Understanding Wittgenstein: some brief remarks

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> What is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for
> you is enable you to talk with some plausibility about some
> abstruse questions of logic, etc. and it does not improve your
> thinking about the important questions of everyday life?
> Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

Introduction

The life of Ludwig Wittgenstein had a dramatic quality that did not rest ex-
clusively on his contributions to philosophy. For not only was he responsible
for influencing the two schools of thought that have dominated twentieth-
century philosophy (logical positivism or logical empiricism and what is gen-
erally referred to as analytical philosophy), but he was a man of rare genius
and personal integrity whose unconventional behavior and magnetic appeal
made an enormous impression on all who knew him.[2] He was an extraordi-
nary man, a man of many qualities.

In his first published work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* Wittgenstein
set out to present a comprehensive philosophical picture of the world.[3] He
did this using the tool of logic to elaborate his world picture. But is was not
logic that mattered to him, but philosophy. And beyond what philosophy
can *say,* there lies what he considered really important.[4] In contrast to the logi-
cal positivists, who found muncht to admire in the *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein held
that we must be silent about all that really matters in human life. The *Trac-
tatus* is a product of what might be considered the first phase of Wittgen-
stein's work in philosophy. With the *Philosophical Investigations* and the se-
second phase, he came to question the fundamental assumption of the *Trac-
tatus* that language is a picture of reality, that its function is to represent the
world to us.[5] He came to believe that he had, by concerning himself with
formal analysis of language as representation, given insufficient attention to
the ways in which language is put *to use* in human life. Wittgenstein rejected
his earlier view that language was a logically rigid essence concealed behind
every discourse, and, instead, came to accept language as it is actually to be

found in social life-serving a variety of human purposes. Whereas the *Tractatus* directed us to determine the truth-values of elementary propositions by comparing them with reality, the later Wittgenstein came to preoccupy himself with the epistemological issue of how we come to know what we know, how it is that our cognitive claims are justified.[6] Despite the enormous differences in his standpoints during the two phases of his work, however, his principle aim remained the achievement of clear understanding. And he always emphasized that philosophy was not a science but, rather, an activity of elucidation and clarification. His concern in both phases was with the same topic: the relation of language to the world.

The latter Wittgenstein conducts a dialogue with the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus;* there is a kind of dialectic, where his earlier and later views are compared and contrasted. In fact, Wittgenstein himself says that he had wanted to publish the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* together, because, in his words, 'the later could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking. For since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again . . ., I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in the first book'.[7]

Method and Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein emphasizes that 'There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies'.[8] What he means by methods are apparently things like imagining a language or a form of life different from our own,[9] 'finding and inventing intermediate cases',[10] imagining 'certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of our concepts different from the usual ones',[11] or calling attention to some well-known facts which are forgotten. These different methods are methods for acquiring self-knowledge. The nature of self-knowledge, and hence the nature of the self, is one of the central themes in the *Investigations*. For Wittgenstein, as for Socrates, self-understanding is both the method and the goal of philosophizing. Wittgenstein's method is not, of course, a recipe or a formula. It is an *art*. He created a new style of thinking, a new way of looking at things. Like Socrates, Freud, and Marx, he is engaged in persuasion and conversion. Speaking of psychoanalysis, Wittgenstein says, 'If you are led by psycho-analysis to say that really you thought so and so or that really your motive was so and so, this is not a matter of discovery, but of persuasion'.[12] And, speaking about himself, he stated in one of his lectures: 'I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another. I am honestly disgusted with the other . . . Much of what we are doing is a question of changing the style of thinking'.[13]

One of the qualities that so clearly distinguishes Wittgenstein from other phi-
losophers is an emphasis on the richness of language and its many possible
uses. As Cavell points out: 'The first thing to be said in accounting for his
style is that he *writes:* he does not report, he does not write up results. No-
body would forge a style so personal who had not wanted and needed to find
the right expression for his thought. The German dissertation and the British
essay — our most common modern options for writing philosophy — would
not work; his he is not a system and he is not a spectator'.[14] What we find
throughout Wittgenstein's later writings is confession, doubt, exhortation, as
well as irony, metaphor, paradox, humor, parable, and dialogue. In short, we
find human speech — not the language of the expert or the professional. We
find an insistence on the language and life of ordinary men.

