

Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy

By Paul Horwich

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*“What is your aim in philosophy?—
To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle”
(PI 309)*

Had it been a novel Paul Horwich would already have given the plot away in the very first lines of the first chapter of his essay *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*.

“Wittgenstein’s most important insight is encapsulated in his remark that “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (PI 109). This thought may not appear to be especially momentous. But in fact it alludes to a revolutionary conception of the subject—of what it is, of how it should be done, and of what it can accomplish. (p. 1)”

In the end this will lead us to the conclusion that “[its] most shocking implication is that philosophy cannot deliver the sort of knowledge that is usually regarded as its *raison d'être*. (p. 1)”

A very grim future for the profession lies ahead of us, although, so it seems. Not that we can say that Horwich didn’t warn us. Already in the preface he hints at this when he writes that “[arguably], Wittgenstein’s singular achievement was to have appreciated the true nature of philosophy. (P. vii)”

The sort of philosophy Horwich has in mind, the sort of philosophy that according to him cannot deliver the goods, is what he calls T-philosophy. It is the sort of philosophy that is both ‘traditional’ and ‘theoretical’ and can be characterized by a strong inclination towards theory building and construction. That is to say “[...] the construction and defense of general, a priori accounts of pervasive yet puzzling phenomena, which accounts must organize, unify, and explain common-sense commitments about the phenomena while having the potential to correct them. (p. 21)”

The problem Horwich has with T-philosophy is in a nutshell that its theories are of a scientific nature. They are “a non-obvious body of a priori principles—one that offers a complete, systematic, precise, and basic account of some pervasive yet puzzling phenomena (p. 21)”. It is this scientific nature that in Horwich’s reading of Wittgenstein is based on the illusion that the philosopher, just like the scientist in the empirical sciences, can make fundamental discoveries if only he uses the same kind of methods the scientist applies to analyze his a posteriori data. But, says Horwich, there are no startling discoveries to be made of facts, not open to the methods of science, yet accessible “from the armchair” through some blend of intuition, pure reason and conceptual analysis.

Horwich’s main aim throughout the book is to show us how we can identify, recognize and get rid of what turn out to be pseudo-problems instead of T-philosophy’s deep philosophical insights. The way to do this is by following a program that consists of eight stages, being:

1. Recognition of the alleged scientific expectations. Usually made explicit by the assumption that it is possible to reduce the philosophical phenomenon at hand to a simple a priori principle.
2. Identifying the reliance on linguistic analogies. The tendency to assume that resemblance in forms of certain terms automatically means that there is also resemblance in use.
3. Showing the tendency to (over) generalize these analogies. Take this similarity between terms to mean that they also refer to the same kind of entities.
4. Exposing the linguistic idiosyncrasies that the terms of our philosophical phenomenon exhibit.
5. Laying bare the paradoxical tensions that arise from (1) to (4). At the one hand we have the strong resemblance between terms, and on the other hand they both have their own peculiarities.
6. The philosophical bewilderment that remains. Our philosophical phenomenon is a deep mystery to us given these paradoxical tensions.
7. Pay attention to the philosophical (read: scientific) theorizing that is undertaken in response to

this remaining bewilderment.

8. Show the solution by means of therapeutic philosophical analysis. We must return to our initial problem and recognize that our philosophical bewilderment is only due to our tendency to take linguistic analogies to play a much bigger role than we should allow them to do. Our alleged problems evaporate to no more than pseudo-problems.

In chapter 1 Horwich introduces us to what he sees as Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy. Focusing on the role language plays and illustrating this with some example from outside philosophy he lays the foundation for what we can expect in the later chapters of the book.

Chapter 2 is one of the core chapters of the book. It is in this chapter that Horwich gives us his critique of T-philosophy in more detail. In 10 sections he takes us from the methodological assumptions and theory constructing techniques used by T-philosophers via the reasons why he thinks both of these are incorrect, to Wittgenstein's deflationary and therapeutic way out of this. A way out that according to him is in spite of accusations of the contrary "not incoherent in that it violates its own anti-theoretical requirements. (p. 20)" Applying the eight stage program mentioned earlier he illustrates this with case studies regarding number, time, truth and good. So why then is it that we call the products of T-philosophy *theories* and the proposed way out not an *anti-theoretical theory*. In section 2.8 Horwich explains why according to him this is the case. He writes that by a theory Wittgenstein is thinking of a "hypothesis about some non-evident reality – an attempt to unearth facts that are not out in the open, that cannot be discerned merely by looking in the right direction, with an unprejudiced eye and a clear head, but that can be known only via some form of conjectural inference. (p. 64)" The emphasis here lies on the "attempt to unearth facts that are not out in the open" suggesting to discover or uncover fundamental principles of the subject matter at hand. The keywords in what makes these exercises theories (and that accordingly should be prohibited) are amongst others *explanation*, *foundation*, *complete*, and *reform* (p.65). It is the methodological presupposition that mimicking scientific methods within the domain of the intuitive and a priori that makes theories in this sense irrational. Now the proposed eight-stage program is certainly not a theory in the above-mentioned sense. Rather than being a theory it should be regarded as a description of a way to identify the overgeneralizations of T-philosophy's theories on a case-to-case basis excluding itself from seeking refuge to the prohibited keywords. As Horwich indicates the only way in which Wittgenstein can be accused of contradicting himself and does come up with a theory himself is in "urging a *theory* in which *theorizing* is illegitimate. (p. 65)"

The purpose of chapter 3 is to describe the Wittgenstein we meet in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and to explain the reasons why he came to distance himself from this earlier work, thus giving way for his later work especially that of Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is this latter work that Horwich takes to be decisive in understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Chapter 4 is on meaning. Defending Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of a word lies solely in its use, and explaining how this idea confronts various paradoxes and other problems Horwich shows how this conception of meaning as use is just another application of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy and is not as often is said a theory of meaning.

