenstein's main achievements in the *Philosophical Investigations* was to present a set of strategies for solving philosophical problems – strategies which, according to the author, could be used for solving problems other than the ones he himself addressed. When attacking the so-called "Augustinian picture of language", for example, Wittgenstein's aim was not only to undermine the idea that the meanings of words are the objects to which they refer, but also – and most importantly – to submit the reader to a philosophical training so that they become able to address surrounding problems which trouble their time and environment. To attain this purpose it is not enough that the readers should become acquainted with the set of critical tools developed by the author: they must instead become the masters of a *technique*.

The technique of philosophical problem-solving presented in the *Investigations* was of course not developed by Wittgenstein alone. Many *Werkzeuge* were already available before he was born, for instance the method of bringing out counter-examples to statements whose validity is presented as wider than it actually happens to be. However, one important innovation introduced by Wittgenstein was the idea that these all-too-far-reaching statements ultimately clash against the rules of language. Examples used to explain the meanings of words are kept in an inner relation with the latter. And examples which are never used for that purpose – since they would spoil the point of the explanation – cannot be included in its scope without a violation of linguistic rules. Yet this is precisely what happens when we say that the meanings of words are the objects to which they refer: 'apple' and 'table' are obviously objects, whereas 'time', 'but' and 'five' are not. If the Augustinian picture of language were right, then we would be able to use the objects to which the words 'time', 'but' and 'five' refer in order to *explain* the meaning of these words. But of course we never do such a thing. So the novelty introduced by Wittgenstein to the critical repertoire of philosophy comes down to this: there is an internal relationship between the activities of explaining and of applying words. We cannot apply words in ways that conflict with our explanation of their meaning – e.g., since we never point to an object to explain the meaning of the word 'but' we can never say that the meaning of 'but' is the object to which it refers. Accordingly, philosophical problems result from the neglect of linguistic rules: "The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language" (Wittgenstein 2001, 41).

At a certain point Wittgenstein wanted his philosophical tools to be used by philosophers in about the same way as the relatively mechanical methods of calculus are used by mathematicians. For no other reason he, while considering a preliminary version of his book, explicitly referred to it as a textbook.¹ By the same token, we should

be able to sum up his problem-solving technique within a few steps.

The first step is to choose a general statement which is a source of problems and entanglement. Let us take for instance the assumption, common to several Western and non-Western philosophies as well as writers of many persuasions, that reality amounts to no more than what can come into the flux of consciousness; in simple terms:

1) reality = conscious activity.

Next an example must be sought with which to deny the general statement. It may be said, for instance, that:

2) a mountain

is the kind of object which is real and yet does not depend on anyone's conscious experience. Up to a recent time the subjectivist philosopher would escape by saying that a mountain is real only inasmuch as it can be experienced by someone as such. That is why the third step is the most important; it consists in posing and asking the question as to whether we can actually *use* the example to explain the term with which 'reality' (or whichever concept) is paired in the general statement. And, of course, while we can use the word 'mountain' to explain the meaning of 'reality':

3) We can use expressions such as 'the view of a mountain' or 'remembering a mountain' to explain what 'conscious activity' means; but *never* the word 'mountain' on its own. Which means that the general statement 1) arises from a violation of the rules of language.²

There is a much more deeply ingrained issue underlying the above illustrated technique of solving problems by appeal to the rules of language. What Wittgenstein actually grasped in his later works was this most fascinating mystery about language: the fact that it consists, on the one hand, in a flexible medium which allows us to make sense of statements such as "The universe is a dust bin", while, on the other hand, this same flexible medium is so merged with our lives that it has soaked up the very unavoidable patterns of our living. Such duplicity of language pervades the philosophy of the *Investigations*, and is presented at a certain point as the distinction between agreement in what we say (through language) and agreement that is *previous* to anything we might say at all (inasmuch as we dwell in language): "It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (Wittgenstein 2001, 75). So when Wittgenstein turns the deep rules of language against its flexible nature, what he is doing is to say that we should let our lives decide upon questions which puzzle us on the theoretical level. A statement such as "Reality is *not* the same as conscious activity" is held by us as it were in the background of our daily concerns. We

problem-solving strategies in this way is deliberate: we wish to avoid the "therapeutical" jargon that, though properly belonging to the *Investigations*, makes a conditioning and a mental necessity out of what can be understood as the fairly simpler application of a technique.

