

56. Questions and Problems vis-a- vis the Role of Philosophy in Wittgenstein (1995)

1. It is true that Wittgenstein does philosophy as a therapy to 'cure' philosophical problems. Is there not a very personal dimension to this? Should it be overlooked? I mean, it is evident both in some of his writings and the testimony of those who knew him that he was genuinely afflicted by philosophical problems. But is this not precisely an extraordinary thing? And if he prescribes a means of treatment with respect to this affliction, what justifies universalizing this treatment? (Universalizing it, that is, for all people who delve into philosophical problems?)

– Yes, that's true. Few have followed Wittgenstein in his way of doing philosophy.

2. Rather, I view it this way. By taking and treating himself (and his philosophizing) in a radical way, he treats philosophical problems as inappropriate or inattentive use of language radically. He becomes deeply thoughtful in an area where others have unquestionably been thoughtless. So what he grants to posterity is a method, one way, of doing philosophy. And this is a corrective against the worst excesses of a sophisticated language that forgets itself.

– Well, his own language is not the most sophisticated but certainly very dense and difficult. Something like notes written down that are probing and perspicacious but still with some lack or shortfall in their meaning.

3. Or perhaps all he offers in the way of doing philosophy is an ideal or model. But the ideal or model of anything, as he himself points out, should not be confused with the practise or line of thought which employs it. So should his way of doing philosophy, it seems to me, not be construed as a pattern for all philosophy.

– He said his task was not only to destroy idols but to make sure no new ones were erected. Now what could this possibly mean? And what sort of purity or one true God – after all, he was a believer all his life – is implied by it? Or, for that matter, his affirming and even exalting the integrity of ordinary language? Is there not something here with this emphasis on origins – Rousseauian? And what about his treating philosophy as if it were always sitting at the window, rouged, waiting for Science?

4. When Wittgenstein speaks about the sickness of philosophical problems, is he not using language in an idiosyncratic way? And suppose the whole

community of philosophers (barring a few exceptions), continue to regard this way of using the word 'sickness' as idiosyncratic? Does this not mean that this particular move in the language game about language games (perhaps another idiosyncratic term) is meaningful only so far as it is – idiosyncratic?

– It's true that when Wittgenstein talks about philosophical problems being a sickness, his own use of language seems to escape scrutiny. I wonder if it's possible to deal with this problem, if I may call it that, from a Wittgensteinian point of view. Ordinarily speaking, a sickness is a problem that one doesn't think one can get rid of by showing it to be a non-problem. And, ordinarily speaking, it's not something that most people don't even recognize. If a physician publicly announced such a sickness as a widespread health problem, who would understand him?

5. Some spirits react to what they consider to be the bad things of their time by going completely in the opposite direction. This is *their* form of bad behaviour.

– Well, there's no question that Russell, for example, thought that Wittgenstein lacked ethics. And yet Wittgenstein himself characterized his work as being ethical. How is one to understand this? It's true that, from one point of view, Wittgenstein was a bad actor. (He beat on some schoolchildren when he was in Austria and trying to live apart from philosophy.) And yet, on the other hand, he was exceptionally conscientious and courageous. Alice, how many people would give away a vast fortune? How many people have done so throughout all history? And for the purpose of preserving an intellectual conscience of the highest order? Oh, tell me, is this merely a curious biographical fact or a statement of some sort – ethical, philosophical, and perhaps even religious – that goes to the heart of what he was?

6. He does philosophy in order to attack the pretensions of philosophy. Its big questions or at least how these big questions are handled seem bogus to him. But there is ambiguity here. On the one hand, he apparently wishes to bring the whole of philosophy into disrepute. On the other hand, he lauds the endeavours of the past and involves himself in deeply vexing, largely impractical, and sometimes all-too-serious ways of thinking.

– Oh, what an ego must've been necessary to cut away from so much! To reduce it all to a collective shell game! To think that the best game of all was to dismantle it with a few logical or linguistic tools! And then to forget

all about it, as he suggested so often to his students, and get into some honest line of work!

7. Should philosophy, unlike other concepts such as 'number,' be a thread with one continuous fibre running throughout it rather than numerous overlapping ones?

– Yes, I remember this aphorism. It's similar to his talk about language-games. A concept identifies itself with sameness while — oh, my God, here I'm talking like a Derridean! — struggling with overriding diversity and difference.

8. Wittgenstein no doubt comes across to some philosophers in a manner which resembles the naive and nagging questions of a child who desires a degree of clarification which cannot possibly be given.

– Well, he says this about himself somewhere. And yet when it comes to questions about his own work — I'm thinking of Frege's and Russell's puzzlement over the Tractatus — he didn't seem to appreciate demands for clarification. No, as soon as he decided that his spade had hit bedrock, he treated such questions as being bereft of point and purpose. Like wheels on a machine that don't turn anything.

9. If one simply takes every utterance of his literally or at face-value, then how much has one really learned about being suspicious in the face of the manifold ways (call some incorrect, if you will) that language may be employed?

