

Bewitched by Language

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

If you found yourself at one of the seminars Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) held in Cambridge in 1940 you would very quickly realize that you were in the presence of someone very unusual. Most people who met him thought he was a genius. Bertrand Russell described him as ‘passionate, profound, intense and dominating’. This small Viennese man with bright blue eyes and a deep seriousness about him would pace up and down, asking students questions, or pause lost in thought for minutes at a time. No one dared interrupt. He didn’t lecture from prepared notes, but thought through the issues in front of his audience, using a series of examples to tease out what was at stake. He told his students not to waste their time reading philosophy books; if they took such books seriously, he said, they should throw them across the room and get on with thinking hard about the puzzles they raised.

His own first book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), was written in numbered short sections, many of which read

more like poetry than philosophy. Its main message was that the most important questions about ethics and religion lie beyond the limits of our understanding and that if we can't talk meaningfully about them, we should stay silent.

A central theme in this later work was 'bewitchment by language'. Language leads philosophers into all sorts of confusion, he believed. They fall under its spell. Wittgenstein saw his role as that of a therapist who would make much of this confusion go away. The idea was that you would follow the logic of his various carefully chosen examples and that as you did this your philosophical problems would vanish. What had seemed terribly important would no longer be a problem.

One cause of philosophical confusion was, he suggested, the assumption that all language works in the same way – the idea that words simply name things. He wanted to demonstrate to his readers that there are many 'language games', different activities that we perform using words. There is no 'essence' of language, no single common feature that explains the whole range of its uses.

If you see a group of people who are related to each other, at a wedding for example, you may be able to recognize members of the family from physical resemblances between them. That is what Wittgenstein meant by a 'family resemblance'. So you may look a bit like your mother in some ways – perhaps you both have the same hair and eye colour – and a bit like your grandfather in that you are both tall and slim. You might also have the same hair colour and eye shape as your sister, but she might have different-coloured eyes from you and your mother. There is not one single feature that every member of the family shares that makes it straightforward to see that you are all part of the same genetically related family. Instead, there is a pattern of overlapping resemblances, with some of you sharing some

features, and others sharing different features. That pattern of overlapping resemblances is what interested Wittgenstein. He used this metaphor of family resemblance to explain something important about how language works.

Think about the word 'game'. There are lots of different things that we call games: board games like chess, card games like bridge and patience, sports like football, and so on. There are also other things that we call games, such as games of hide-and-seek or games of make-believe. Most people just assume that because we use the same word – 'game' – to cover all these, there must be a single feature that they all have in common, the 'essence' of the concept 'game'. But rather than just assuming that there is such a common denominator, Wittgenstein urges his readers to 'Look and see'. You might think that games all have a winner and a loser, but what about solitaire, or the activity of throwing a ball at a wall and catching it? Both of these are games, but obviously there isn't a loser. Or what about the idea that what they have in common is a set of rules? But some games of make-believe don't seem to have rules. For every candidate for a common feature of all games, Wittgenstein comes up with a counter-example, a case of something that is a game but that doesn't seem to share the suggested 'essence' of all games. Instead of assuming that all games have a single thing in common, he thinks we should see words like 'game' as 'family resemblance terms'.

When Wittgenstein described language as a series of 'language games' he was drawing attention to the fact that there are many different things that we use language for, and that philosophers have become confused because they mostly think that all language is doing the same sort of thing. In one of his famous descriptions of his aim as a philosopher, he said that what he wanted to do was show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. A typical philosopher

will buzz around like a fly trapped in a bottle, banging against the sides. The way to 'solve' a philosophical problem was to remove the cork and let the fly out. What this meant was that he wanted to show the philosopher that he or she had been asking the wrong questions or had been misled by language.

Take St Augustine's description of how he had learnt to speak. In his *Confessions*, he suggested that the older people around him would point to objects and name them. He sees an apple, someone points to it and says 'apple'. Gradually Augustine understood what the words meant and was able to use them to tell other people what he wanted. Wittgenstein took this account to be a case of someone assuming that all language had an essence, a single function. The single function was to name objects. For Augustine, every word has a meaning that it stands for. In place of this picture of language, Wittgenstein encourages us to see language use as a series of activities that are tied up with the practical lives of speakers. We should think of language as more like a tool bag containing many different sorts of tools, rather than as, for example, always serving the function that a screwdriver does.

It may seem obvious to you that when you are in pain and you speak about it what you are doing is using words which name the particular sensation you have. But Wittgenstein tries to disrupt that view of the language of sensation. It's not that you don't have a sensation. It's just that, logically, your words can't be the names of sensations. If everybody had a box with a beetle in that they never showed to anyone, it wouldn't really matter what was in the box when they talked to one another about their 'beetle'. Language is public, and it requires publicly available ways of checking that we are making sense. When a child learns to 'describe' her pain, Wittgenstein says, what happens is that the parent encourages the child to do various

things, such as say 'It hurts' – the equivalent in many ways to the quite natural expression 'Aaargh!' Part of his message here is that we should not think of the words 'I am in pain' as a way of naming a private sensation. If pains and other sensations really were private we would need a special private language to describe them. But Wittgenstein thought that idea didn't make sense. Another of his examples may help explain why he thought this.

A man decides that he will keep a record of every time he has a particular kind of sensation for which there is no name – perhaps a specific kind of tingle. He writes 'S' in his diary whenever he feels that special tingling sensation. 'S' is a word in his private language – no one else knows what he means by it. This sounds as if it is possible. It isn't difficult to imagine a man doing exactly this. But then, think a bit harder. How does he know when he gets a tingle that it really is a further example of the type 'S' he's decided to record and not another kind of tingle? He can't go back and check it against anything except his memory of having an earlier 'S' tingling experience. That's not really good enough, though, because he could be completely mistaken about it. It isn't a reliable way of telling that you are using the word in the same way.

The point he was trying to make with his example of the diary was that the way we use words to describe our experiences can't be based on a private linking of the experience with the word. There must be something public about it. We can't have our own private language. And if that is true, the idea that the mind is like a locked theatre that no one else can get into is misleading. For Wittgenstein, then, the idea of a private language of sensations doesn't make sense at all. This is important – and difficult to grasp too – because many philosophers before him thought that each individual's mind was completely private.

CHAPTER

26

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Linguistic Analysis and Ordinary Language

One of the major interests in twentieth-century Western philosophy is language. At first glance, this may seem puzzling, but a second look suggests that it is not so surprising. Our scientific theories, our religious and philosophical views, and our commonsense understandings are all expressed in language. Whenever we try to communicate with someone about a matter of any importance, it is language that carries the freight. What if there were something *misleading* about the language in which we think? What if it sets traps for us, catapults us into errors without our even realizing it? Perhaps we ought not to trust it at all.

Actually, this suspicion is a sort of subtext running through modern philosophy, but in the twentieth century this attention to language becomes a major preoccupation of philosophers. The interest in language has been so dominant that some speak of “the linguistic turn” in philosophy.

In this chapter we examine two phases of this interest in language. These two phases are often called *analytic philosophy* and *ordinary language philosophy*. Both are complex movements involving many thinkers, and one could get a taste of these

styles of doing philosophy in a number of ways. We have chosen to focus on one remarkable thinker, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), whom many would cite as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, he can stand as an emblem for *both* phases because Wittgenstein changes his mind. As we follow his severe critique of his own earlier analytic thought, we can see how attention to language in its *ordinary* employment tends to supplant the earlier attraction of an *ideal* language. Wittgenstein is also interesting because he is not just interested in language; his passionate concern from first to last is, *How shall we live?* But first we need a little background.

Language and Its Logic

To understand analytic philosophy, we need to know at least a bit about modern **logic**. It is a tool of very great power, incredibly magnified in our day by the speed and storage capacities of the digital computer. Every college and university now teaches this “formal,” or “symbolic,” logic, which was developed in the period near the beginning of

the twentieth century by Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and others.

The power of the new logic derives from abstracting completely from the meaning or semantic content of assertions. It is a *formal* logic in just this sense: The rules governing transformations from one symbolic formula to another make reference only to the syntactical structures of the formulas in question and not at all to their meaning. Aristotle's logic of the syllogism, of course, is formal in this same sense.* But the new logic provides a symbolism for the internal structure of sentences that is enormously more powerful than Aristotle's. It can also deal with a more complex set of relations among sentences. For the first time, it really seems plausible that whatever you might want to say can be represented in this formalism. Because this logic abstracts entirely from content, it can be used with equal profit in any field, from operations research to theology. It can show us what follows from certain premises, explain why assertions are inconsistent with each other, and diagnose errors in reasoning. Being formal in this sense, it sets out a kind of logical skeleton that can be fleshed out in any number of ways, while preserving the logical relations precisely.

The prospect opened up by the new logic is that of a language more precise and clear than the language we normally speak—a purified, *ideal language*, in which there is no ambiguity, no vagueness, no dependence on emphasis, intonation, or the many other features of our language that may mislead us. Bertrand Russell expresses the appeal of such a language in this way:

In a logically perfect language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact, with the exception of such words as “or,” “not,” “if,” “then,” which have a different function. In a logically perfect language, there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the words for the simple things that enter in,

one word for each simple component. . . . It is a language which has only syntax and no vocabulary whatever. Barring the omission of a vocabulary, I maintain that it is quite a nice language. It aims at being that sort of a language that, if you add a vocabulary, would be a logically perfect language. Actual languages are not logically perfect in this sense, and they cannot possibly be, if they are to serve the purposes of daily life.¹

Two complementary ideas make the new logic of particular interest to philosophers. The first is the conviction that natural language, such as ordinary English, does not in fact possess this sort of perfection. The second is that our natural languages tend to lead us astray, especially when we think about philosophical matters.

So the dazzling idea of applying the new logic to traditional philosophical problems takes root in the imagination of many philosophers. Perhaps, if we could formulate these problems using the crystalline purity of these formal logical structures, they could finally—after all these centuries—be definitively solved. The excitement is great. And indeed some very impressive analyses of puzzling uses of language are produced.

As an example, let us consider Russell's “theory of definite descriptions.” A *definite description* is a phrase of the form, “the so-and-so.” Some sentences containing phrases of this form have a paradoxical character. Consider this sentence: “The golden mountain (that is, a mountain wholly made of pure gold) does not exist.” We think this is a true sentence, don't we? You couldn't find a mountain made of gold anywhere. But now ask yourself: How can it be *true* that the golden mountain doesn't exist unless this definite description, “the golden mountain,” is *meaningful*? (Meaning is a prerequisite for truth; if a term lacks meaning you don't even know *what it is* that might be true!) And how can that phrase be meaningful unless there is something that it means? And if there *is* something that it means—why, then, there must be a golden mountain after all. So the original sentence seems to be *false*, not true. So it looks as if the sentence, if true, is false. And that's a paradox.

Russell applies the new logic to this puzzle and shows how it can be made to disappear. The

*See pp. 188–189. For the distinction between syntax and semantics, see p. 604.

solution goes like this. We go wrong in thinking of the phrase “the golden mountain” as a *name*. It is true that for a name such as “Socrates” to be meaningful, there must be something that it names.* Although definite descriptions *look* like names, they actually have the *logic* of predications. If we can get clear about the logic of such phrases, we will clear up our confusion.

According to Russell, to say “The golden mountain does not exist” is equivalent to saying, “There exists no thing that has both of these properties: being golden and being a mountain.” In the language of formal logic, this is expressed as follows: $\sim(\exists x)(Gx \ \& \ Mx)$. In this formula, it is clear that the *G* (for golden) and the *M* (for mountain) are in the predicate position. There are, in fact, no names in it at all—not even the occurrences of the letter *x*, which function as variables ranging over everything. In effect, the formula invites you to consider each and every thing and assures you with respect to it: This is not both golden and a mountain. And that statement is both true and unparadoxical.

So by getting clear about the *logic* of the language in which the puzzle is stated, we get ourselves into a position to understand the sentence in a clear and unpuzzling way. We see that it is just a confusion to think that this language commits us to the existence of a golden mountain. Of great importance, however, is that we also identify the *source* of the confusion—which lies very naturally in the language itself. Phrases such as “the golden mountain” *do* look like names.

*You might think at this point, “Whoa—I know that’s not true; ‘Santa Claus’ is a name, but there isn’t anything that it names!” But Russell holds that “Santa Claus” is not a true name; it is shorthand for “the fat, jolly, bearded man who flies through the air on a sleigh and brings presents to children at Christmas time.” And that is a definite description, subject to the same analysis as “the golden mountain.” True names *do* name something. (In some moods, Russell thinks that even “Socrates” is not a true name, but a disguised description; when he is thinking along these lines, he is inclined to say that the only true names are terms such as “this” and “that.”)