² The here presented steps are obviously a simplification of Wittgenstein's methods, and do not aim to cover the whole set of *Werkzeuge* dealt with in the *Investigations*. We leave totally aside, for instance, the method of imagining a language-game in order to figure out how concepts relate to each other.

¹ Cf. Hilmy 1987, p.6. It must be said that this "mechanical procedure", which relates to Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook in the early thirties, was finally abandoned by the author. However, our choice to present Wittgenstein's

live in accordance with it, and to *that* extent it lies beyond the reach of theoretical musings.

Being a technique, the above procedure not only can, as well as it must, be applied to problems that Wittgenstein himself never addressed. To mention just one instance: people who are against abortion often say that we should regard the “moment of conception” as the beginning of a child’s life – during the sexual act or otherwise. An application of the above depicted technique in order to expose the falsity of this claim would run as follows:

1) moment of conception = beginning of life.

Now to be alive is to be in a certain *state*. How does the workings of our language handle that state?³ We say, for instance, that John is alive. And when asked about when John began to be alive, we can give some date such as “November, 1970”. So we usually explain the beginning of someone’s life by reference to:

2) the date of someone’s birth;

The third step demands some clarification. For it is true that we can explain the so-called ‘moment of conception’ by saying something like: “It is a biological state that necessarily precedes someone’s birth”. And yet a state that necessarily *precedes* one’s birth cannot be passed off as that which happens *at the time* when someone is born. Therefore:

3) though we are right in believing that the formation of an embryo is a necessary biological condition for someone’s birth, we do not see how the expression ‘the date of John’s birth’ could be used to explain that biological previous state we describe as ‘moment of conception’.

So again what we find here is the bewitchment of our understanding by failure to observe language’s workings. In the end it is hoped that this sort of problem, which pervades our concerns and discussions, is brought to rest through the appropriate philosophical training.

2. Institutionally unstable propositions

Picture yourself living in Greece around 400 B.C. as a master of Wittgenstein’s problem-solving technique. Someday you come across the fairly widespread philosophical idea according to which movement is the result of displacements and collisions among invisible unchanging particles that constitute the elements of nature – out of which all visible changing objects and living beings are made. It is quite natural to assume that you are committed to fight this idea using your problem-solving technique, since at that time in Greece no one would accept some obscure reverie about invisible particles as an appropriate way to explain the meaning of the word ‘movement’.

Nevertheless it is beyond dispute that this amusing idea usually connected with the personality of Democritus had some bearing on what many of us nowadays accept as an explanation – perhaps even the best *kind* of explanation – about movement in the sense of a physical phenomenon. It is not so much a case of assessing the truth of that ancient doctrine, nor of tracing its historical connections up to the point when it reappears in modern science, as of giving serious consideration to its *philosophical status*. For lack of a better name, let us call ideas such as Democritus’ thesis on movement “institutionally unstable” propositions. So our question is: up to what point should we philosophically train ourselves to reject theoretical statements? As philosophers, should we not leave space for ideas to acquire their eventual institutional stability by becoming part of new conceptual techniques that might engage with our life and practices in totally unforeseen ways? For without doubt institutionally unstable propositions have played a gigantic role in the development of any culture.

3. Philosophy as development of conceptual technologies

The unrestricted application of Wittgenstein’s problem-solving technique would apparently condemn potentially fruitful ideas whose institutional status is nevertheless unstable. In the face of this problem a different approach is called for – one that makes room both for the critical thoroughness of Wittgenstein’s elaborations and for the groundbreaking power of (at least some) institutionally unstable propositions. We would like to suggest that philosophy best fulfills its role when it concerns itself with the development of conceptual technologies. Critical discourse, concepts that spring from ordinary talk, scientific explanations and religious mantras are, each on its own ground, examples of conceptual technologies: tools by means of which one is able to cope with reality in manifold ways. We therefore see philosophy much more as a general *attitude* towards life than as a discipline standing on its own ground. And this turns out to be much closer to the spirit of Wittgenstein’s philosophy than the sectarian following of his writings – which, understood as the exposition of a technique, remain constantly liable to criticism, improvement and intrepid application.

Literature

Hilmy, Stephen 1987 *The Later Wittgenstein: The Emergence of a New Philosophical Method*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2001 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.

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³ There is an interesting parallel between this question and Wittgenstein’s treatment of the grammar of mental states as, for example, in *Philosophical Investigations* §573.