In Wittgenstein's later work, as I noted, he moved away from a concern with
logical symbolism to a concern with language as an activity. He wanted his
readers (and listeners) to recognize for themselves what was implicit in their
own linguistic practices. Het regarded philosophy as a means to an end —
namely, the liberation of men's minds. The impact of Wittgenstein's later
work can be seen as a kind or *therapy*. He himself once noted that 'The philo-
sopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness'.[15] Instead
of answering a question, the philosopher 'treats' it. The aim of philosophy is
not completeness or comprehensiveness, nor is it exactitude; it is to help us
untie the knots of our own thought. Wittgenstein was concerned that people
be released from those 'pictures' that held hem captive, that they get 'back
to the rough ground'. Rather than searching for essences, we must look at
concrete cases, uncovering similarities and differences which are important,
perhaps recognizing and rearranging those things we already know.

It is not that something new has to be erected, or that something new has to
be discovered. We have to examine and compare things which no one may
have ever bothered to examine or compare before, so as to see things *as they
are now*. By seeing more than we did before, our philosophical dissatisfactions
will disappear. Our present habits of thinking may have to be abandoned. We
must recognize what it is to be human, even though it is certainly human to
want to avoid this recognition. We must recognize that knowledge has no
foundation, i.e. that grounds come to an end in our actions. The essences for
which men search are made not found; they are not a discovery of reason
but a product of will. One of Wittgenstein's goals, then, was to help us find
our way about, to recognize where (and what) we are. 'The sickness of a time',
Wittgenstein wrote, 'is cured only through a changed mode of thought and of
life, not through a medicine invented by an individual'.[16]

Wittgenstein and Relativism

The application of Wittgenstein's ideas can, I believe, help us cure some of the sicknesses of *our* time. In the remainder of this essay, I will briefly discuss the relevance of Wittgenstein's thought to one of those sicknesses: *relativism*. As Karl Popper points out,[17] the thesis of relativism has far-reaching and dangerous consequences.[18]

I have noted elsewhere that the work of Thomas Kuhn and others writing within the 'new image' of science, in common with the sociology of knowledge espoused by Mannheim and Mills, seems to lead inevitably to relativism.[19] Both positions have the paradoxical flavor of most all-or-nothing views. For they both have the form: we can never be sure of x because we are sure of y, in that y turns out to be an instance of x. Whereas those persons adhering to a positivist view of science seem to deny history, by emphasizing a formal, axiomatic, deductive account of scientific theories, and by ignoring the consequences of conceptual and historical variety, those with a more 'sociological' and historical approach appear to bow completely to history. Emphasizing the determinative influence of social-historical conditions on what men and women can think, say, perceive, etc., they come to view various criteria, standards, and so forth, as completely local, temporary, and, therefore, 'relative'. The sociology of knowledge and the new image of science lead not only to relativism, but also to a totally deterministic view of social and intellectual life, where the individual is epistemologically locked into the milieu in which he lives and the paradigm under which he practices science.

Contrary to what some critics have suggested, Wittgenstein was most certainly not a relativist. In fact, his ideas are very useful in finding a middle way between the relativist and absolutist extremes. Wittgenstein's later work is directed against the idea that the words in an utterance are in some way correlated with the objects for which the words stand. This idea assumes that all language has a particular use of employment, and Wittgenstein insists that there is a 'multiplicity of languagegames'.[20] Further, he emphasizes repeatedly that language is a concrete social activity, expressive of human needs. That is, language is used not only as a device for constructing and talking about the world, but also as a means of communication within the world. Language cannot be divorced from the wider human context in which it is located. Another way of saying this is to state that 'form of life' in some way underlies and precedes 'language-games'. Form of life, although never clearly defined by Wittgenstein, can be seen as referring to various differences in biological and mental properties among different organisms. Wittgenstein frequently refers to these in terms of the 'natural histories' of the human species.