“Beware of language, for it is often a great cheat.”

—Peter Mere Latham (1789–1875)

This analysis has a great impact on many philosophers, and a sort of cottage industry develops in which bits of language are analyzed in similar fashion, trying to show how we are misled by misreading the logic of our language. The suspicion grows that many of the traditional problems of philosophy have their origin in such misreadings. The prospect opens up that some, at least, of these problems in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics can be cleared up and perhaps even be made to completely disappear.*

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

In 1889 a son was born into the wealthy and talented Wittgenstein family of Vienna. He grew up in an atmosphere of high culture; the most prominent composers, writers, architects, and artists of that great city were regular visitors to his home. His father was an engineer and industrialist, his mother very musical, and Ludwig was talented both mechanically and musically. But it was a troubled family; there were several suicides among his siblings, and he himself seems to have struggled against mental illness most of his life.

Having decided to study engineering, he went first to Berlin and then to Manchester, England, where he did some experiments with kites and worked on the design of an airplane propeller. This work drew his interests toward pure mathematics and eventually to the foundations of mathematics and logic.

*Think, for example, of what might happen to Plato’s semantic argument for the reality of the Forms (p. 154), if understood in this light. His argument is that terms such as “square” and “equal” do not name anything in the visible world, yet they are meaningful. So they must name something in the intelligible world. But if what Plato takes to be a *name* has the logic of a *predicate*, the whole argument for the Forms on this basis falls to the ground.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Over a long lifetime (1872–1970), Bertrand Russell wrote on nearly every conceivable topic. His books range from *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits* (1948) to *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930) and *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (1959). In 1950 he was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature. A pacifist during World War I, Russell was active in social causes all his life. Three passions, he said, governed his life: a longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.

Though his views changed and developed on some topics, he was consistent in wishing philosophy to become more scientific. As one of the major contributors to the new logic, he held that traditional philosophical problems either are not properly the business of philosophy at all (and should be farmed out to the sciences) or are problems of logic. As a maxim for scientific philosophizing, Russell recommended that logical constructions replace inferences whenever possible.

Consider, for example, our knowledge of the external world; suppose you think you are now seeing a table. What you have directly in your

acquaintance is a “sense datum”—some brownish, trapezoidal, visual figure or a tactual feeling of resistance. Common sense (and philosophy, too) characteristically *infers* from such data the existence of a table quite independent of my evidence for it. But such inferences are notoriously unreliable and lead easily to skeptical conclusions.

Russell suggested that your knowledge of the table should rather be *constructed* in terms of logical relations among all the sense data (actual and possible) that, in ordinary speech, we would say are “of” the table. Thus the inference to the table external to your evidence is replaced by a set of relations among the data constituting that evidence—a view known as *phenomenalism*. About those items, skeptical problems do not arise.

In matters of ethics, Russell took a utilitarian line, holding that right actions are those that produce the greatest overall satisfaction. With respect to religion, he was an agnostic. He was once asked what he would say if after his death he found himself confronted with his Maker. He replied that he would say, “God, why did you make the evidence for your existence so insufficient?”

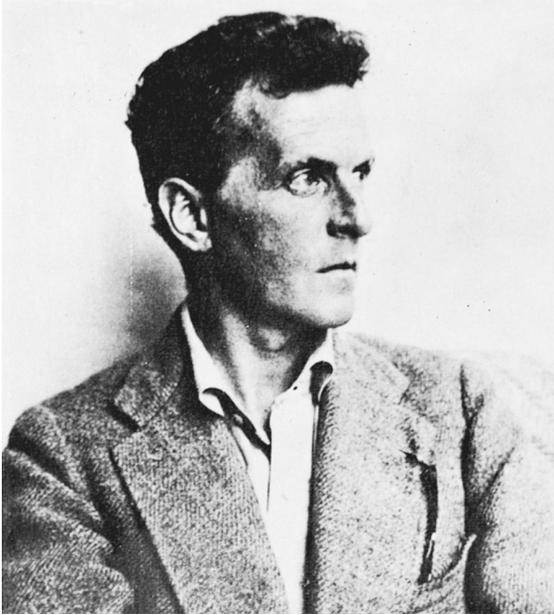
In the fall of 1911 he went to Cambridge to study with Russell, who tells a story about Wittgenstein’s first year there.

At the end of his first term at Cambridge he came to me and said: “Will you please tell me whether I am a complete idiot or not?” I replied, “My dear fellow, I don’t know. Why are you asking me?” He said, “Because, if I am a complete idiot, I shall become an aeronaut; but if not, I shall become a philosopher.” I told him to write me something during the vacation on some philosophical subject and I would then tell him whether he was a complete idiot or not. At the beginning of the following term he brought me the fulfillment of this suggestion. After reading only one sentence, I said to him: “No, you must not become an aeronaut.”²

When the war broke out in 1914, Wittgenstein was working on a manuscript that was to become

the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He served in the Austrian army and spent the better part of a year in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, where he finished writing this dense, aphoristic little work that deals with everything from logic to happiness. After the war, he gave away the fortune he had inherited from his father, designating part of it for the support of artists and poets. He considered that he had set out in the *Tractatus* the final solution of the problems addressed there and abandoned philosophy to teach school in remote Austrian villages. He lived, at that time and afterward, in severe simplicity and austerity.

His days as a schoolmaster did not last long, however, and for a time he worked as a gardener in a monastery. Then he took the lead in designing and building a mansion in Vienna for one of his sisters. Eventually, through conversations with friends, he came to recognize what he thought



“At some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description.”

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

were grave mistakes in the *Tractatus* and to think he might be able to do good work in philosophy again. He was invited back to Cambridge in 1929, where he submitted the *Tractatus*—by then published and widely read—as his dissertation.

He lectured there (except for a time during the Second World War) until shortly before his death in 1951. He published nothing else in his lifetime, though several manuscripts circulated informally. A second major book, *Philosophical Investigations*, was published posthumously in 1953. Since then, many other works have been published from notes and writings he left.

Subsequent developments leave no doubt that Wittgenstein is one of the century’s deepest thinkers. He is also one of the most complex and fascinating human beings to have contributed to philosophy since Socrates.³ Wittgenstein’s concerns early in life are fundamentally moral and spiritual; the most important question of all, he believes, is *how to live*. As we’ll see, however, he also thinks there is very little one can *say* about that problem. In fact, he thinks getting clear about what one *cannot* say is just

about the most important thing we can do. In the preface to the *Tractatus*, he writes,

The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence. (*Tractatus*, preface, 3)⁴

Wittgenstein’s thought here is a radical one indeed: The *posing* of the problems of philosophy is itself the problem! If we can just get clear about “the logic of our language,” these problems will *disappear*. They will be part of “what we cannot talk about.” About them we must be silent.*

How will getting clear about the logic of our language produce such a startling result? If we get clear about the logic of our language, Wittgenstein thinks, we will see what the *limits* of language are. We will also see that thinkers violate those limits whenever they pose and try to answer the sorts of problems we call philosophical.

Thus the aim of the book is to set a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e., we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense. (*Tractatus*, preface, 3)

You will recall that Kant sets himself to uncover the limits of rational knowledge and thinks to accomplish that by a critique of reason. The domain of knowledge is *phenomena*, the realm of possible experience. Beyond this are things-in-themselves (*noumena*), thinkable, perhaps, but unknowable by

*Those of you who know something of Zen may detect a familiar note here. Wittgenstein never discusses Zen—his concern is for problems, not schools of thought. But you would not go far wrong to think of him as a kind of Zen master for the West—especially in his later thought.

us. Knowledge, Kant believes, has definite limits; and we can know what these are.*

Wittgenstein's strategy in the *Tractatus* bears a family resemblance to this Kantian project, but it is more radical on two counts: (1) It aims to set a limit not just to *knowledge*, but also to *thought itself*; and (2) what lies on the other side of that limit is *not even thinkable*. Wittgenstein calls it "nonsense."

Wittgenstein's ingenious notion is that this limit setting must be done in language—and *from inside* language. He thinks he has found a way to draw the line between meaning and nonsense that doesn't require having to *say* what is outside the limit. One can set this limit, he thinks, from the inside, by working outward from the central *essence of language* through everything that can be said in language. What lies out beyond the boundary simply *shows itself* to be linguistic nonsense.

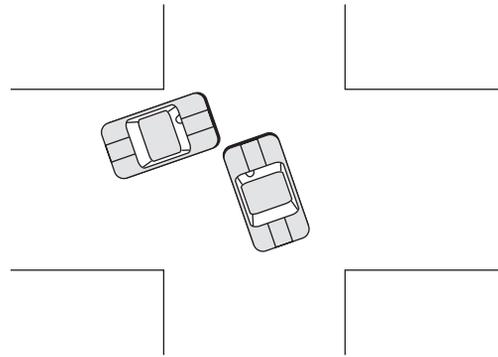
Here are the first two sentences in Wittgenstein's youthful work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

1. The world is all that is the case.
- 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.†

These sayings, announced so bluntly, may seem dark, but the key to unlock these mysteries is at hand: the new logic. Wittgenstein believes that he can use this logic to reveal the *essence of language*, and language *shows* us what the *world* must be. But this needs explanation.

PICTURING

What is language? We are told that Wittgenstein's thinking about this question takes a decisive turn when he sees a diagram in a magazine story about an auto accident. Let us suppose it looked like this:



This diagram, we can say, pictures a **state of affairs**. It may not, of course, accurately represent what really happened. Let us call the actual state of affairs the **facts**. We can then say that this is a picture of a **possible state of affairs**—a picture of what might have been the facts. (We can imagine the lawyers on each side presenting contrasting pictures of the accident.)

- 2.1 We picture facts to ourselves.
- 2.12 A picture is a model of reality.
- 2.131 In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects.
- 2.14 What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way.
- 2.141 A picture is a fact.

The preceding diagram is itself a fact: It is made up of actual elements (lines on the page) that are related to each other in certain ways. Moreover, each element in the diagram *represents* some object in the world (the edges of the streets, cars). So this fact pictures another (possible) fact: the way the objects here represented were actually (or possibly) related to each other at a certain time and place.

Every picture has a certain *structure*. By "structure," Wittgenstein means the way its elements are related to each other. Two pictures that are different in many ways might still have a similar structure. Imagine, for instance, a color photograph taken from a helicopter hovering over the corner just after the accident. The elements of this picture (blobs of color) are quite different from the elements of our drawing (black lines on a white

*A quick review of Kant's Copernican revolution and the idea of critique will bring this back to mind. See pp. 466–468.

†The *Tractatus* is arranged in short, aphoristic sentences, or small groups of sentences that express a complete thought. These sentences are numbered according to the following scheme. There are seven main aphorisms, 1, 2, 3, and so on; 1.1 is supposed to be a comment on or an explanation of 1; 1.11 is to play the same role with respect to 1.1. It must be admitted that this elegant scheme is sometimes difficult to interpret.

background). But if our drawing is accurate, the two pictures have similar structures: Their elements are related to each other in similar ways.

Furthermore, the two pictures not only have similar structures but also have something in common: what Wittgenstein calls **pictorial form**. Pictorial form is the *possibility* that a picture might actually have just this structure, that elements of some sort might actually be arranged in just this way. There needn't ever have been a picture, or a fact, with elements related to each other like this. But even if there never had been, there *could* have been. This possibility, actualized in our diagram, might also be actualized in many more pictures of the same state of affairs. All these pictures would have the *same* pictorial form.

But it is not just similar pictures that share the same form.

- 2.16 If a fact is to be a picture, it must have something in common with what it depicts. . . .
- 2.17 What a picture must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it—correctly or incorrectly—in the way it does, is its pictorial form.

Pictures and *what is pictured* by them must also share the same form.

So far we have been thinking of spatial pictures of spatial objects. But there are other kinds of pictures, too. We can, for instance, think of an orchestra score as a picture; this is a spatial picture (the notes are laid out next to each other on a page), but what it primarily pictures is not spatial, but temporal: the succession of sounds the orchestra plays in a performance. So while we tend to use the word “picture” rather narrowly, the concept applies very widely. Wherever there are objects in relation representing other objects, there is a Wittgensteinian picture. Every picture, Wittgenstein claims, is a *logical* picture. And logical pictures can depict the world (*Tractatus*, 2.19).

If we think of a certain two-dimensional *physical* space, such as a desktop, we can see that there are a variety of possible ways the books on it can be arranged. Analogously, we can think of **logical space**. Logical space consists of all the *possibilities*

there are for all the *objects* there are to be related to each other in all the *possibly different ways* there are. Logical space, then, comprises the form not only of all the actual states of affairs but also of all possible states of affairs. Given this notion of logical space, we can say,

- 2.202 A picture represents a possible situation in logical space.