Chapter 5 of the book deals with Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Its main purpose seems to be to compare Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein with the interpretation of Horwich. The, maybe obvious, conclusion Horwich draws from this comparison is that Kripke's Wittgenstein diverges from the original Wittgenstein whereas his own interpretation is an elucidation of Wittgenstein's thought. According to Horwich "Kripke's train of thought consists in a paradox [...]. The paradox is an argument for a striking "skeptical thesis": namely, that there are no 'genuine' facts as to what people mean by their words. (p. 144)" Quite something else than the therapeutic eight-stage program to overcome paradoxical tensions and skeptical solutions Horwich reads in Wittgenstein. It is therefore unfortunately that Horwich is not very convincing here. We learn more about why Horwich thinks that Kripke is wrong than we learn about where, according to Horwich, Kripke's ideas diverge from Wittgenstein.

The last chapter is again an application of the eight-stage program, this time applied to the "mystery" of consciousness. In this chapter it is Horwich's intention to show how, by applying this therapeutic

program, the “mystery” of conscious dissolves in nothing more than just another pseudo-problem. Horwich starts out with the observation that “a pseudo-question or pseudo-problem is one that we should not attempt to answer – not because it is too difficult, but because there is every reason to expect that no objectively correct answer exists. (p. 170)” and that he will try “to explain sympathetically Wittgenstein’s view that the traditional and still widely debated perplexities of consciousness are indeed the result of recognizable defective assumptions rather than the incompleteness of scientific knowledge and of our conceptual repertoire. (p. 172-173)” As it turns out the “mystery of consciousness” exists of no more than “an inflated-private-arena model of experience, and that lying behind this inflation is an exaggeration of the similarities between sensation reports and observation reports. (p. 186)” Stretching these similarities between for instance *pain* (sensation) and *red* (observation) to its limit we come to the ultimate bewilderment (stage six of the eight-stage program) that “pain (and experience in general) is metaphysically bizarre and (in large part) epistemologically inaccessible. (p.193) The therapeutic solution in this case is just “come to appreciate the distinctive usage of pain attributions (p. 194)” in order to see that “...the only facts whose explanations are required in order to justify a neural reduction of pain are the facts about which forms of bodily change tend to cause pain and which forms of behavior seems to ensue. (p.191)

It is clear that Horwich feels very close to the subject for in the preface he writes “As a schoolboy I happened upon the *Tractatus* in Manchester’s Central Library. It was somehow impressive, and I wished I could understand it. Six years later I had my chance. I began studying philosophy in Cornell’s PhD programme (having switched from physics a few months earlier). (p. xiv)” Now, decades later he is trying to convince us that “[...] an account of [...] Wittgenstein’s [...] mature philosophy can be extracted from Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and that this work should be taken to override any other writings in tension with it. (p. vii)” Not being an expert on Wittgenstein I don’t consider myself to be in a position to judge whether or not Horwich has succeeded in doing this. He does however succeed in giving a clear picture of what he considers major defects of T-philosophy. So returning to where we started we can now ask ourselves whether or not Horwich is convincing in his opinion that its “most shocking implication is that philosophy cannot deliver the sort of knowledge that is usually regarded as its *raison d’être*. (p. 1)”

A number of remarks come up when thinking about this. First there is the question of what precisely Horwich shares under the header of T-philosophy. In the introduction he writes that his critique is aiming at “most of what has been done, and still is done, in the name of philosophy. (p. x)” thus suggesting that there is more to philosophy than the part he, in the name of Wittgenstein, is critical about. However, about what that other philosophy might be he remains more or less quiet. We get a hint of what he is aiming at when he writes in his reaction to Timothy Williams review of “*Wittgenstein’s Metaphilosophy*” that

“besides T-philosophy and the therapeutic efforts to undermine it, there are many other intellectual activities legitimately called ‘philosophy’. For some of these other activities could be worthwhile. In particular, there’s the popular Quinean conception of the subject—as flagrantly a posteriori and continuous with the sciences. (Horwich 2013, p. e25)”

So perhaps the grim future for the profession is after all not so grim at all.

A second remark is on the suggested eight-stage program. As a method it seems in some ways to suffer from the same defects of (over) generalization and simplification as the methods of T-philosophy it is criticizing. In broad terms Horwich claims that all philosophical bewilderment, caused by occurring paradoxes, can be traced back to reliance on linguistic analogies that once laid bare teach us that there actually was no problem to start with. Perhaps this is the case for some problems but it might just as well be that there are numerous problems that do need further investigation. The appearance of a paradox may just as well be seen as an incentive to critically examine our methods and principles and modifying these where necessary to avoid future paradoxes.

The reader may be wise to compare Horwich’s compelling and provocative view on this subject with that of Timothy Williamson in *Must Do Better* (the afterword of his *The Philosophy of Philosophy*) whose view on the future of the profession is not as grim as that of Horwich:

“It is therefore appropriate to end with a misquotation from Winston Churchill. This is not the end of philosophy. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning. (Williamson 2007, p.292)”

The overall conclusion is that *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy* is a well written book by a major philosopher that deserves to be read by far more people than only those from within the philosophical community.

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