For Wittgenstein, various language-games are partly dependent upon certain

contingent facts of nature: that human beings think, use language, agree in judgements and reactions, and share certain common interests.[21] In this sense, language is a *product* of human activity in the world; it is a product of the facts of human and physical nature. But, at the same time, language is also a *producer* of meanings and new forms of human activity. Wittgenstein, then, does not want to endorse a position which holds that facts of nature *completely* determine language; nor, on the other hand, does he want to say that the facts of nature are *totally* creations of our language. Whereas the relativist refuses to separate the 'facts of nature' from language, so that language determines what is real, and the absolutist sees particular concepts as being determined by nature, Wittgenstein's position is different and far more subtle. While he gives many examples of imaginary peoples with forms of life different than our own and, therefore, with such basically different conceptions of the way things are that they can be said to live in a 'different world', this is not the case in the world in which *we* live. Of course, there are different language-games among us, but there are certain facts of nature which have a priority to all language-games.

What is of crucial importance here is Wittgenstein's conception of facts of nature as providing an important *prior grounding* for language. In fact, 'form of life' can be seen as a concept referring to the fact that, by and large, the human race is one biological species. The existence of people who show certain common characteristics, interests, and responses, provides a kind of grounding which restricts the possible forms which language can (logically) take. In Wittgenstein's words: 'It is as if our conception involved a scaffolding of facts'. That would presumably mean: If you imagine certain facts otherwise, describe them otherwise, than the way they are, then you can no longer imagine the application of certain concepts, because the rules for their application have no analogue in the new circumstances'.[22] There are, then, non-arbitrary aspects of language-games; they are rooted in the pre-linguistic world. Wittgenstein remarks that 'it is our *acting,* which lies at the bottom of the language-game'.[23] But this acting is not something conditioned by prior-held-beliefs; it is primitive, pre-linguistic behavior of the human species.

At the same time that Wittgenstein denies the notion that the facts of nature are completely the creation of our language, he also denies that language itself is uniquely determined by external facts of nature. Wittgenstein tries to strike a balance between these two positions; his position is dialectical. He writes:

Do I want to say, then, that certain facts are favourable to the formation of concepts; or again unfavourable? And does experience teach us this? It is a fact of experience that human beings alter their concepts, exchange them for others when they learn new facts; when in this way what was formerly important to them

becomes unimportant, and *vice versa*.[24]

When people learn new facts, they may alter their concepts, they may come to see the world differenthy (i.e. partially through these new concepts).[25] Existence, then, is not entirely the creation of concepts or language. Nor is our language uniquely determined by the facts of nature. Language does have an enormous freedom to create its own reality, but language is nevertheless built upon the facts of human and physical nature.

Wittgenstein's recognition of the dialectical relationship between nature and language also serves to undermine those *deterministic* explanations where either nature or language *causes* us to act (and see, and talk) as we do. If, indeed, everything we say and do were *entirely* a consequence of certain facts of nature which impress themselves upon us or of the conceptual apparatus available to us within the group or society in which we happen to live, then we would be locked into a deterministic system. There is much in the work of sociologists of knowledge and in Kuhn's writings which appears to entail determinism. By emphasizing the continuing tension between nature and language, Wittgenstein helps us avoid a commitment to determinism.

