

"Don't think, but look!": Wittgenstein (& James) on Method

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I.

The later Wittgenstein urges and displays a distinctive method of inquiry. Philosophical problems and puzzles, he maintains, result from the misunderstanding of ordinary words and from their misapplications in the stating, comparing, and testing of philosophical positions; thus, by elucidating such words' actual (and heterogeneous, discourse-context-specific) uses and thereby undoing such errors, it is possible both to cure existing perplexities and to inoculate against further ones.

This is the standard story of Wittgenstein's methodological diagnosis and prescription, and the practice of professional philosophers today shows that they overwhelmingly reject Wittgenstein and, if anything, prefer the disease to his proposed remedy.

I suspect, though, that the Wittgensteinian position has not been rendered with sufficient clarity for it to gain a full and fair hearing. Toward *that* end, I here begin fleshing out the standard story by offering a more-detailed interpretation of Wittgenstein's exhortation, "don't think, but look!" (1958:66). I think this can be profitably read as expressing a methodological impulse shared by the American pragmatist philosophers William James and John Dewey, and in this paper I present a reading informed by the parallels between Wittgenstein and James.

II.

Consider Wittgenstein's famous statement in the *Investigations* that at least some categories, such as 'game,' are structured by family resemblances among their members, rather than, as is commonly supposed, by the existence of a set of (necessary and sufficient) elements shared by all:

66. Consider ... "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 anything common to them 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! ...

Linked to this is Wittgenstein's point that concepts, and the categories they denote, can have indefinite, uncertain boundaries, and therefore have uses not strictly governed by rules. This fact conflicts with common preconceptions-- for instance, that metaphysically-legitimate and practically-usable conceptual categories cut up the world in a determinate, well-defined way, and (perhaps) that useful boundaries are definite and free of 'unprincipled' exceptions. Wittgenstein, however, attacks not only the substance of such preconceptions, but preconceiving as such, the tenacious adherence to certain precepts as given, fixed, and unnoticed starting points of thought:

100. "... [I]t isn't a game, if there is some vagueness *in the rules* ... [A]t any rate it certainly isn't a perfect game." ...--But I want to say: ... we ... should call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word "game" clearly.

101. We want to say that there can't be any vagueness in logic. The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal '*must*' be found in reality. ... [W]e think we already see it there.

...
107. The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) ...

...
340. One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that.

But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. ...

We learn that the "*preconceived idea* of crystalline purity" is to be "removed" (108), and that "presenting" a "model" "as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond" is "The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy" (131).

Of precisely what, then, is Wittgenstein complaining when he chastises those who 'think' rather than 'look'? A first hypothesis might be: commitments made to preconceptions, which obscure vision of the phenomena in which one is interested and whose renunciation is not considered even when they lead into confusion or perplexity.

Now, all knowledge requires preconceptions. Without the application of an organizing, articulating, discriminating perspective comprising (at least) already-possessed concepts and beliefs, thought can have no particular, determinate content.

So, if Wittgenstein's advice is conducive to gaining knowledge, it cannot be to escape or transcend one's perspective in order to gain some impossibly (and incoherently) immediate encounter with the phenomena themselves. Nor is it to revise one's perspective repeatedly so that differing aspects of reality become visible, for Wittgenstein displays no great eagerness to encourage intellectual innovation generally. Nor is it fruitful to take him as merely recommending a *particular* set of preconceptions, for that would flatten 'don't think, but look!' into 'don't think this way, think that way!,' and moreover render his injunction substantive and not methodological.

We seem to be left with something like an achingly-vague 'Be openminded to the facts, do not let your perspective blind you' or 'If in a given situation you have reason to suspect that certain preconceptions may be significantly limiting your knowledge, change or suspend them,' precepts that give little useful guidance. What exactly is one to do? When? Surely, Wittgenstein is offering a methodological critique more incisive and concretely constructive than that.

III.

James, it turns out, shares these Wittgensteinian preoccupations and his less-elliptical writings provide helpful clues for an interpretation of 'thinking' and 'looking.'