Some pictures represent reality correctly and others don't. How can we tell whether what a picture tells us is true?

- 2.022 What a picture represents it represents independently of its truth or falsity, by means of its pictorial form.
- 2.223 In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality.
- 2.224 It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false.
- 2.225 There are no pictures that are true a priori.

You can't tell just by looking at our accident diagram whether it represents the accident correctly. And this is the case with *all* pictures, Wittgenstein says. A *true* picture is one that represents a possible state of affairs that is also actual. And actual states of affairs are *facts*. So a true picture depicts the facts. If there were a picture that was true a priori (independent of experience), you wouldn't have to “compare it with reality” to tell whether it was true; you could discover the facts just by examining the picture. But that, Wittgenstein says, is precisely what is not possible. To tell whether a picture is true (represents the facts correctly), you have to check its fit with the facts. In no case can we tell a priori whether a picture is true. This is an extremely important feature of pictures.*

*If Wittgenstein is right, rationalist attempts to say what the world must be like based on reason alone must be mistaken. No matter how “clear and distinct” one of Descartes' ideas is, for instance, one can't deduce from this that it is true. By stressing that there are no pictures that are true a priori, Wittgenstein expresses one version of empiricism. Compare Hume, pp. 443–444.

THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

Among the logical pictures, there is one sort that is of particular significance:

- 3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.
- 3.001 “A state of affairs is thinkable”: what this means is that we can picture it to ourselves.
- 3.01 The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world.

Our thoughts, then, are pictures, too. And, being pictures, they have all the characteristics of pictures we noted earlier: They are composed of elements in a certain arrangement, so they are facts with a certain structure; in virtue of that, they possess pictorial form; they represent possible states of affairs; and they share their pictorial and logical form with what they represent.

And now comes a crucial point:

- 3.1 In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses.

This is why Wittgenstein thinks he can set a limit to thought by finding the limits of language. It is in language that thought is expressed. If there are limits to what language can express, these will be the limits of thought as well.

A perceptible expression of a thought is a **proposition**—in fact, a sentence. But what is a sentence? Like all pictures, it is a fact, an arrangement of objects.

- 3.1431 The essence of a propositional sign is very clearly seen if we imagine one composed of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, and books) instead of written signs. Then the spatial arrangement of these things will express the sense of the proposition.

For instance, suppose you want to picture the fact that Sarah is standing to the east of Ralph. You might use a table to represent Sarah and a chair to represent Ralph. By putting the table to the east of the chair, you can picture the fact in question. This shows us, Wittgenstein says, “the essence of a propositional sign.” What he means is that written or spoken sentences are like this, too; they are made up of elements standing in certain relations.

But it is not obvious that they are like this.

- 4.002 Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it. It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is. Language disguises thought.

The *essence* of language is hidden, “disguised.” Yet it is something that can be disclosed, or shown. What reveals the hidden essence of language? *Logic*. Wittgenstein agrees with Russell that the superficial grammar of what we say may not be a good indication of the logic of what we say. And he holds that the new logic displays for us the internal structure, the essence of language. Still, he is not tempted to discard our natural languages (German or English, for example) in favor of some artificially created “ideal” language. Because the languages we speak are *languages*, they too must exemplify the essence of language. What we need is not to junk them in favor of some ideal, but to understand them.

- 5.5563 In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.

If they weren’t, they wouldn’t constitute a language!

But because “language disguises thought,” the logical structure of our language is not apparent. To bring it to light we need *analysis*. What sort of analysis, then, can we give of a sentence? We already have the elements of an answer in hand. A sentence is a picture, and we know that a picture, like all facts, is composed of elements set in a certain structure. So there must be elements and a structure in every sentence. It only remains to determine what they are.

Let’s consider again the sentence “Sarah is to the east of Ralph.” We saw that this could be represented by one object in relation to another, a table and a chair, for instance. The table would in effect be a kind of name for Sarah and the chair a name for Ralph. Wittgenstein concludes that the *only* elements needed in a language are names. Everything else—all the adjectives and prepositions, for instance—are inessential. If sentences were completely analyzed into their basic elements, all this

would disappear. We would be left with **names** in a structure.*

- 3.202 The simple signs employed in propositions are called names.
- 3.203 A name means an object. The object is its meaning . . .
- 3.26 A name cannot be dissected any further by means of a definition: it is a primitive sign.

As you can see, there would be a very great difference between the “look” of a completely analyzed propositional sign and our ordinary sentences. One might have a hard time even recognizing the complete analysis of a familiar sentence, particularly because the names in question have to be *simple* signs. What we take to be names in ordinary language are invariably complex; “George Washington,” for instance, is a shorthand expression for “the first president of the United States” (and many other descriptions). These descriptions themselves need to be analyzed if we are to understand how language pictures the world.

Sentences are essentially composed of names in a logical structure. And names are *simple*. They cannot be further analyzed or “dissected.” The meaning of a name cannot be given in a definition using other linguistic elements; the meaning of a name is the object it stands for.†

Now we are ready to go back to the beginning and understand those first mysterious propositions of the *Tractatus*. Just as sentences represent possible states of affairs, true sentences represent facts. True sentences, moreover, are made up of names, and names stand for objects. But a sentence isn’t just a list of names; it has an internal structure. So a fact isn’t just a jumble of things; it has the same structure

*Here is a rough analogy. Certain notations in mathematics are merely a convenience and could be eliminated without diminishing the science. For instance, x^3 is just $x \cdot x \cdot x$, and $4y$ can be defined as $y + y + y + y$. So Wittgenstein thinks names standing in certain relations will express whatever we want to express, though we usually use more economical means.

†It is worth noting that Wittgenstein does not offer any examples of these simple names in the *Tractatus*. He argues that such names must be implicit in our language and ultimately reachable by analysis; but just what they are—and what they name—is something of a mystery.

as the true sentence that pictures it. The **world**, then, is what is pictured in the totality of *true sentences*. The world is not a random collection of objects, but “the totality of facts, not of things” because it shares the same logical form as the true sentences.

- 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.

So the world is “all that is the case.”

But we do not yet see how to solve the main problem Wittgenstein poses: to set a limit to thought. To do this, we have to look more closely at the logic of propositions.* Ordinary language often disguises the logical form of our sentences, but analysis can reveal it. A complete analysis would leave us with sentences that could not be further analyzed—simple sentences sometimes called **atomic propositions**. They would have constituents (names in a structure of possibility), but they could not be further broken down into other sentences.

- 4.221 It is obvious that the analysis of propositions must bring us to elementary propositions which consist of names in immediate combination.

But how are these simple sentences related to each other? Wittgenstein holds that

- 5.134 One elementary proposition cannot be deduced from another.

What this means is that the truth-value of each is independent of the truth-value of any other. An elementary proposition can remain true while the truth-values of any others (or even all the others) change. This has consequences for our view of the world as well.

- 2.061 States of affairs are independent of one another.
- 2.062 From the existence or non-existence of one state of affairs, it is impossible to infer the existence or non-existence of another.

*We do not here distinguish sentences from propositions, though some philosophers do; a *proposition* is often thought of as an abstract feature several sentences can share when they mean the same thing. For example, “Mary hit Sally” and “Sally was hit by Mary” are different sentences but can be said to express the same proposition. Another example is “Snow is white” and “Schnee ist weiss.”

Recall once more the beginning of the *Tractatus*:

- 1.2 The world divides into facts.
 1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.

This view, called **logical atomism**, is reminiscent of Hume's remark that "all events seem entirely loose and separate."^{*} It means that relations existing between atomic facts cannot be *logical* relations. Given one true elementary proposition, it is never *necessary* that another one be true—or false.

There are, of course, logical relations between complex propositions. If we are given the truth-value of p and of q , we can infer something about the truth of the conjunction, p and q . To display these logical relations, Wittgenstein devises *truth tables*. A truth table for a complex proposition sets forth all the logically possible combinations of truth-values for its components and then displays the corresponding truth-values for the whole. Here, for example, are truth tables for conjunctive, disjunctive, and negative propositions.

p	q	p and q	p or q	not p
T	T	T	T	F
T	F	F	T	F
F	T	F	T	T
F	F	F	F	T

The two columns on the left set out the possibilities: They show us that two propositions may both be true, one or the other may be true, or neither one may be true. The truth table for the *conjunction* shows us that the conjunction is true only when both components are true and false otherwise. The truth table for the *disjunction* (an "or" statement) shows us that the disjunction is true unless both components are false. And the truth table for *negation* shows that negating a proposition changes its truth-value.

Propositions may be of any degree of complexity. There may be a very large number of elementary propositions in its makeup, and the logic of their relations may be extremely complicated. The truth table for a proposition such as

if [if (p and q) then not (r or s)]
 then (t if and only if not u)

is very large, but it is calculable. A computer could calculate it in a fraction of a second. The truth-value of a complex proposition is a function of the truth-values of the component parts; this feature is called *truth functionality*. The logic of the *Tractatus* is a truth-functional logic.

LOGICAL TRUTH

We noted that no pictures are true a priori. To determine whether a proposition is true or false, then, we must compare it to the world. From the point of view of logic, any elementary proposition might be true or it might be false. Such propositions are called *contingent*: Their truth depends on the facts, and there is never any necessity in the facts. The negation of any true elementary proposition always pictures a possibility. Suppose it is true that it is now raining where you are; then it is false that it is not raining there (see the preceding truth table), but it is not necessarily false. Given the configuration of the objects in the world, it is raining. But the objects of the world *could have been* otherwise configured.

We might like to ask, Just how far do these unrealized possibilities extend? How many possibilities are there? The answer is that this is what logic shows us. Our experience of the world can tell us what the actual facts are. Logic shows us what they *might be*. Logic is the science of the possible. And everything that it shows us is *necessary*.

Consider, for example, the truth table for a proposition like this:

Either it is raining or it is not raining.

p	not p	p or not p
T	F	T
F	T	T

The first column gives us the possibilities for the truth of p . The next column shows us what is the case when p is negated. And the third displays the results of disjoining the first two. The crucial thing to notice is that whatever the truth of p (and there are just these two possibilities), p or not p is true.

^{*}See p. 450.

In other words, there is no possibility that this proposition could be false. It is *necessarily* true; it is a **logical truth**. Such a proposition Wittgenstein calls a **tautology**.*

There are three important points to notice here.

1. The sentence represented by p or $\text{not } p$ is a complex, not an elementary, proposition; p may or may not be elementary, but in this complex proposition, it is set in a structure defined by the logical operators, “not” and “or.”† Only propositions that are logically complex in this way can be necessarily true or false.

2. Logical words such as “not,” “and,” “or,” and “if–then” are not *names*. These terms do not stand for objects; they have an entirely different function. They are part of the *structure* of sentences, not part of the content. Their function is to produce propositions from other propositions.

4.0312 My fundamental idea is that the “logical constants” are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts.

Wittgenstein illustrates this “fundamental idea” by considering double negation. There is a law of logic stating that negating the negation of a proposition is equivalent to asserting the proposition.

To say that *it is not the case that it is not raining* is equivalent to saying *that it is raining*. If the logical operator “not” were a name of something, the left side of this equivalence would picture something quite different from what the right side pictures (because it contains two “nots”), and the law would

*There are two limiting cases of propositions: *tautologies* and *contradictions*. While tautologies are necessarily true, contradictions are necessarily false. Tautologies do not rule out any possibilities, whereas contradictions rule them all out. In a sense, it is not strictly correct to call tautologies and contradictions “propositions” because propositions are pictures of reality; tautologies and contradictions do not picture states of affairs. They have a different role to play.

†A *logical operator* is a term that has the function of producing propositions from other propositions. Additional examples are “and” and “if-then.”

be false. But it doesn’t. And the proof of this is that a truth table for this principle is a tautology. So the logical operators are not names.

3. Why is it that the proposition p can tell us something? It can be informative because it picks out one of several possibilities and says, That is how things are. In picking out that possibility, it excludes another. It tells us something about the world by shutting out one possibility and allowing another; p or $\text{not } p$, by contrast, excludes nothing. It does not rule out any possibilities, so it does not *say* anything.

4.462 Tautologies and contradictions are not pictures of reality. They do not represent any possible situations. For the former admit *all* possible situations, and the latter *none*.

SAYING AND SHOWING

Wittgenstein draws a distinction that is very important to him: the distinction between **saying** and **showing**. Propositions do two things; they show something and they say something.

4.022 A proposition *shows* its sense. A proposition *shows* how things stand *if* it is true, and it *says that* they do so stand.

The proposition “All crows are black” shows or presents its sense. To grasp its sense is to understand what *would be* the case if it *were true*. So understanding the sentence is knowing *what would make it either true or false*. And that—its sense—is what a proposition *shows*.