In this connection, it is important to recognize the *primacy* of ordinary language, and the general language-game of everyday life. This language is not only primary in our everyday lives, it is also the foundation upon which other (extra-ordinary) language are based. That is, we can only learn to play the language-game of physics or sociology, for example, through the use of ordinary language. This ordinary language, Wittgenstein's stresses, is beyond justification (although what we can say *within* ordinary language is not). Wittgenstein warns:

Here we are in enormous danger of wanting to make fine distinctions. — It is the same when one tries to define the concept of a material object in terms of 'what is really seen'. — What we have rather to do is to *accept* the everyday language-game, and to note *false* accounts of the matter as *false*. The primitive language-game which children are taught needs no justification; attempts at justification need to be rejected.[26]

Our everyday language-game, in short, is not based on grounds. It is therelike our life.[27]

The everyday language-game constitutes the very rock bottom of our knowledge and experience. It would simply make no sense to ask whether it is 'true' (or 'false'), for there is no transcendental criterion — which would have to stand beyond or outside language — by which a judgement could be made. Wittgenstein writes: 'I want to say: 'It is *primarily* the apparatus of our ordinary language, of our word-language, that we call language; and then other things by analogy or comparability with this'.[28] There is no selfjustifying

foundation outside our ordinary language. Hence, the *everyday language has an epistemological and ontological primacy*. It underlies and provides a foundation for such extra-ordinary language-games as science, art, law, and religion. The constructed, extra-ordinary language-game of sociology or other sciences, in other words, cannot exist in total isolation from concrete everyday languages employed by human beings. And this everyday language, I have tried to indicate, is itself partly dependent on certain facts of physical and human nature.

Various sciences, specialities, and paradigms must be seen for what they are: artificial, constructed, language-games which create 'possible' worlds.[29] Each of these extra-ordinary languages expresses a possible way of constructing the world or some portion thereof (consider, for example, Marxism or Freudianism), each will speak of certain things and be silent about others. But, as Wittgenstein points out, there are limits to what is possible. Wittgenstein's account of language, I have argued, is most certainly not a relativist account. Nor is it a conventionalist account — if we mean by that an account where any statement at all can be assured of truth by meddling at sufficient length with the meanings of other statements in the system. Instead, there are constraints which exist prior to conventions; there is a nonarbitrary element, based on various facts of nature and on our certainties. This is one of the lessons which Wittgenstein tried to teach — a lesson that is often forgotten by his advocates and detractors alike.

Notes

1 Quoted in Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 39.

2 See, for example, Malcolm, *op. cit.;* William Warren Bartley III, *Wittgenstein* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1973).

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961).

4 *Ibid.,* 4.022, 4.1212.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

6 This is especially true in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty.* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

7 *Philosophical Investigations, op. cit.,* p. x.

8 *Ibid.,* 133.

9 *Ibid.,* 2, 48.

10 *Ibid.,* 122.

11 *Ibid.,* p. 230.

12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 33.

13 *Ibid.,* p. 41.

14 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 182-183.

15 *Philosophical Investigations, op. cit.,* 255.

16 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967), II: 4.

17 Karl R. Popper, 'Normal Science and Its Dangers'. In Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 56.

18 Nevertheless, I do not agree with Popper's 'solution' to the relativism problem. I consider his views at length in my forthcoming, *Wittgenstein and Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

19 Derek L. Phillips, 'Epistemology and the Sociology of Knowledge: The Contributions of Mannheim, Mills, and Merton', *Theory and Society* 1 (1974), pp. 59-88.

20 *Philosophical Investigations, op. cit.,* 24.

21 *Ibid.,* 25, 174, 466, 467; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 383-384, 388, 532-534, 540-541.

22 *Zettel, op. cit.,* 350.

23 On Certainty, *op. cit.,* 204.

24 *Zettel, op. cit.,* 352.

25 *Ibid.,* 357-358, 364.

26 *Philosophical Investigations, op. cit.,* p. 200.

27 I am very much indebted to Nil Disco for discussions concerning these issues, and also to his paper, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Beginnings of a Sociology', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 3 (1974), pp. 18-52.

28 *Philosophical Investigations, op. cit.,* 494.

29 I discuss the whole question of 'possibilities' in Chapter VIII of my forthcoming book.