In *The Meaning of Truth*, he chastises Russell for wrongly presupposing that natural language works in the idealized way of logic and mathematics, and that therefore terms have as their meanings context-independent definitions that can be substituted for them with no loss-- that "such terms as 'meaning,' 'truth,' 'belief,' 'object,' 'definition' are self-sufficients with no context of varying relation that might be further asked about" (1975:148). The terms in his arguments "taken in a vacuum, and made into bare logical entities" (1975:152), Russell is guilty of a "diseased" or "vicious" "abstractionism" (1975:153, 148) that involves treating words "privatively," "reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of 'nothing but' that ..., ... acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged," (1975:135-136) "*denying* (implicitly or explicitly) all its features save the one specially abstracted to conceive it by"

(1975:135). James judges that "more than half the trouble that metaphysicians and logicians give themselves over the paradoxes and dialectical puzzles of the universe may ... be traced to this relatively simple source" (1975:136), though he has "no objection to abstractions" whose roles as "endlessly serviceable" shorthands are kept in mind (1975:109; also 1955:172).

This critique sounds distinctly like Wittgenstein's attack on his own earlier assumption that "logic[] presents ... the a priori order ... common to both world and thought," and the corresponding project of "trying to grasp ... the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on... a *super*-order between... *super*-concepts," rather than the relations of ordinary concepts sustained by the "humble" actual uses of such words (1958:97). James' complaint dovetails also with Wittgenstein's denigration, in *The Blue Book*, of the "craving for generality" (1960:17-18), for the simplest, most comprehensively unifying explanations. Wittgenstein decries imitation of natural-scientific ways of asking and answering questions as "the real source of metaphysics," which "leads ... into complete darkness."

The term whose 'scientific' treatment most concerns James is 'truth.' While as an observer 'looking' at concrete experience he finds instances in which things get deemed true and instances in which ideas are practically useful to believe, he sees no intrinsic, context- (and believer-) independent feature that makes each of these a truth. In particular, he cannot discern the supposed facts of agreement with The One (perspective- and interest-independent) Reality that constitute truth on some views.

The parallel with Wittgenstein is striking. The *Investigations* show, again and again-- for instance, regarding the words 'games,' 'pointing' (1958:33-36), 'understanding' (143-155), and 'reading' (156-178)-- how actual conceptual-semantic variations cloaked by an unchanging outward linguistic form go unnoticed. The result is well-meaning, but misguided questions and theories of excessive generality, like "What is a question" (1958:24), "what the essence of a language ... is" (1958:65), or "What are signs" (1960:16).

James raises an objection of this kind against the formula that truth is 'agreement with reality' (1977:448).

Philosophers have generally been satisfied with the word 'agreement' here, but pragmatists have seen that this word covers many different concrete possibilities ... innumerable ways in which our thoughts may fit reality.

For James, there is no single, eternal, human-independent realm of Truth "unrolling" through time (1955:158). Truths get "made" (158, 159) or "engender[ed]" (167) by human activity, and exist "in the plural" (54, 158); "the question 'what is the truth?' is no real question (being irrelative to all conditions)" (158). The term *the truth* is "a mere useful summarizing phrase like *the Latin Language* or *the Law*" (158), "a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience" (54).

IV.

In light of the shared Wittgenstein-James concerns, we might reconstruct the 'thinking'-'looking' contrast as follows. 'Thinking' involves a systematic production of mistaken semantic interpretations of words: a word *W* is used in some theorizing activity as if it means *X*, and is taken to have the meaning *X* not only within this activity but generally and essentially, when in fact *X* is a specialized sense shaped by the demands of this or some other (culturally-esteemed) theoretical enterprise, and disconnected from the ordinary uses of *W*.

That is, a word like 'truth' gets impressed out of its varied normal discourse contexts, shorn of many of its ordinary roles and functions, and assigned new duties within a network of ideas that purports to grasp hold of reality in a way that the pedestrian discourse of daily life cannot. The evil lies not in the drafting of an ordinary term into philosophical service, but in the remarkably thorough forgetting, once the term has been commissioned to its special-purpose, theory-conforming semantic role, of its actual functions and significances in civilian life. The word's theoretically-broad but sociolinguistically-narrow role is mistakenly taken to be authoritatively and context-independently definitive of it-- rather than merely a specialized, idealized use having no guaranteed applicability in the ordinary settings of the word's use.