But a proposition such as this not only shows its sense. It also *says* that things are this way, that crows actually are black. It makes an assertion and so is true or false, depending on the facts of the world. According to Wittgenstein, this is the most general propositional form, what all propositions have in common:

4.5 This is how things stand.

Propositions *show* (display) their sense; they *say* how things are.

But tautologies and contradictions *show* that they *say nothing*. If these limiting cases of propositions say

nothing, however, we might wonder whether they have any importance. Couldn't we just ignore them? No. They are of the very greatest importance because they show us what is possible and what is impossible. They display for us the structure of logical space.

But they have another importance as well.

6.1 The propositions of logic are tautologies.

What Wittgenstein here calls the “propositions” of logic are sometimes called the laws of logic. Consider as an example the very basic law called the *principle of noncontradiction*: No proposition can be both true and false. We can represent this as

not both p and not p.

If we write a truth table for this formula, we can see that it is a tautology—that is, necessarily true no matter what the truth-values of *p* are.

<i>p</i>	<i>not p</i>	<i>p and not p</i>	<i>not (p and not p)</i>
T	F	F	T
F	T	F	T

So the device of truth tables provides a justification for the laws of logic. Showing they are tautologies is equivalent to demonstrating their necessary truth. The truth table shows that there is no alternative to the laws of logic—no possibility that they might be false.* The *Tractatus* doctrine is that every principle of logical inference can be reduced to a tautology.†

Moreover,

6.113 It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol alone, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic.

*Of course this also shows that the laws of logic *say* nothing—that is, are *about* nothing. The laws of logic are purely formal and empty of content. And that is exactly why they can be noncontingently true.

†In fact this claim is not correct. Truth tables constitute a decision procedure for validity only in propositional logic, where the analysis of structure does not go deeper than whole propositions. Alonzo Church later proves that in quantificational (or predicate) logic, where the analysis reveals the internal structure of propositions, there is no such decision procedure.

What this means is that the propositions of logic can be known a priori. As we saw previously, we can know about the actual world only by comparing a proposition with reality. It is the mark of logical propositions that this is not only unnecessary, but also impossible; because they say nothing, they cannot say anything we could check out by examining the facts.

So the propositions of logic are one and all tautologies. And every valid form of inference can be expressed in a proposition of logic. This means that all possible logical relations between propositions can be known a priori. And in knowing them, we know the logical structure of the world—logical space, what Wittgenstein calls “the scaffolding of the world” (6.124).

SETTING THE LIMIT TO THOUGHT

Finally, we are ready to understand how Wittgenstein thinks he can show us the limits of language. An operation discovered by Wittgenstein can be performed on a set of elementary propositions to produce all the possible complex propositions (truth functions) that can be expressed by that set. Suppose we have just two elementary propositions, *p* and *q*. Using this operator, we can calculate that there are just sixteen possible truth functions combining them: *not p*, *not q*, *p or q*, *p and q*, *if p then q*, and so on. Now imagine that we were in possession of *all* the elementary propositions there are; using this operation on that enormous set, one could simply calculate all the possible truth functions there are and so *generate each and every possible proposition*.

Remembering the picture theory of meaning, we can see that this set of propositions pictures all the possible states of affairs there are and in all their possible combinations. So, it represents the entirety of logical space; it pictures everything that there could possibly be in reality—every “possible world.” Notice that there would be no proposition saying that these are all the possible facts. That these are all the facts there are *shows itself* in these propositions being all there are.

This very large set of propositions contains *everything it is possible to say*, plus the tautologies and

contradictions (which say nothing). Beyond this set of possible propositions lies only *nonsense*. So the limit of thought is indeed set from inside. Thought is expressed in language. The essence of language is picturing. And, given this, we can work out from the center to the periphery of language by means of logic. We do not need to take up a position outside the thinkable to draw a line circumscribing it. The limit *shows itself* by the lack of sense that pseudopositions display when we try to say something unsayable. It is indeed, then, only “in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense” (*Tractatus*, preface, 3).

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1. What is Wittgenstein’s aim in his *Tractatus*? And what motivates that aim—that is, why does he want to do that? If he had succeeded, would that have been significant?
 2. Explain how a picture is a “model of reality.” In what sense is a picture itself a fact?
 3. Explain the concepts of pictorial form, possible state of affairs, and logical space.
 4. Why are there no pictures that are true a priori?
 5. In what way does language “disguise” thought? What is the essential nature of a proposition?
 6. What is the meaning of a simple name? What are atomic propositions composed of? And why is this view correctly called “logical atomism”?
 7. What, then, is the world? And how is it related to logic? To language? To the truth?
 8. How do truth tables work? What is truth functionality?
 9. What domain does logic reveal to us? In what way does logic “show itself”?
 10. Contrast contingent truth with necessary truth. How do necessary truths reveal themselves in a truth table?
 11. Why do tautologies and contradictions “say nothing”? What do they “show”?
 12. Explain: “A proposition *shows* its sense” and it *says* “This is how things stand.” Give an example.
 13. How is the limit to thought set?
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VALUE AND THE SELF

We noted earlier that the young Wittgenstein’s concerns were mainly spiritual and moral, but we have just seen that the bulk of the *Tractatus* deals

with quite technical issues in logic and the philosophy of language. How are we to understand this apparent discrepancy? In a letter to a potential publisher for the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes,

The book’s point is an ethical one . . . : 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 one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY *rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly in place by being silent about it.⁵

What could this mean—that the really important part of the book is the part he did not write? Why didn’t he write it? Was he too lazy? Did he run out of time? Of course not. He didn’t write the important part because he was convinced it *couldn’t be written*. What is most important—the ethical point of the book—is something that *cannot be said*.

Nonetheless, and again paradoxically, he does have some things to “say” about this sphere, which he also calls “the mystical.”* Before we examine his remarks—brief and dark sayings, as many have noted—it will be helpful to set out a consequence of what we have already learned.

- 4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science.

The essence of language is **picturing**; and to picture is to say, “This is how things are.” The job of natural science is to tell us how things are. And if natural science could finish its job, we would then have a *complete* picture of reality.† Nothing—no object, no fact—would be left out. Science would include all the true propositions there are.

But natural science does not contain any propositions like these: one ought to do *X*; it is wrong to *Y*; the meaning of life is *Z*. It follows that these are

*It is obviously a problem how we are to understand what he “says” about the unsayable. He makes a suggestion we consider later.

†Compare Peirce’s similar conviction, pp. 599–600.

not really propositions at all; they look a lot like propositions, but, if Wittgenstein is right, they lie *beyond the limits of language*. Strictly speaking, they are unsayable. Those who utter them may be “just gassing.” Or they may be trying to say the most important things of all but failing because they “run against the boundaries of language.” In a “Lecture on Ethics” Wittgenstein gave in 1929 or 1930 he says,

This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. 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.⁶

Ethics “can be no science” because science consists of propositions, and

- 6.4 All propositions are of equal value.
- 6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case.
- 6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.

The vision of the *Tractatus* is one where everything in the world is flattened out, where nothing is of more significance than anything else because nothing is of any significance at all. In the world is no **value** at all, nothing of importance. There are just the facts.

So ethics “cannot be put into words,” and yet it is the most important thing of all. To understand this, we need to consider Wittgenstein’s views of the subject, the self, the “I.” He suggests that if you wrote a book called *The World as I Found It*, there is one thing that would not be mentioned in it: *you*. It would include all the facts you found, including all the facts about your body, your character, personality, dispositions, and so on. But you—the

subject, the one to whom all this appears, the one who *finds* all these facts—would not be found.*

- 5.632 The subject does not belong to the world; rather, it is a limit of the world.
- 5.641 The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world—not a part of it.

The self is not a *fact*. Wittgenstein calls it the “**limit of the world.**” Think about the relation between an eye and its visual field. The eye is not itself part of the visual field; it is not seen. In the same way, all content, all the facts, are “out there” in the world, which is the “totality of facts” (1.1).

- 5.64 Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.

*Among thinkers we have studied, this should remind you most of Kant. It is not identical with Kant’s view, however. Kant believes that, though we can’t come to know the nature of “this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks,” we can know a lot about it—that it is the source of the pure intuitions, the categories, and the a priori synthetic propositions, all of which explain the structure of the empirical world. For Wittgenstein, none of this is possible. The structure of the world is not dictated by the structure of rational minds because the structure of reality is just logic; and logic, consisting as it does of empty tautologies, neither has nor needs a source. Kant’s world needs a structure-giver because its fundamental principles are thought to be synthetic. But logic is analytic. It requires no source beyond itself because it has no content requiring explanation. This “scaffolding of the world” is neither a fact in the world, nor a fact about the world, nor a fact about rational minds. It is not a fact at all! It *shows itself*. Look again at the relevant discussions of Kant on pp. 481–482, including the diagram on p. 494.

†Compare Descartes’ struggles to overcome solipsism by proving the existence of God in *Meditation III*; see also pp. 382 and 402. Wittgenstein acknowledges there is a truth in solipsism, but such truth as there is already involves the reality of the world—of which the self is aware. So there is no need to *prove* the world’s existence—or that of God, about whom in any case nothing can be said.

- 5.62 For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest.*

What the solipsist wants to say is that only he exists and the world only in relation to himself. But this cannot be *said*. Why not? Because to say it would be to use language—propositions—to picture facts. And in picturing facts we are picturing the world, *not* the transcendental self to whom the world appears. So this self “shrinks to a point without extension.” And if we ask *what there is*, the answer is the world—“all that is the case” (*Tractatus*, proposition 1). And this is just the thesis of radical **realism**, the antithesis of solipsism.

The concern of ethics is good and evil. But, as we have seen, there is no room for good and evil in the world, where everything just is whatever it is. What application, then, do these concepts have? Ethics must concern itself with the self, the subject. But how? Here is a clue.

- 6.373 The world is independent of my will.
6.374 Even if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate, so to speak.

You may will to do something, such as write a check to pay a telephone bill. And usually you can do it. But it is clear that paying a bill by check depends on the cooperation of the world: The neurons have to fire just right, the nerves must transmit the neural signals reliably, the muscles must contract in just the right way, the bank must not suddenly crash, and so forth. And none of that is entirely in your control. That is what Wittgenstein means when he says the world is independent of my will. If you intend to pay your telephone bill, getting it done is, in a way, a “favour granted by fate.” In a strict sense, your willing *is* your action; what follows is just the result of your action.



“For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”

—*T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)*

GOOD AND EVIL, HAPPINESS AND UNHAPPINESS

Good and evil, then, cannot attach to any facts; they must pertain to the will. But what sort of willing would be good? Wittgenstein suggests an analogy with our attitude toward works of art:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.† This is the connection between art and ethics.

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as if it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. (*N*, 84c)⁷

Most of us, most of the time, do not occupy the position of the transcendental subject, even though that is what we essentially are—the limit of the world, not some entity within the world. We identify ourselves with a body, with certain desires, hopes, and fears—and our focus narrows. We suffer from tunnel vision and our world is no longer *the* world; it is merely the world of our concerns. But when we are lost in a great work of art—a Mozart symphony, a Shakespeare play, *The Lord of the Rings*—our world and the world of the artwork coincide. For a time we forget our selfish worries. The world of the story is all there is, and we are just a vanishing point to which it appears. Now Wittgenstein asks,

Is it the essence of the artistic way of looking at things, that it looks at the world with a happy eye? (*N*, 86e)

He doesn’t answer the question, but obviously means us to answer yes. And it’s true, isn’t it, that we are happy when we are caught up in aesthetic experience? What’s true in aesthetics is true in life.

- 6.421 (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)
6.43 If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language.

†From the viewpoint of eternity.

In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole.

The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.

Bad willing is dominated by selfish fears and hopes—worrying about our past and our future, living in the constricted world of our private concerns. So the bad person’s world narrows, wanes. But to live life from the viewpoint of eternity is to live in the present, and “whoever lives in the present lives without fear and hope” (N, 76e). A life lived *sub specie aeternitatis*, then, is the good life, and—in parallel with aesthetic experience—the ethical person is also the happy person. To live ethically is to be opened up to the world. When we identify with the transcendental self, our world waxes larger. We see it just as it is—a limited whole and the totality of facts, none of which is of such importance to us that it crowds out any other. *Our* world becomes *the* world. Although the *facts* of the world don’t change, it is really true that the world of the happy person is a different world from that of the unhappy. The happy experience the world *as it is*.*



“Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.”

—Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)

In a “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein describes an experience that he has had, which, he says, is an experience of “absolute value.”

