

Critique of Language and Sense of the World: Wittgenstein's Two Philosophies

Marco Bastianelli, Perugia, Italy

marcobastianelli@tin.it

The distinction between two kinds of philosophical activity is clear in the preface of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein writes that he has finally solved the problems, because he has shown that the formulation of philosophical problems «rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language». Nonetheless he admits that it only demonstrates «how little has been done when these problems have been solved» (Wittgenstein 1966: Pref.). At the end of the book, in fact, he concludes:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless [...]. He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.54).

Following Cora Diamond's suggestion, these remarks can be considered as a sort of "frame" of the book. What lies inside the frame is the philosophy oriented to language: it shows the logical essence of language bringing to light the source of philosophical misunderstandings. So Wittgenstein concludes:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science [...], and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.53).

Wittgenstein establishes also a sort of equivalence between the meaningful language and the scientific representation of the world. Therefore it seems that language cannot express what concerns ethics, values and, in general, the sense of the world, because it «must lie outside the world» (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.43). Ethical problems cannot be solved through propositions picturing facts, because «the facts all belong only to the task and not to its performance» (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.4321).

Nonetheless Wittgenstein's anti-intellectualism does not mean that he professes some kind of emotivism, as it can be shown considering his philosophy of the subject. In the *Tractatus* he points out: «There is [...] really a sense in which in philosophy we can talk of a non-psychological I. The I occurs in philosophy through the fact that the "world is my world"» (Wittgenstein 1966: 5.641).

This non-psychological connection between the I and the world emerges from the very enquiry on the limits of language. Wittgenstein claims that, in order to understand the logic of language, we don't need the experience «that such and such is the case, but that something *is*». Yet this is «no experience» (Wittgenstein 1966: 5.552), but it is «the mystical feeling» of the world as «a limited whole» (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.45).

The possibility of a philosophical sense of the I derives from the fact that such an "experience" is made by the subject through the will. In the notebooks Wittgenstein specifies that

the world is *given* me, *i.e.* my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there (Wittgenstein 1961: 8.7.16).

In this period he doesn't yet know what the will is (cf. Wittgenstein 1961: 8.7.16). In the *Tractatus* however he clearly thinks of the philosophical will not as a phenomenon but «as the subject of the ethical» (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.423).

There is also a deep relation between will and world, since, according to Wittgenstein, «the will seems always to have to relate to a representation». He means that

«the will is an attitude of the subject to the world. The subject is the willing subject» (Wittgenstein 1961: 4.11.16).

Wittgenstein is trying to tell that the world is given to each subject in his own life, so that the I must take an attitude towards the world as a whole. The I gives also to the world an ethical sense, which is not expressible through factual propositions, because it cannot be considered independently of personal experience. Wittgenstein thinks that «it is not sufficient for the ethical judgment that a world is given», because «good and evil only enter through the *subject*» (Wittgenstein 1961: 2.8.16).

Nonetheless the reference to the philosophical subject of the will should not be understood in a solipsistic sense. For what Wittgenstein is trying to do is showing the possibility of a universal dimension of ethics, which is accessible by every subject through the will, even if each one does it in a personal way.

This tension is neatly expressed in the *Lecture on Ethics*. In order to try to make clear what he means «by absolute or ethical value», Wittgenstein refers to the «idea of one particular experience», which is, «in a sense, my experience *par excellence*» (Wittgenstein 2007: 11). He specifies that «this is really a personal matter and others would find other examples more striking», but in referring to it, he aims at recalling in the reader «the same or similar experiences», in order to have a common ground for investigation (Wittgenstein 2007: 12).

The experience Wittgenstein is referring to is such that, he says, «when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world» (Wittgenstein 2007: 12). In the same sense, maybe remembering the years he spent as volunteer in the First World War, he mentions the experience of «feeling absolutely safe», safe «whatever happens» (Wittgenstein 2007: 12).

In both cases, Wittgenstein remarks, one is «misusing language» (Wittgenstein 2007: 12), because the proposition one uses when one says that one wonders at the world is senseless, since one cannot imagine the world as not existent; analogously one cannot conceive a situation in which he is absolute safe whatever happens.

Therefore ethical questions do not concern episodes or facts, but their sense, namely an attitude towards them. In order to try to make this clear, one should investigate the structure of the original relationship between subject and world.

Wittgenstein's conclusions in the *Lecture on Ethics* are not mere personal remarks unrelated to his enquiry on

language. They are rather the consequences of it: having shown that every fact happens «in logical space» (Wittgenstein 1966: 1.13), Wittgenstein concludes that «a necessity for one thing to happen because another has happened does not exist. There is only *logical* necessity» (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.37). Accordingly he states that,

even if everything we wished were to happen, this would only be, so to speak, a favour of fate, for there is no *logical* connexion between will and world, which would guarantee this (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.374).

During the hard days of the war, Wittgenstein writes: «I feel dependent on the world, and therefore I must fear it, even if momentarily nothing bad happens» (Wittgenstein 1991: 9.11.14; my translation). In such situations «we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will»; we tend to call this «alien will» as «fate» or as «the world – which is independent of our will», or simply as «God». The disagreement between the subject and the world seems to be a contrast between two «godheads: the world and my independent I» (Wittgenstein 1961: 8.7.16).