The demands of logical fit and explanatory plausibility imposed by the encompassing theoretical web of ideas either prevent the construction of a tenable concept that meets these constraints, or do not. If the former, the result is an appearance of incoherence or other rot at the core of the concept, or perhaps in other constituent concepts or principles of the theory; that the terms continue to serve their original, prosaic, less theoretically-regimented purposes quite felicitously is overlooked or treated as irrelevant.

If the latter, problems are likely to arise when the word *W* is brought back to its ordinary sorts of contexts and applied with what is, though not recognized by these sophisticated users as being, a new and different sense. One possibility is that phenomena that get recognized as *W*, using ordinary tacit identification criteria unaffected by adoption of the explicit theory, may be misunderstood once the theory is brought to bear, their theory-dissonant features overlooked. Alternatively, the discord between phenomena and theory may become painfully evident, *W* no longer fitting comfortably within its customary language games when its theoretically-purified sense is insisted upon.

In any event, the 'thinking'-generated difficulties just reviewed tend to produce only redoubled efforts at theory elaboration and clarification, ie the still-more-dogged pressing of the abstract question about the presumed single Real essence of the concept ("What *is* (a) *W*?")-- and, ultimately, unresolved puzzlement.

How does such a misbegotten intellectual practice get underway? Wittgenstein exposes its source: a set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing ways in which theorizing about a concept *C*, or about the nature of what it denotes, becomes untethered from the ordinary language practices that make *C* the concept it is, whereby (in not accommodating those ordinary uses) the theory fails to be about *C*, surface appearances notwithstanding. At least three missteps can be distinguished:

1. We attempt to discover a general, all-purpose characterization of *the* concept corresponding to a word *W* (in one of its recognized 'dictionary' senses). (This ambition is fed by metaphysical assumptions about there being a single unified, mind-independent, internally-consistent, hidden world structure for which we strive to compose a single set of adequate concepts and beliefs-- those that carve the world at its unique joints, or provide the one True account of it.)
2. In pursuing a general account of *W* we consider too few instances of the term's use, taking a few exemplars to capture the concept in its entirety-- after all, any individual sample ought to reveal a unitary essence as well as a comprehensive survey would-- and therefore deny ourselves evidence that would expose the foolhardiness of the project. In Wittgenstein's formulation (1958:593): "A main cause of philosophical disease--a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example." (This misstep is abetted by human mental limitations-- specifically, our ability to mobilize only a subset of our mental resources at any time. At any moment, we are in a particular one of our many 'frames of mind,' keyed to the practical situation of thought in which we find

ourselves. This restricts what can be accessed from memory, and in particular can block situationally-'irrelevant' word uses from view, thus causing a very selective review of the uses to seem more or less exhaustive and hence a legitimate basis for an inference of the conceptual essence.)

3. The instances we do consider are stereotypical ones, conceived in the stereotypical ways. They are not considered along with the culturally-specified practical "surroundings" (Wittgenstein 1958) of activity, purpose, and circumstance that indicate their actual functions; rather, they are understood 'thinly' in abstraction from the practical contexts of action, and/or conceived in ways taken over from existing theories. As a result, they get prematurely assimilated to the distortingly-idealized concept.

There is a vicious psychological circularity at work here: a narrow and superficially-digested diet of sample cases is conducive to (and indispensable for) the hypothesizing of a conceptual essence, which in turn leads to the seeming adequacy of consuming such a constricted diet.

'Looking,' then, appears to involve a sensitivity to the enduring connections between theoretically-recast linguistic concepts and their roots in concrete, localized, everyday human activity. It involves seeing these concepts as simply instruments fashioned and refashioned through use to enable thought and action, and disavowing the distracting ideal of concepts that match the categories of some unsullied, human-transcendent realm and offer an understanding of the world that has no need for us and our homely language games in it.

V.

Now, as James says, "a highly abstract way of stating ... [a] complaint ... needs to be redeemed from obscurity by showing instances" (1975:135). But that, along with a consideration of Dewey's views and of the countervailing benefits obtainable from theoretic idealization, must await another occasion. This paper is only a first step toward a detailed explication and evaluation of Wittgenstein's methodological critique.

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