I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “how extraordinary that the world should exist.”⁸

*Compare Heraclitus, who says, “To those who are awake the world order is one, common to all; but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.” The *Tractatus* might almost be read as an extended commentary on this and related sayings by Heraclitus, with logic—the “scaffolding” of the world—playing the role of the *logos*. See the discussion of these matters on pp. 17–20.

Now, according to the doctrine of the *Tractatus*, this can only be nonsense. One can wonder that the world contains kangaroos, perhaps; but there is no meaningful proposition that can express the “fact” that the world exists. Why not? Because this is no fact. Beyond the totality of true propositions—and these, remember, describe the totality of the facts, all that is the case—there is no further proposition that says, “Oh yes, and don’t forget, the world exists.” And yet that is what Wittgenstein very much wants to say. It points to the important part of the book—the part he couldn’t write. To “wonder at the existence of the world” is to experience it as a limited whole. And that is what Wittgenstein calls “the **mystical**.”

6.44 It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.

6.45 To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.

It is tempting to think that we can ask, Why does the world exist? or Why is there anything at all rather than nothing? But

6.5 When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.
The riddle does not exist.
If a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it.

The *answer* cannot be put into words because to say why the world exists would be to state a fact—and the world itself is already the totality of facts. So the *question*, “Why does the world exist?” which has exercised so many philosophical minds and has produced so many arguments for God’s existence, is *no question at all*. It seems like a question—but that is an *illusion* generated by language.

What we can say is *how* the world is. And that is the job of natural science. But

6.52 We feel that even when *all possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.

- 6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. . . .
- 6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.



“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.”

—*Albert Einstein (1879–1955)*

THE UNSAYABLE

If you have been following carefully, you have no doubt been wondering how Wittgenstein can manage to say all this that he so explicitly “says” cannot be said. This is indeed a puzzle we must address. What he has been writing is clearly philosophy. But if, as he (philosophically) says, the totality of true propositions is science, what room is there for philosophy?

- 4.111 Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. . . . Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in “philosophical propositions,” but rather in the clarification of propositions. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.

The key thought here is that philosophy is an activity; its business is clarification. It follows that we should not look to philosophy for *results*, for truths, or for “a body of doctrine.” To do so is to mistake the nature of philosophizing altogether. It has been one of the major failings of the philosophical tradition, Wittgenstein believes, that it has tried to produce “philosophical propositions”—that it has thought of itself as in the same line of work as science. But it is *altogether different* from science. It lies, one might say, at right angles to science. Wittgenstein’s view of his predecessors is severe:

- 4.003 Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only establish that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language. . . . And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all.
- 6.53 The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science—i.e., something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.

Plato and Aristotle, Hume and Kant all think they are revealing or discovering truth. But, if Wittgenstein is right, all of their most important claims are nonsensical. They aren’t even *candidates* for being true! Their theories are pseudoanswers to pseudoquestions. Just *gassing*. Such theories arise because these philosophers don’t understand the logic of our language; Wittgenstein thinks he has, for the first time, clearly set this forth.

But there is still a worry. Wittgenstein is himself not utilizing “the correct method” in writing the *Tractatus*. How, then, are we to take his own “propositions” here?

- 6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

To “see the world aright” is to see it from the viewpoint of eternity, from the point of view of the **philosophical self**. It is not too far-fetched to be reminded of that ladder the mystics talk about as leading to oneness with God. Having climbed Wittgenstein’s ladder, we too can wonder at the

THE LOGICAL POSITIVISTS

The *Tractatus* was painstakingly studied by a group of scientifically oriented philosophers in Vienna (a group that came to be known as the Vienna Circle). They admired its logic and philosophy of language, but had no sympathy for what Wittgenstein himself thought most important. These *logical positivists*, as they were called, began a movement that had a significant impact on scientists, on philosophy of science, and on the general public. **Logical positivism** is identified with three claims:

1. Logic and mathematics are *analytic*. The positivists accept Wittgenstein's analysis of the basic truths of logic: They are all tautologies and so are factually empty, providing no knowledge of nature. They are, however, very important because they provide a framework for moving from one true factual statement to another. That is, they license inferences, just as Wittgenstein says they do.

2. Meaningful propositions can be distinguished from meaningless ones by the **verifiability principle**. Here is Moritz Schlick's explanation of verifiability:

The meaning of a proposition consists, obviously, in this alone, that it expresses a definite state of affairs. One can of course, say that the proposition itself already gives this state of affairs.* This is true, but the proposition indicates the state of affairs only to the person who understands it. But when do I understand the meanings of the words which occur in it? These can be explained by definition. But in the definitions new words appear whose meanings . . . must be indicated directly: the meaning of a word must in the end be *shown*, it must be *given*.⁹

Wittgenstein never specifies what the elementary names stand for, but for the positivists these basic terms indicate items in perceptual experience—green, hot, hard, etc. This is what is

*Wittgenstein says, "A proposition *shows* its sense" (4.022).

"given." The bite of the verifiability principle is this: Unless you can point to a perceptual difference that a proposition's being true or false makes, it is *meaningless*. Clearly, positivism is a kind of empiricism.*

The positivists have no tolerance for a "good" kind of nonsense that might point to something important, but is "unsayable." They talk about the *elimination* of metaphysics. What is to be left as meaningful is science alone. Out with Plato's Forms, Aristotle's entelechy, Augustine's God, Descartes' mind, Kant's noumena, Hegel's Absolute Spirit—and Wittgenstein's mystical! Whatever cannot be verified by the senses is to be purged from human memory.†

3. Like Wittgenstein, they hold that the business of philosophy is the clarification of statements, but they are convinced that philosophy itself doesn't have to be classified as nonsense. Clarification has certain definite results: It issues in definitions. Much of what the positivists write concerns what they call "the logic of science," so they are interested in the concepts of *law* and *theory*, of *hypothesis* and *evidence*, of *confirmation* and *probability*. Under their influence, the *philosophy of science* becomes a recognized part of philosophy, and most university philosophy departments now teach courses in that area.

The fate of ethical statements on positivist principles is particularly interesting. What kind of statement is a judgment that stealing is wrong? In an explosive book titled *Language, Truth, and Logic*, the English philosopher A. J. Ayer sets out the positivist view of ethics. Ethical concepts, he says, are "mere pseudoconcepts."

Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You

*Like David Hume, the positivists want to base all non-analytic knowledge on the data our senses provide. See again Hume's rule, "No impression, no idea" (p. 444). It has been said, with some justice, that logical positivism is just Hume plus modern logic.

†Compare Hume's trenchant remarks at the end of his *Enquiry* (pp. 463–464).

THE LOGICAL POSITIVISTS

stole that money.” In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, “You stole that money,” in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.

If I now generalize my previous statement and say, “Stealing is wrong,” I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written “Stealing money!!”—where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed.¹⁰

This is pretty radical stuff, at least as judged by the philosophical tradition.* Socrates’ search for the nature of piety, courage, and justice must be misguided. Plato’s Form of the Good, Aristotle’s virtues as human excellences, Epicurus’ pleasure, the Stoics’ will in harmony with nature, Augustine’s ordered loves, Hobbes’ social contract, Kant’s categorical imperative, Mill’s greatest happiness principle—all these, if Ayer is right, are just expressions of personal preferences, no more than how these individuals *feel* about things.†

*But see the motto of Protagoras on p. 62 and the relevance of rhetoric to justice as developed by Gorgias, Antiphon, and Callicles, discussed on pp. 64–67. A major portion of rhetoric might be thought of as techniques for “expressing moral sentiments” in persuasive ways.

†Note that the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* would think this turn of events about as awful as could be imagined. While he would agree that value is not a matter of fact, he locates ethics—what really matters—in the life of the *transcendental self*. Positivist ethics construes



“The idea that ‘good’ is a function of the will stunned philosophy with its attractiveness, since it solved so many problems at one blow: metaphysical entities were removed, and moral judgments were seen to be, not weird statements, but something much more comprehensible, such as persuasions or commands or rules.”

—Iris Murdoch (1919–1999)

It is important to note that this **emotivist theory of ethics**, with its dramatic contrast between the factually meaningful and the meaningless, depends on the adequacy of the verifiability principle. But there are problems with that principle. Suppose we ask, What sort of statement is the principle itself? There seem to be three possibilities, none of them satisfactory. (1) It doesn’t itself seem to be verifiable by sense experience, so it cannot be a *factual* statement. (2) It doesn’t seem to capture the ordinary sense of meaningfulness, since there are lots of unverifiable statements we think we understand perfectly well: For example, “The last word in Caesar’s mind, unuttered, before he died, was ‘tu.’” So it doesn’t seem to be a *definition*. (3) If it is taken as a *recommendation*, it is open to the objector to simply say (on positivist grounds), “Well, I feel different about it.”

We need a better theory of meaning.

value as no more than the way some *empirical self* happens to feel. What greater difference could there be? From Wittgenstein’s point of view, if Ayer is right, all we ever get in morality is “just *gassing*.” See p. 629.

existence of the world, experience happiness and beauty—and do our science. But we would always have to keep in mind the last “proposition” of the *Tractatus*:

7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Yet, the things we must “pass over in silence” are the most important of all.

-
1. Why couldn’t the “important” part of the *Tractatus* be written?
 2. Why must the sense of the world lie outside the world? Why cannot there be “propositions of ethics”?
 3. Suppose you wrote a book entitled *The World as I Found It*. Would you appear in the book?
 4. How does solipsism coincide with pure realism?
 5. In what way is the world of the happy person different from the world of the unhappy person? What does it mean to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis*?
 6. Could a person be absolutely safe? (Compare Socrates in his defense to the jury in *Apology* 41c–d, p. 129.)
 7. What is the “mystical”? Why does it have absolutely nothing to do with the “occult”?
 8. Why won’t science solve the problems of life? Why does “the riddle” not exist?
 9. What is philosophy? What is its “correct method”? What is the ladder analogy?
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Philosophical Investigations

The analysis of language in terms of the new logic yields some impressive results, but not everyone is convinced that this is the way to go. Logical atomism has some problems (see the following section). And the ambitious program of the logical positivists doesn’t seem to be working out even for their favorite case of meaningful discourse: science.

These problems suggest that instead of looking to some “ideal” language inspired by logic, we might be better advised to pay closer attention to how our own language actually functions. Maybe it’s not that language itself is to blame so much as that we—philosophers particularly—misuse it or misdescribe its use. Perhaps all goes smoothly

when we talk about minds or truth in everyday life, but when the philosopher reflectively asks himself, “Just what is a mind?” or “What is truth?” things start to go all wobbly.

This suspicion is deepened by the later Wittgenstein. In the preface to his youthful work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein had written,

The *truth* of the thoughts that are here set forth seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe myself to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems. (*I*, Preface, 5)

With great consistency and in perfect conformity with his inexpressible ethics, he then leaves philosophy. As the years pass, though, he engages in conversations with other philosophers and scientists, including members of the Vienna Circle. Eventually he comes to believe that he has not, after all, found “the final solution” of all the problems he had addressed. The vision expressed in his *Tractatus* is powerful and elegant, but Wittgenstein gradually becomes convinced that it is not *true*. In the first fifty pages of *Philosophical Investigations* he subjects his earlier views to devastating criticism.*

There are certainly difficulties in the *Tractatus*. For one thing, his view that logic consists solely of tautologies is proved by Alonzo Church to be too simple. Furthermore, there is that strange consequence of the picture theory—that all his own philosophical propositions are nonsensical, despite the fact that many of us seem to understand at least some of them rather well. But it is neither of these things that moves Wittgenstein to criticize the doctrines of the *Tractatus*. He begins to feel difficulties in connection with its central thesis—that the essence of language is picturing, together with the correlated doctrine of names and simple objects. Think of requests like “Shut the door,” or

*Published posthumously in 1953, two years after his death, *Philosophical Investigations* is written in two parts, the first of which is organized in numbered sections, most of which are a paragraph or two long. Like the *Tractatus*, it is a difficult book, but in quite a different way. Whereas you can read a sentence in the *Tractatus* half a dozen times and still be puzzled about what it means, the *Investigations*, for the most part, reads with some ease. But then you find yourself asking, What does this all amount to?

exclamations like “Phooey!” Bits of language? Of course. But what is their logical form? And of what simple names are they composed? And what possible states of affairs do they picture? Just to ask such questions shows up a deficiency in the *Tractatus* doctrine. Even if you were to grant that the picture theory correctly analyzes an important part of language (e.g., the propositions of natural science), it would be at best only partial; it would not reach the essence of language.

PHILOSOPHICAL ILLUSION

Wittgenstein allows that his *Tractatus* does express a possible way of seeing things. We can climb the ladder of his “nonsensical” propositions and get a certain vision of things. He had said in the *Tractatus* that we would then “see the world aright” (*Tractatus* 6.54). But he now thinks this way of seeing things is a mistake. Yet, “mistake” is not quite the right word; it is more like an illusion, he suggests, or even a superstition that held him in thrall (*PI*, 97, 110).¹¹ But how could he have been so deceived? What is the source of this illusion that the *Tractatus* presents with such clarity and power?