– He deprecates his own work at the end. He apologizes for not being more controlled and systematic. And yet he claims he has no other way to get out what he has to say except by following his natural bent. So that gives him a certain freedom, I suppose. For what? Well, perhaps just so he doesn't have to hide or dissimulate problems. Internal contradictions, inconsistencies, and perhaps even incoherencies in his own work. Things that, if I don't miss my guess, he would've liked to have surgically removed.

10. Like Nietzsche, he views himself (at least in part) as a destroyer. The one with respect to old values; the other with respect to old ways of doing philosophy. In each case, something smacks of hyperbole. (This too is a way of using language.)

– And one that, in philosophy at least, is generally frowned upon. Imagine if

all carried on in such fashion. You know, I'm trying to get into Wittgenstein's head and, all in all, I think I'm doing pretty good. But as a representative of the crass majority, I must finally come down on the side of everybody playing the same game and following the same rules.

11. It is interesting to note, I think, that Wittgenstein saw a way to undo philosophical problems by rendering problematic what most philosophers took to be no problem at all. (Or at least no problem worth investigating on a grand scale.)

– If Wittgenstein is right in thinking that the biggest problem of all is how philosophers use language, then his fate is like Cassandra's in the Greek myth. Few have heeded him. Few have paid attention to him even when explaining him. And so, just as he says, everything remains the same.

12. Does Wittgenstein offer us simply a description of language? Is not 'description' itself a word with a certain degree of fluidity, a meaning related to context? Then, if this is so, could there not be aspects of Wittgenstein's description of language which resemble explanation? For example, when he introduces such neologisms as 'language-game' and 'family-resemblance,' how do these not count as technical terms with explanatory value?

– A good point. Even if he limits these terms to a bare minimum, they're still operating. They're still trying to capture the whole of something. Frankly, I don't see how a description can have any sense unless there's an explanation to give it some point and purpose.

13. In Section 109 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he talks about looking into the workings of language. And this, he says, must be done in the way of description and not explanation. Now imagine someone saying the same thing about a car motor. One fellow says to the other: 'I'm going to describe to you the workings of this motor in such a way that you will be very clear about it.' Now in what way, it may be asked, would such an account not amount to being an explanation? Even if it were to remain wholly practical, its intent would still be more than simple familiarization. And so it seems to me that, so far as Wittgenstein is involved in wanting to create a new understanding or awareness, he unavoidably involves himself in explanation. (In our normal way of speaking, explanation yields understanding and description yields familiarization or recognition.)

– Description / explanation. Philosophical language / ordinary language. Sense / nonsense. Wittgenstein had a small packet of oppositions that don't

find favour with many – or at least some – philosophers. I suppose the explanation is that, just as he wanted to doubt in a thoroughly novel way, so he wanted to end it.

14. I wonder if Wittgenstein's way of proceeding is as wholly unscientific as he seems to think it is. Does he not view language-games as a kind of diverse, wide-ranging phenomena? And does he not find and examine a multitude of examples of language use in much the same way that a scientist collects specimens? (I would hesitate to go so far as to say he proceeds inductively and draws principles.)

– If the question "What's a game?" escapes being answered in an absolutely definitive way, then how should it be any different for the question "What's a science?" And, furthermore, even if, as Wittgenstein allows, strict boundaries can be drawn up for a specific purpose, there are always and forever border disputes.

15. What is the role of philosophy? Webster's Dictionary describes it as 1) the love or pursuit of wisdom, 2) the search for underlying causes or principles of reality, 3) the critical examination of the grounds for fundamental beliefs and an analysis of the concepts employed in the expression of such beliefs, 4) the study of the principles of human nature and conduct, 5) the science that comprises all learning exclusive only of technical precepts and practical arts, 6) the coordinate disciplines of science and liberal arts exclusive only of medicine, law, and theology, 7) the science that comprises logic, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology, 8) a system of motivating beliefs, concepts, and principles, 9) the sum of an individual's ideas and convictions, and 10) the calmness of temper and judgment befitting a philosopher.

– And 11) the practise of saying that most of the above is nonsense.

16. I would like to try a little experiment. In Section 69 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein remarks upon the difficulty of explaining to someone (who is presumably from another planet) what a game is. I would like to quote part of this section but, in place of the word 'game,' I shall substitute the word 'philosophy.' Thus:

How should we explain what philosophy is? I imagine that we should describe philosophy to him, and we might add, "This and similar things are called 'philosophy'." And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell

what philosophy is? – But this is not our ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary – for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.)

– Wittgenstein had a very special purpose and, for that reason, drew a strict and narrow boundary around philosophy. And yet drawing this boundary was in some sense at odds with his purpose. Philosophy shouldn't constrain language, he said, and one wonders why that shouldn't include the language of philosophy. In other words, his own philosophizing was perhaps more personal than he realized and didn't check itself out except at odd moments. (For example, I'm thinking of the Introduction to the Philosophical Investigations where he admits to some failing or shortcoming.) On the other hand, it did do just that – be very consciously or at least conscientiously personal – by presenting itself like the workshop of his mind with none of the inner struggles and questionable moves concealed.