In order to avoid the desperation resulting from this contrast, according to Wittgenstein «the human being must not depend on circumstances» (Wittgenstein 1991: 6.10.14; my translation). This means that happiness consist in living «in agreement with the world», namely «in agreement with that alien will on which I appear dependent». In this sense, Wittgenstein states: «I am doing the will of God!», and concludes that «to believe in God means to see that life has a meaning» (Wittgenstein 1961: 8.7.16)

The kind of philosophical activity involved in the search for the sense of life seems to be a sort of conversion of the will, in so far as the subject should change his attitude to the world. This means that,

«if good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language. In brief, the world must thereby become quite another, it must so to speak wax or wane as a whole [...]» (Wittgenstein 1966: 6.43).

In 1931, some time after he came back to philosophy, Wittgenstein reasserts that the deepest philosophical activity consist in a conversion of the self:

«Work on philosophy [...] is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them)» (Wittgenstein 1977: MS 112 46: 14.10.1931).

Wittgenstein maintains this conception of philosophical activity even when he changes his conception of language. In the *Tractatus* he considered the link between language and social reality simply as «silent adjustments», which are «enormously complicated» (Wittgenstein 1966: 4.002). Later he realized that, if the personal change achieved through philosophical investigation is not merely a psychological matter, but has a universal character, then it should result in the real life and language of the subject in the community.

Considered under this closer perspective, language is not thought of as a well-defined phenomenon ruled by logical laws. It is a complex set of activities, strictly connected with one another through rules and conventions, which have their ultimate justification in the forms of life.

In order to articulate this new point of view, Wittgenstein uses the expression «language games», and he tells us that it means «the whole, consisting of language and

the actions into which it is woven» (Wittgenstein 1953: §7). He also specifies that «to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life» (Wittgenstein 1953: §19).

The connection between language and forms of life aims at making clear that the understanding of the meaning of words does not consist only and always in the knowledge of the objects or facts they denote. The task of philosophy consists in giving a «perspicuous representation» of the various functions of the words in the context of the manifold human activities. As a consequence, philosophy oriented to language, according to Wittgenstein, «may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is» (Wittgenstein 1953: §124).

What changes is also the perspective adopted by Wittgenstein in the investigation of language. What does not change is his conception of a deep philosophical activity oriented to the subject. The understanding of language seems to be a condition for operating a personal change, which must be evident also in the use of language.

In this deep sense, philosophy cannot leave everything as it is, because, as Wittgenstein writes in 1937,

«the solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic disappear» (Wittgenstein 1977: MS 118 17r c: 27.8.1937).

The mere analysis of language cannot solve problems of life, because they are «insoluble on the surface, and can only be solved in depth» (Wittgenstein 1977: MS 137 73b: 25.7.1948). It is not however the depth in which Wittgenstein searched the logical essence of language, but that of the personal investigation.

Nonetheless, this attitude is consistent with the new conception of language, because, as Wittgenstein states in 1946, «to go down into the depths you don't need to travel far; you can do it in your own back garden» (Wittgenstein 1977: MS 131 182: 2.9.1946).

This means that the changes operated by the individual subject cannot be understood in a solipsistic way, but involve changes in the whole form of life, because, as Wittgenstein remarks in 1948, «tradition is not something that anyone can pick up, it's not a thread, that someone can pick up, if and when he pleases; any more than you can choose your own ancestors. Someone who has no tradition and would like to have it, is like an unhappy lover» (Wittgenstein 1977: MS 137 112b: 29.11.1948).

Therefore philosophical problems concern not only the single subject, but also the forms of its life, so that changes in personal language interact with changes of a whole culture. Wittgenstein points out that

«the sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual» (Wittgenstein 1956: II, 23).

In this strict connection between language, life and culture one should reconsider also the question of nonsense. For the sense of a proposition does not depend only on the picture of facts, but on the whole of one's culture and language. Wittgenstein's critique against the primacy of scientific culture is now accompanied by the revaluation of the impact of ethical and religious dimensions on language and forms of life. His search for a resolution of the problem

of life in a religious attitude to the world is deep and enduring for his whole life. And it is not a question of being convinced by doctrines, because «all wisdom is cold», and «you can no more use it for setting your life to rights, than you can forge iron when it is cold» (Wittgenstein 1977: *MS* 132 167: 11.10.1946).

The perspective of faith, that he has been striving for since at least the First World War period, teaches «that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life)». In other words, a deep philosophical activity means a change not in facts, but in one's attitude to them, because «here you have to be seized and turned around by something», and «once turned round, you must *stay* turned round» (Wittgenstein 1977: *MS* 132 167: 11.10.1946).

Deep philosophical activity, which Wittgenstein tries to express in the form of Christian perspective, could be understood as a personal investigation with the purpose of drawing the structure of a new way of thinking, of a new *Denkbewegung*. It means «grasping the difficulty *in its depth*», namely that one should «start thinking [...] in a new way». And once established the new way of thinking, «the old problems disappear», because

«they are embedded in the way we express ourselves; and if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment» (Wittgenstein 1977: *MS* 131 48: 15.8.1946).

In this deep sense «words are deeds» (Wittgenstein 1977: *MS* 179 20: ca. 1945), and philosophical activity cannot consider them in isolation from the forms of life where they have their meaning. In 1937, for example, Wittgenstein remarks that

«in religion it must be the case that corresponding to every level of devoutness there is a form of expression that has no sense at a lower level» (Wittgenstein 1977: *MS* 120 8: 20.11.1937).

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