We sometimes find that others misunderstand what we mean when we talk to them. These misunderstandings can often be removed by paraphrasing, by substituting one form of expression for another. It is often helpful to use simpler terms to explain what we mean:

This may be called an “analysis” of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart. (*PI*, 90)

But now it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our forms of language, and so a *single* completely resolved form of every expression. That is, as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, unanalyzed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light. When this is done the expression is completely clarified and our problem is solved.

The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was committed to all these notions: to the idea that there is “something hidden” in our ordinary language that can be “completely clarified” by a “final analysis” into “a *single* completely resolved form of every

expression.” The slide to these conclusions is so subtle we scarcely notice it, but it is a slide into illusion.

Language, propositions—these seem mysterious, strange. We are encouraged to suppose that there *must* be an essence of language—one essence—because it is all called by one name, “language.” Further, we assume that every instance of it must have something in common with all the rest. This is a supposition that goes way back; Socrates, in asking about piety, is not content with answers that give him examples of pious behavior. What he wants is the essence of piety—that is, something common to all examples that *makes* them instances of piety.*

About this seductive idea, Wittgenstein now says,

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. (*PI*, 115)

This picture is not a *Tractatus* picture. It is a picture in an ordinary, though metaphorical, sense, as when we say, “I can’t help but picture her as happy.” It is a picture of language as a *calculus*, as something possessing “the crystalline purity of logic” (*PI*, 107). Captive to a picture, we cannot shake off the conviction that language *must* have an essence, that hidden in the depths of our ordinary sentences must be an exact logical structure in which simple names stand for simple objects. Logic, which is the “scaffolding of the world” (*Tractatus* 6.124), *requires* it. Propositions *must* have pictorial form and an isomorphism with what they picture. Never mind that they don’t actually look like that! That is the way it *must* be—we think.

But that is just what is wrong with the *Tractatus* vision. It doesn’t *describe* the way language works; it *prescribes*. Once we become aware of that, we can also see our way out of the illusion. We can get out of the grip of this superstition by confining ourselves solely to *description*.

We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description

* See p. 112.

gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings. . . . The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (*PI*, 109)

Note that philosophy is still something quite different from the sciences: Its problems are “not empirical.” And philosophy’s job is not to produce theories or explanations. Philosophy is still an activity of clarification rather than a set of results. But Wittgenstein no longer thinks that all philosophical problems can be solved at once, by analyzing “the essence of language.” We must proceed in a piecemeal fashion, working patiently at one problem after another by “looking into the workings of our language,” by “arranging what we have always known.” It is not “new information” that we need to resolve philosophical problems. We need the ability to find our way through the many temptations to misunderstand.

When philosophers use a word—“knowledge,” “being,” “object,” “I,” “proposition,” “name”—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—

What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (*PI*, 116)

The notion of a *language-game* is one we will have to examine closely. It is clear that philosophical theories of knowledge, reality, the self, and the external world are regarded with great suspicion by Wittgenstein, just as they were in the *Tractatus*. Such theories, we may imagine, he still regards as “just *gassing*.” But the reason for suspicion is now different. The words that are being used in these theories—“know,” “object,” “I,” “name”—all are words with common uses. Wittgenstein now suspects that as they are used in these philosophical theories, the words lose their anchors in the activities that make them meaningful. They float free, without discipline, and lose their meaning; yet, it is just *because* they have no anchors in concrete life

that they seem to indicate deep problems. This appearance of depth, however, is just part of the illusion. What is needed is to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”

Philosophical problems are baffling:

A philosophical problem has the form: “I don’t know my way about.” (*PI*, 123)

But the solution is not to construct a philosophical theory about the baffling topic. What we need is to clarify the language in which the problem is posed.

Philosophy 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. (*PI*, 124)

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. (*PI*, 126–128)

This is surely a radical view of philosophy, as radical in its way as that of the *Tractatus*. According to this view, the aim of the philosopher is not to solve the big problems about knowledge, reality, God, the soul, and the good. These are not real problems at all; they arise only out of misunderstanding our language. The task of the philosopher is to unmask the ways in which these problems are generated and, by putting “everything before us” and “assembling reminders,” bring us back to home ground. What is the purpose of the reminders? To show us how the language in which these “deep” questions are framed is actually used in those human activities in which they get their meaning. If we understand that, we will be freed from the temptation to suppose these are real questions. Wittgenstein offers the following rule:

Don’t think, but look! (*PI*, 66)

Here are two more striking remarks on this theme.

The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness. (*PI*, 255)

What is your aim in philosophy? To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. (*PI*, 309)

The first remark suggests that philosophy is itself the illness for which it must be the cure. There is that old saying by Bishop Berkeley about

raising a dust and then complaining that we cannot see. The posing of philosophical problems, Wittgenstein is saying, is like that. Being possessed by a philosophical problem is like being sick; only it is we who make ourselves sick—confused, trapped, perplexed by paradoxes. We foist these illusions on ourselves by misunderstanding our own language. It *easy* to do that because language itself suggests these illusions to us. Philosophy, then, is a kind of therapy for relieving mental cramps.

With the second remark we get the unforgettable image of a fly having gotten itself trapped in a narrow-necked bottle, buzzing wildly about and slamming itself against the sides of the bottle, unable to find the way out that lies there open and clear if only the fly could recognize it. We get into philosophical problems so easily but then can't find our way out again.

“But *this* isn't how it is!”—we say, “Yet *this* is how it has to be!” (PI, 112)

Just like the fly in the bottle! It is Wittgenstein's aim to show the fly the way out of the bottle—to help us put philosophical problems behind us, not to devise theories to solve them.

LANGUAGE-GAMES

Let us look in more detail at the way Wittgenstein uses the prescription “Don't think, but look!” in criticizing the characteristic theses of the *Tractatus*. We begin with one of the most basic notions in that work, the notion of a *name*.

Wittgenstein makes use of a device he calls “language-games.” A **language-game** is an activity that involves spoken (or written) words. These words have a natural place in the activity; it is this place, the role they play in the activity, that makes them mean what they do mean. It is sometimes helpful, Wittgenstein suggests, to imagine a language-game more primitive than the ones we engage in. Here is such a primitive language-game.

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block,”

“pillar,” “slab,” “beam.” A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language. (PI, 2)

The words in this language-game can very naturally be thought of as names. To each word there corresponds an object. Here we have an example of a language that the theory of the *Tractatus* fits. This theory

does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises “Is this an appropriate description or not?” The answer is: “Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe.” (IPI, 3)

In the following language-game, the *Tractatus* view that names exhaust the meaningful symbols shows itself to be inadequate—if we only *look*.

I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked “five red apples.” He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked “apples”; then he looks up the word “red” in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers . . . up to the word “five” and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.—It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. (PI, 1)

What is interesting in this little example is the very different way in which the shopkeeper operates with each of the three words. “Apple” seems to be a name, like “slab.” But what of “red”? And, even more significantly, what of “five”? Both words are used in ways completely different from “apple” and completely different from each other. Can they all be *names*?* Suppose we ask,

But what is the meaning of the word “five”?

—No such thing was in question here, only how the word “five” is used. (PI, 1)

*Consider again Plato's theory of Forms (pp. 152–155). Is Plato someone who falls into the trap of thinking that meaningful words are all names and that there must be something each one names? Or think of Locke on general terms, pp. 428–430.

The point of this language-game, this little “re-minder,” is to cure us of the hankering to ask about the meaning of this word, especially since we are inclined to think its *meaning* must be an *object* analogous to apples—only a very mysterious object. We are brought back to the way in which we actually *use* the word. We say the numbers and take an apple for each number. And there is nothing deep or mysterious here to puzzle us. Note that this example shows us Wittgenstein doing just what he says the job of the philosopher is: dispelling puzzlement by bringing words “back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*PI*, 116). There is no explanation given, just description. Wittgenstein is merely “arranging what we have always known” (*PI*, 109). The quest for general explanations is likely to lead us into illusions about meaning and language—illusions into which the author of the *Tractatus* was led.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had held that the proposition was the basic unit and that each proposition pictured a possible state of affairs. Now he asks,

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols,” “words,” “sentences.” And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all: but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. . . .

Here the term “language-*game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (*PI*, 23)

Think how different from each other these language games are: giving orders, describing an object, testing a hypothesis, playacting, making a joke, translating, asking, cursing, greeting, praying. In all these ways—and more—we use language. It *is* absolutely unhelpful—and worse, dangerous!—to suppose that language is everywhere all alike. It leads into pseudoproblems and illusions, the sorts of dead ends where we are likely to say, This isn’t how it *is*, but this is how it *must be*.

1. How is philosophy now conceived? What are “philosophical problems” like? What is to happen to them?
2. What is a language-game? What does Wittgenstein think the notion can do for us, and why does he think this is important?
3. How does the example of shopping for five red apples undermine some basic theses of the *Tractatus*?
4. What now happens to the notion of an essence of language? How many kinds of sentences are there, anyway?

NAMING AND MEANING

We are tempted to think, as the *Tractatus* suggests, that “a name means an object. The object is its meaning.” We are tempted to think that naming is fundamental and that the rest of language can be built on that foundation. We teach the child “ball,” “blue,” “water.” But how do we do this? We present a ball to a child and repeat “ball,” “ball.” This might lead us to form a general theory that says names are learned via such **ostensive definitions**—basically by pointing to objects.

But if we *look* at what is going on, we see that this cannot be right. If someone tries to teach you what a watch is (supposing you don’t know) by pointing to the device on his or her wrist, you may take it that “watch” means a color, a material, a device for keeping time, or an indicated direction. An ostensive definition, Wittgenstein says, “can be variously interpreted in *every* case” (*PI*, 28). He does not deny that such ostensive definitions can sometimes be useful. But because such definitions can always be understood in a variety of ways, they cannot be the key to the essence of language. They cannot give us a *foundation* on which language can be built.

This person could help you out by saying, “This device on my wrist is a watch.” But that presumes, as you can clearly see, that you are already in possession of large portions of the language. You must already understand “device” and “on” and “wrist” if what the person says is going to be helpful. Language, then, cannot *begin* with names ostensively defined, and a name cannot have its meaning provided independent of other bits of language. And that means an ostensive definition is no help in getting into the game in the first place.

But that leaves us with a problem. How do we ever get started with language, if acquiring the use of even such a basic name as “ball” presupposes an understanding of language in general? It seems impossible. Again Wittgenstein advises us to *look*. And if we look, what we see is that teaching a child the basic words is simply *training*. We set up “an association between the word and the thing” (PI, 6). It’s like teaching your dog to come when you say “Come!”

Suppose that such an “association” is established between “apple” and apples by “training” little Jill in that way. Does she now *understand* the word “apple”? Well, does your dog understand “Come!” when it comes at that command? The process is similar, Wittgenstein suggests, and so are the results. Jill, of course, has only the most rudimentary understanding at that stage. The difference between Jill and Rover is that Jill can eventually go on to learn a lot more about apples by internalizing an ever more complex language in which to talk about them. Understanding comes in degrees. Jill is capable of understanding more than Rover, but they start in the same way. It is not by definitions (ostensive or not) that we enter the gate of language, but by *training*.

These simple associations that training sets up are not, however, themselves the meanings of words. But if neither the object named nor an association between a word and the object is the meaning of a name, what can meaning be?

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)

The meaning of a word (by and large) is its having a specific place in a particular language-game, a certain form of life. This “place” is defined by how the word is related to other words, to activities and objects—and the positions it can occupy in sentences. To understand a word, you have to understand what *role* it plays in the language-games where it has its home—what jobs it does. The **meaning** is the **use**. And that is why it is important not to think, but to *look*—look and see how a word is actually being used.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

These are strong criticisms of the *Tractatus*. But we need to ask again: Is it really true that there is no essence of language? Wittgenstein asks us to consider an example: *games*.

I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but *look and see* whether there is any-thing common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!—Look for example at board-games. . . . When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all “amusing”? . . . Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience [solitaire]. In ball-games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! . . .