17. It is fair to say, I think, that there are those scholars who take Wittgenstein to be drawing very definite boundaries around philosophy. But perhaps this view of the matter, if it is not looked into more carefully, comes from a reading of him which is simply too literal. After all, there is certainly enough evidence to show that he wasn't the least bit interested in having disciples or founding a school. So far as that goes then, unless he truly wanted philosophy to end with him, he must have been aware, however bitterly, of the limited application of his method. On the other hand, it would be absurd to think that he desired to have no influence. So the matter might be settled, I think, by considering the more tendentious of his pronouncements, those that sound like universal propositions about what philosophy is or should be, to be an aspect of style. In other words, he wishes his voice not only to sound (or to be simply the voice of sweet reason) but also to ring a bit. And given that this voice was, at least to some degree, a voice in the wilderness, the use of language as an attention-getting device hardly strikes me as an inappropriate move."

– Wittgenstein not wanting disciples? I'm not sure about that. He attracted and was attracted by people largely on the basis of the interest they took in his work. And that work, as much as it was his writings, was also the thing he didn't write about or at least not very much. I'm thinking of the ethic or way of living that, according to him, couldn't be said but only shown.

– I think both can be done. You can live in a certain way. You can also write

about it in a certain way. You can tell the truth about it in a certain way and that writing can also be part of that way of living.

– Well, he toyed with the idea of writing an autobiography. Here was a man who seemed to think the best things were consigned to silence. Who couldn't even appreciate Shakespeare! How could he — oh, well there's only one answer. He was a minimalist. A poetic-philosophical minimalist. He wrote the Tractatus – a brilliant piece of minimalist work – and got away with it in a sort of minimalist way (though I don't decry the work that went into it) by, first, paying little attention to the philosophical tradition, and, second, having this treatise accepted as a doctoral thesis.

– If one were a bit more of a poet (and didn't just read detective stories), then one wouldn't be so quick, I think, to identify saying with bare-bones talk. Or to identify showing with silence and so a kind of mute expression of nobility. No, all are bound up together and so, if there's a case for being the kind of truth-teller that Wittgenstein was, so there's a case for being another kind.

– Alice —

– Oh, it's so terribly presumptuous, isn't it? To put him on the same level? After all, he's only written a few meagre essays whereas Wittgenstein, well, Wittgenstein wrote the Tractatus. A very brazen attempt to cut through all the bullshit. At least if you think that, when it comes to truth, it's our ordinary language that counts for everything.

– Well, statements that hold up a picture of reality. That limit all our genuine knowledge of what's true and what's false.

– Pah! It's so poverty-stricken it makes lying look good.

– "Everything that can be said can be said clearly." Lies? We hardly know what we mean by this.

– I'm thinking about it.

– Well, I suppose you could accuse Wittgenstein of a lie when he says: "Everything that can be said can be said clearly."

– The cat is on the mat. Or else the cat is not on the mat. That's very clear. But if we dragged it out indefinitely, filling up a whole world, it would be a

big nothing.

– Oh, he knows that very well. And he also knows that he can't be entirely true to his own position. And that the ethic he can't speak about, along with being the attempt to be as true as possible to it, is precisely not being true to it as a sort of broken confession of its impossibility.

– His writing is boring. It's his life that's interesting.

– Yet he made a singular contribution. He drew our attention to the way we use language. Only what he calls misuse and error and confusion is contestable.

– It's that all-too-typical putting down of philosophers by others.

– He called his own stuff nonsense though. That should give some idea of the non-biassed or objective side of his thought. On the other hand, he took his nonsense to be something like a ladder or escape route.

– That's too convenient. This kicking away the ladder behind him so he could get away from it all.

– Yes, he really thought he could make that great Kierkegaardian leap into another world. I'm not sure what sort of world exactly. I'll only say it seemed to be an active one where, with a clear conscience, he could think everything except philosophy.

– Maybe he was thinking it all the time. Even when he thought he didn't have to think about it any longer.

– Putting it on the back burner is probably what happened. Otherwise it's difficult to explain his coming back to it.

– It was an albatross around his neck.

– It was strikingly like a malediction that, as Nietzsche with his sickness did, was transmuted.

– P and not-P. There's the logic of what he was.

– A man who was torn between being a philosophical guru and a philosophical dropout. I'm afraid I can't contradict you on that point.

- A philosopher who didn't want to be a philosopher. What sort of logic or language-game is that? Doesn't that show that, right from the beginning, the cards are scrambled? That as much as we live and die by the "cat on the mat" stuff, we also live and die by the truth of the human heart.*
- Or untruth, Alice.*
- Right from the beginning. And since as much certainty as uncertainty is laid up there to make doubting certainty a wise move, it's not surprising we've carried it right to the heart of this fickle world.*
- He must've wanted order in one place. Untouchable. And there he's strikingly similar to all the philosophers he's otherwise so different from.*
- But he scrambled the cards with the Philosophical Investigations. Anybody who claims there's an indefinite number of games is on the way to losing faith in calling his game the game.*
- And so he died without quite finishing his game. And others have come along to play it for him. There's the whole history of philosophy.*
- It's complication and over-complication.*
- By and large that seems to have been our agenda so far. What else is on it?*

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