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: “games” form a family. (PI, 65–67)

Recall that at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition, dominating it with the kind of power that only unexamined assumptions can have, stands Socrates with his questions: What is piety? Courage? Justice? And what Socrates wants is a definition, the essence of the thing. What he wants to discover are those features that (1) any act of justice has, (2) any nonjust act lacks, and (3) *make* the just act just. Are acts A and B both just? Then it seems natural to suppose that there must be something they have in *common*, some *essential*

characteristic they share, some feature by virtue of which they are just. Unless we understand what that is, we will not understand justice.*

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact this assumption has had. It certainly lies beneath the *Tractatus* quest for the essence of language; it accounts for the author's certainty that there must be such a thing. But now that we are looking rather than thinking, we discover that, in very many cases, there is no such thing. There is no essence of games or of language. And almost surely there is no essence of justice or piety. All are matters of instances, examples, and cases loosely related to each other by crisscrossing and overlapping similarities. What we find when we look are **family resemblances**. What we find is exactly the kind of thing that Socrates so curtly dismisses when it is offered by Euthyphro!

It follows from this new picture that there may be no sharp boundaries for many of our concepts.

How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: "This and *similar things* are called 'games.'" And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is? But this is not 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.) (*PI*, 69)

Frege compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it.—But is it senseless to say: "Stand roughly there"? (*PI*, 71)

We may understand Wittgenstein's point more clearly by examining another example. What, people sometimes ask, is a religion? Is belief in a supreme being essential to religion? Then early Buddhism is not a religion. How about belief in life after death? But early Judaism seems to lack that feature. Some people suggest that communism is

essentially religious in character. But how can that be, if it lacks so many of the features of Presbyterianism? If we search for the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient to define "religion," we will probably search in vain. But suppose we proceed this way: Do you want to know what a religion is? Consider Roman Catholicism; this and similar things are called "religions." To treat the question this way is to think of "religion" as a family resemblance concept.

Someone might ask, "How similar to Roman Catholicism does something have to be if it is to qualify as a religion?" We would be right to reply that there is no exact answer to that question. And the absence of a clear boundary does not mean that the concept is unusable, any more than "Stand roughly there" is a useless instruction just because it isn't perfectly precise.*

When he was writing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thought that every proposition had to have a determinate sense and that therefore a completely analyzed proposition would be free of all vagueness and ambiguity. How could it be otherwise, when it was composed of simple names, each standing for a simple object? But if we look, without seeking to prescribe how it *must* be, we see that language is not everywhere exact, like a logical calculus. Like "game," many of our concepts are governed by relationships of family resemblance rather than essences.† And they are none the worse for that. So Wittgenstein assembles his reminders of how our language actually functions, bringing us back to the activities (forms of life) in which it does its varied jobs. And in so doing, he shows us the way out of various fly bottles we get ourselves into by misunderstanding the logic of our language.

*Notice how this sort of thing undercuts Descartes' requirement (*Meditation IV*) that we should assent only to ideas that are clear and distinct. Most of our ideas, Wittgenstein holds, are not clear and distinct. And that is not something we should try to fix. On the contrary, our concepts are "in order" as they are.

†But not all. We do have concepts that are governed by strict rules. Many scientific concepts—"triangle," for example, or "force"—are like that. We should not think of the family resemblance claim as a *theory* about the essence of meaning!

**Euthyphro* on piety is a good example. For other examples, see Plato on knowledge (pp. 149–152) and Descartes on clear and distinct ideas (p. 362).

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1. Why cannot ostensive definitions be basic in language use? And if they are not, how do language-games get started? (How do children learn a language?)
 2. Explain the motto “The meaning of a word is its use in the language.”
 3. Must usable concepts have sharp boundaries? What are family resemblances? What are we supposed to learn from the example of games?
-

The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought

As you can see, virtually every one of the principal theses of the *Tractatus* is undermined and rejected by the later Wittgenstein.

- There is an essence of language.
- The essence of language is picturing facts.
- There is a complete and exact analysis of every sentence.
- The basic elements of language are names.
- The meaning of a name is its bearer.
- Names are simple.
- Names name simple objects.
- The world is pictured as the totality of facts in logical space.

Other thinkers have changed their ways of thinking—Augustine after his conversion to Christianity, Kant after reading Hume—but Wittgenstein's turnabout is as deep and dramatic as any. Is there any line of continuity that one can trace through this shift? Let us suggest that three interrelated themes and a motivation persist.

The first theme is an opposition, amounting almost to a personal revulsion, to what Wittgenstein calls “just *gassing*.” A more contemporary term for this phenomenon might be “bullshitting.”¹² The second is the idea that one might “set a limit to thought” (*Tractatus*, preface, 3). The third is the notion that some things cannot be said, but only shown. The motivation that persists is a quest for a life that is worth living.

1. The whole point of the *Tractatus*, you will recall, was to “set a limit to thought” by delineating what can and cannot be said. Whatever can be said can be said clearly. The rest is “nonsense,” which we

must “pass over in silence” (*Tractatus*, preface, 3). Wittgenstein felt that most talk about the meaning of life, about value and God and the soul, was “just *gassing*”—an attempt to put into words questions and answers that cannot be put into words. But it is crucial to remember that he also thought that these matters were *far and away the most important*. The revulsion he felt was grounded in his conviction that prattle about them demeans them, takes them out of the realm in which they properly exist. A good man, for instance, is not someone who *talks* about goodness, but someone who “shows” it, displays it in his life. “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words” (*Tractatus* 6.421). But it can be put into a life!

2. His project—to set a limit to thought by identifying nonsense, *gassing*, and bullshit—is still a driving force in Wittgenstein's later thought. The aim has not changed, but the method by which he thinks it can be done has changed. In the *Tractatus*, he tried to do it all at once—with one stroke, as it were—by constructing a *theory* of language and meaning that would expose nonsense for what it is. But now having come to see that he had been prescribing to language, that he had been held captive by the picture of language as a logical calculus, he gives up the attempt to create a theory. Instead, he “assembles reminders” (*PI*, 127) that bring us back from nonsense to the actual uses of language in those varied activities (forms of life) in which words get their meaning. This is something that cannot be done all at once; it requires the careful examination of case after case where language “goes on holiday” (*PI*, 38) and misleads us. And so we get the little stories, the language-games, the questions and answers, and the multitudinous examples of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

3. The *Tractatus* tells us there are some things that cannot be said. These things *show* themselves. Among them are these:

- the logical structure of language (which displays itself in every proposition);
- the nature of logical truth (manifest in tautologies);
- the relation of the philosophical subject to the world (the coincidence of solipsism and realism);

- the happiness of the good person (who has a different world from that of the unhappy person);
- “the mystical” (that the world is).

Are there still, in *Philosophical Investigations*, things that can only be shown, not said? There are, and one suspects they are still the most important things. But it is no longer so easy to list them. Rather, the *showing* has become identical with the style of the book. Even the samples we have examined display a most unusual style.* The book is full of questions (often unanswered), conversations between the author and an interlocutor, instructions (“Compare . . . ,” “Imagine . . .”), little stories, suggestions, reminders, and so on. Surely no other book in the history of philosophy contains so many questions! Wittgenstein is reported to have said that he thought an entire book of philosophy could be written containing nothing but *jokes*.

The aim of all this is still, as in the *Tractatus*, to get us to “see the world aright” (*Tractatus*, 6.54). But that no longer means a flight of the metaphysical self to that point without extension from which the entire world looks like a limited whole of valueless facts. Seeing the world aright now means to see it, and language especially, in all its lush richness. And we are invited to see it that way—or, better, to let it *show itself* to us—through the very structure of the book. It is no accident that in the preface Wittgenstein compares his book to an album of sketches:

The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of . . . long and involved journeyings.

. . . Thus this book is really only an album. (*PI*, ix)

We could compare what Wittgenstein is doing here to the work of an artist. He is trying in as many ways as he can to help us appreciate the

“landscapes” of our language so that we no longer get lost in them, confused by them. The book *shows* us a way of investigating puzzles and problems.

It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways.

For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. . . .

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. . . . Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.

There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies. (*PI*, 133)

Here we come to the motivation that persists from the early work through the last. By bringing our words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use, he wants to show us how to be *content* here—in the everyday. It’s not just that we misunderstand our language; because language structures a form of life, we also fail to understand our *lives*. We are *driven* to these illusions because we are not satisfied with our lives. Metaphysical theories are a kind of compensation, an attempt to find peace *beyond the world* because we have not been able to find it here. (The *Tractatus*, too, was an attempt to find peace that way.)*

Wittgenstein wants to show us a form of life that is so worthwhile we can simply stop doing philosophy when we want to. As in the *Tractatus*, “philosophical” problems should simply *disappear*. But the form of life shown us in the *Investigations* is not something “unheard-of.” It is our own life! A student asks a Zen master, “What must I do to gain enlightenment?” The master asks, “Have you eaten?” “Yes,” says the student. “Then wash your bowl.”

*One is reminded of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, or of Nietzsche’s aphorisms, or maybe of Heraclitus or Zhuangzi, or perhaps of the stories about how Zen masters proceed. It is not accidental that the earlier book is called a *treatise* and the later book *investigations*. The former suggests completeness and a theoretical character that is altogether lacking in the latter.

*Compare Nietzsche on “real worlds,” pp. 570–571. See also Kierkegaard’s characterization of the “Knight of Faith,” pp. 530–531. Wittgenstein once said that Kierkegaard was the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century. The relation between the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith in Kierkegaard is remarkably like the relation between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. It is significant, I think, that Wittgenstein wanted them printed together, though this has not happened.

These investigations are profoundly subversive of the traditional ways of doing philosophy. Doctrines found in Plato, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and so on are undercut, not by *argument* but by the examples, stories, questions, and language-games—all designed to get us to see things in a different (though familiar) light. Wittgenstein aims to show us how to give up the temptation to formulate philosophical *theories* about reality, mind, perception, or understanding. He aims to show the fly the way out of the bottle.

There is a theme in Wittgenstein's later work, closely connected to the idea of a language-game, that we can perhaps pull out. It is a theme directly relevant to a matter that has come up repeatedly in our account of the great conversation: the question about relativism. Recall that this issue originates in the dispute between Socrates and the Sophists (see those earlier chapters) and is expanded on by most of our philosophers. Can Wittgenstein throw any new light on that old perplexity?

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1. What continuities exist between the thoughts of the early and the late Wittgenstein?
 2. How has the project of setting a limit to thought changed in Wittgenstein's later philosophy?
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Our Groundless Certainty

Think about the ubiquitous arrow, indicating to us which way to go—to the exit, on the one-way street, to Philadelphia. How do you know which way you are being directed to go? Why, for instance, don't you go toward the tail of the arrow? Or why don't you go in different directions on different days of the week?

What has the expression of a rule—say a sign-post—got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here?—Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it. (*PI*, 198)

Training again. Rather like we train a dog to heel, perhaps. And because we *all* go the way the arrow points, we can see that the training initiates us into a common way of doing things—a *practice*. In fact

a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom. (*PI*, 198)

Without such a custom, such a “regular use,” there would be no such thing as obeying the sign. If that is right, some interesting consequences follow.

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on.—To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions). (*PI*, 199)

We are not to understand this as an empirical remark, as something that we conclude on the basis of *observing* cases of rule following. Rather, Wittgenstein means to say that it is *not possible* that there should be a purely private rule. Because obeying a rule is part of a custom, it presupposes a community in which such practices exist.

But suppose you were asked, “How *do* you know that is the way to go?”

Well, how do I know?—If that means “Have I reasons?” the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons. (*PI*, 211)

“How am I able to obey a rule?”—If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do.

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” (*PI*, 217)

In this striking metaphor, Wittgenstein brings us back to the communal practices in which our language-games have their home. It is as if the philosophical why-questions have made us dig deeper and deeper. But there comes a point when we can dig no more, find no more justifications for our beliefs, our knowledge claims, or our scientific methods. At that point we reach bedrock, and our “spade is turned.” What is **bedrock**? Is it some Cartesian clear and distinct idea? Is it some Humean private impression? Is it a Kantian synthetic a priori truth? No. None of these things. Bedrock is “simply what I do.” And what I do is part of what we do, we who live this form of life, engage in these activities, play these language-games, grow up in these customs. There comes a point where explanations and justifications

ZEN

“Usually thinking is rather self-centered. In our everyday life, our thinking is ninety-nine percent self-centered: ‘Why do I have suffering? Why do I have trouble?’” (SS, 118). Zen, a form of Buddhism brought from India to China and developed in Japan, presents a radical cure for this self-centeredness and promises, in consequence, release from suffering.

The key is to see into our own nature. But the aim is not to develop a theory of the mind or gain an intellectual understanding. Paradoxically, the goal is to have no goal, to be free of “attachments,” as the Zen masters put it. That is not easy, however, cluttered as our minds are with desires, concerns, and anxieties. Something dramatic has to happen, a kind of explosion that blows our usual ways of thinking into smithereens. The result of that explosion is enlightenment, or **satori**.

To stimulate that explosion, Zen masters often assign students a **koan** to meditate on—a puzzling statement that seems at first to make no sense. Here are several famous *koans*:

- All things return to the One, but where does this One return?
- Who is it that carries for you this lifeless corpse of yours?
- Who is the Buddha? Three pounds of flax.
- What are your original features, which you have even prior to your birth?

Kao-feng (1238–1285) has left us an account of his wrestling with the *koan* about the One. While deep in sleep one night, he found himself fixing his attention on it. For the next six days and nights,

while spreading the napkin, producing the bowls, or attending to my natural wants, whether I moved or rested, whether I talked or kept silent, my whole existence was wrapped up with the question “Where does this one return?” No other thoughts ever disturbed my consciousness; no, even if I wanted to stir up the least bit of thought

irrelevant to the central one, I could not do so. . . . From morning till evening, from evening to morning, so transparent, so tranquil, so majestically above all things were my feelings! Absolutely pure and not a particle of dust! My one thought covered eternity.

But this was not yet *satori*. After the sixth day, he happened to glance at a poem written on a wall and *suddenly* he awoke from the spell, and

the meaning of “Who carries this lifeless corpse of yours?” burst upon me. (DTS, 101)

But, significantly, he doesn’t tell us what the meaning is. He doesn’t tell us because he can’t. What he experienced then, what he *knew*, is the kind of thing that words cannot capture. He has seen into his own nature, and the result is a transformed life.

Words can, however, *indirectly* indicate the reality experienced there, and Zen masters are not at a loss for words to point us in the right direction. One clue is that there are two stages in Kao-feng’s enlightenment. In the first stage of intense concentration, the mind is polished, like a mirror freed from dust, and he feels himself eternal. What happens in the second stage? Something exotic, marvelous, intensely dramatic? No.

Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine. (SS, 57)

It is a kind of mystery that for people who have no experience of enlightenment, enlightenment is something wonderful. But if they attain it, it is nothing. But yet it is not nothing. (SS, 47)

Zen gives a radical interpretation to what the Buddha found when he gained enlightenment. The Buddha nature, which all existing things share and express, is actually *emptiness*. Our mind is no-mind, our self is no-self. And the intense realization of this frees us from the imperious demands of the ego. The result, surprisingly, is nothing extraordinary.

ZEN

It is just our everyday life, but played now in a new, selfless key.*

When we are hungry we eat; when we are sleepy we lay ourselves down; and where does the infinite or the finite come in here? . . . Life as it is lived suffices. (*DTS*, 9)
. . . when your practice is calm and ordinary, everyday life itself is enlightenment. (*SS*, 59)

If a student displays his lack of enlightenment, a Zen master will sometimes strike him with a staff. This illustrates that the transition from self-centered everydayness to true everyday life is a violent matter. The two lives may look very similar from the outside, but inwardly no difference could be greater. Moreover, this change never just happens; it requires intense effort and activity.

The truth is that our nature has been the Buddha nature all along. (Everything arises from the same emptiness.) All along, everything needed for enlightenment has been ours; we have just been too dim-witted to see it. After satori is ours, we are amazed to discover that

*Compare Kierkegaard's Knight of Infinite Resignation with his Knight of Faith (pp. 530–531). Compare also Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with his *Philosophical Investigations* (pp. 643–645). Philosophy, the later Wittgenstein says, "leaves everything as it is."

we have been led astray through ignorance to find a split in our own being, that there was from the very beginning no need for a struggle between the finite and the infinite, that the peace we are seeking so eagerly after has been there all the time. (*DTS*, 13)

The path to enlightenment is not easy. It is leaving home on a dangerous journey and coming back again. But the home to which you return is very different—and yet exactly the same—as the home you left.

Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters. (*DTS*, 14)

It is as though upon attaining enlightenment, you suddenly "see the world aright" (*Tractatus* 6.54).

NOTE:

References are as follows:

DTS: D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

SS: Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).

for behaving in a certain way come to an end. Then one just acts. We do as our linguistic community has trained us to do. In the end, it comes down to this:

When I obey a rule, I do not choose.
I obey the rule *blindly*. (*PI*, 219)

In the *Tractatus*, we found the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown. In the *Investigations*, we find that when we get to bedrock, there is no more to say. At that point you can only *display* my form of life, the language-game you play. Here, where the spade is turned, you just *show* you what you do: This is what you do—how you live, the way you understand, mean things, and follow

rules; this is your (our) form of life. In the *Tractatus*, it was the logical hardness of tautologies that turned the spade, that could only be shown. Here it is the practice of a certain set of language-games.

But this bedrock cannot, as we have seen, be a purely private form of life, governed by private rules. And Wittgenstein now pushes this point by asking, "What does it mean to 'agree in language'?"

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. (*PI*, 242)

Are there some particular judgments that we need to agree about to communicate with one

another in a language? In an essay titled “A Defense of Common Sense,” English philosopher G. E. Moore claims to “know with certainty” a large number of propositions.¹³ And he thinks we all know them, too. For instance, he claims each of us knows that

- there exists a living human body that is my body.
- my body was born at a certain time in the past.
- my body has been at various distances from other things, which also exist.
- there have been many other human bodies like my own.
- I have had many different experiences.
- so have other human beings.

This is not Moore’s complete list, but you get the idea. It is a list of what seem to be *truisms*.

Wittgenstein tends to think the word “know” is inappropriately used here. But our interest is directed to his idea that these “judgments” might form the basis for an agreement defining a language or a form of life.

How is it that we are so *certain* of these “facts”? Have we carefully investigated each of them and found that the evidence is in their favor? No. They do not have that kind of status. Taken together they are more like a picture we accept.

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (*OC*, 94)¹⁴

Wittgenstein compares this “inherited background” to a kind of mythology, by which he means that though the truisms of the picture are empirical, they are not acquired by empirical investigation.* He also compares our world picture to the banks of a river within which the water of true and false propositions can flow. The mythology can change; the banks of the river are not unalterable. And in some ways, at least, different pictures are possible for us even at a given time.

*Here you should keep in mind the Kantian a priori synthetic principles. Wittgensteinian “world pictures” play a similar role. They define a world for us. They are as anchored for us as the categories. But they are neither universal nor necessary—nor are they unchangeable. They function like the *paradigms* in Thomas Kuhn’s influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Very intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former. (*OC*, 336)

How are we to account for this? Suppose the doubter talks to the believer. If the reasons for doubt are already well known to someone who believes the biblical story, what could the doubter say to convince the believer? All the doubter’s reasons are already on the table—and they don’t convince!

Different language-games (different forms of life) are possible. And arguments in favor of one of them *presuppose* the standards of argument and evidence characteristic of that very form of life. So reasons do not get a grip on a different form of life with different standards and rules of reasoning. Reasons, Wittgenstein reminds us, come to an end.

World pictures, then, may differ; but there is *always some* framework within which we come to believe and think certain things.

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty. (*OC*, 115)

Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don’t. That is how I act. (*OC*, 148)

How does someone judge which is his right and which his left hand? How do I know that my judgment will agree with someone else’s? How do I know that this colour is blue? If I don’t trust *myself* here, why should I trust anyone else’s judgment? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable; it is part of judging. (*OC*, 150)

Can you doubt—Descartes notwithstanding—that you have a body? That you have parents? That you have never been to the moon? These things “stand fast” for us. It is hard to imagine anything *more certain* than these judgments that could cast doubt on them. Is it, for example, *more certain* that my senses have sometimes deceived me than that the sky I’m looking at is blue?*

*Wittgenstein’s critique here should remind you of Peirce on doubt and belief. (See again pp. 596–597.)

Much seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused siding. (OC, 210)

Now it gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form. Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the *scaffolding* of our thoughts. (Every human being has parents.) (OC, 211)

The use of the *Tractatus* word “scaffolding” in this connection cannot be an accident. In his earlier view, logic (that transparent and absolutely rigid medium) was the *scaffolding* of the world. Now, in dramatic contrast, what grounds our system of beliefs are such apparently empirical and logically accidental facts as that I have parents or even that motor cars don’t grow out of the earth (OC, 279).

But the complex system of certainties that make up a world picture does not function like an ordinary foundation. The foundation of a house is that on which everything else rests, yet the foundation could stand alone. Our certainties, however, form a *system* of interrelated judgments.

When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) (OC, 141)

I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house. (OC, 248)

Here the atomism of the *Tractatus* is most thoroughly repudiated. We do not first believe a single isolated proposition, then a second, a third, and so on. “Light dawns gradually over the whole.” In a striking metaphor, Wittgenstein suggests that the foundation walls are themselves borne up by their connection with the rest of the house.

We may still want to ask, What makes us so certain of this picture? What guarantees for us that these judgments are fixed, that they do stand fast? Wittgenstein’s answer is that *nothing* guarantees this. There is no guarantee. We are, indeed, certain of these things; but our certainty cannot be anchored in anything objective, in anything more certain than they.

To be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end. (OC, 192)

And in what does it come to an end?

At the foundation of well-founded beliefs lies belief that is not well-founded. (OC, 253)

The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing. (OC, 166)

Giving grounds . . . , justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC, 204)*

My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things. (OC, 344)

If the Western philosophical tradition has been a quest for certainty, we can say that Wittgenstein satisfies that quest, for he acknowledges that there are many, many things of which we are certain (many more things than most philosophers ever imagined!). But if philosophy is a quest for objective certainty, for a foundation that *guarantees the truth* of the edifice of knowledge, then, in a certain sense, if Wittgenstein is right, philosophy is over. Epistemology is *over*. For there comes a point where the spade is turned, where one cannot dig any deeper. And bedrock comes sooner than most philosophers have wanted it to come. We find it in our form of life. Our life *consists* in “being content to accept many things.” This is, Wittgenstein holds, a difficult realization; we keep wanting to ask that good old why-question. Can’t we, we yearn to ask, *somehow justify our form of life?* No, says Wittgenstein. It is *groundless*. It is “simply what we do.” And what we do may not be what *they* do. Philosophy cannot dig deeper than the practices and customs that define our form of life. We do have our certainties, but they are groundless.¹⁵

Philosophy 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. (PI, 124)

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1. When we see the sign EXIT, how do we know which way to go to find the exit?
 2. Could there be just one occasion on which someone obeyed a certain rule? Explain.
 3. When reasons give out, what do we do then? In what sense do we obey rules blindly?

*See Kierkegaard on the unavoidability of a leap (p. 536).

4. What is bedrock? And what does Wittgenstein mean by “agreement in language”? Why is that important?
5. What kind of status does your “world picture” have? Are you certain about it? What guarantees its correctness?
6. What does it mean to say that our believing is groundless?

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. The young Wittgenstein thought he had found a unique solution to the problem of the meaning of life—the problem disappears! Try to explain this “solution” in terms that could be meaningful to your own life and then decide whether you accept it.
2. If Wittgenstein is right, philosophy as a quest for foundations, for the absolute truth of things, has suffered shipwreck. Do you think he is right? If so, what should we do now?
3. Several times, a similarity to Zen themes has been suggested. See whether you can work out this parallel more fully. Are there differences, too?

KEY WORDS

logic	limit of the world
states of affairs	realism
facts	mystical
possible state of affairs	philosophical self
pictorial form	logical positivism
logical space	verifiability principle
proposition	emotivist theory of
names	ethics
world	language-game
atomic propositions	ostensive definitions
logical atomism	meaning as use
logical truth	family resemblances
tautology	satori
saying/showing	koan
picturing	bedrock
value	

NOTES

1. Bertrand Russell, “Logical Atomism,” in *Logic and Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), 197–198.
2. Bertrand Russell, “Philosophers and Idiots,” *Listener* 52, no. 1354 (February 10, 1955): 247. Reprinted in Russell’s *Portraits from Memory* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), 26–27.
3. A brief and very readable account of Wittgenstein’s life can be found in Norman Malcolm’s *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961). Quotations from the main text of the *Tractatus* are identified by the paragraph numbers found in that work.
5. Paul Englemann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 143–144.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 12.
7. Quotations from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks, 1914–1916* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *N*. References are to page numbers.
8. Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” 8.
9. Moritz Schlick, “Positivism and Realism,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 86–87.
10. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, n.d.), 107–108.
11. Quotations from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953) are cited in the text using the abbreviation *PI*. References are to section numbers.
12. Wittgenstein is mentioned in Harry D. Frankfurt’s interesting piece, “On Bullshit,” in his *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Frankfurt identifies the essence of *bullshit* as the lack of any concern for the truth.
13. G. E. Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, 2nd ser., ed. G. Muirhead (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925).
14. Quotations from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969) are cited in the text using the abbreviation *OC*. References are to paragraph numbers.
15. We have learned much about reading Wittgenstein from Gordon Bearn’s *Waking to Wonder: Wittgenstein’s Existential Investigations* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).