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Wittgenstein's Accomplishment Is Most Importantly About Method

Wittgenstein is working hard to combat some particular views or claims, but that's not all he's doing. If he is right regarding those claims, then the stakes for philosophy of language, for philosophy of mind, and for philosophy of human beings are already quite high. He is opposing, for example, the following views: that learning names is learning a connection between a thing and its name; that understanding is a mental process; that an account of rules and their applications is at the most fundamental level of an account of language; that when we speak what we say stands for or translates some private mental saying. He claims that the identities of paying attention, pointing to, reading, naming sensations--that the identities of these things are not to be found separate from the circumstances leading up to the particular examples, the details of the examples, and the subsequent uses of them. He opposes the view that we contain within us a rich mental life of which no one else can be made aware, and he opposes the view that we know our internal feelings only by looking within ourselves.

It is a matter of some debate whether he has succeeded in that opposition to those views. I'm inclined to think he has, and that as a result a great deal of the work currently being done in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language is superfluous, profoundly mistaken, and inevitably will be recognized as such. It is as if we were working in academic astronomy in 1600, with Copernicus dead half a century and his revolution well started but most professors in astronomy still desperately working out an account of the epicycles and pericycles to make Ptolemaic orbits around the earth consistent with what we can see by going outside.

But demolition of those claims and the wreckage of 20th Century philosophy of mind is actually small potatoes compared to the central accomplishment of Wittgenstein. The central accomplishment is deeper and has to do with our conception of philosophy and with our methods. He has reminded us of what philosophy is for, that philosophy cannot be only self-referential, and by implication he has added to our difficulty at the same time he has added to our repertoire of philosophical methods.

Doing poor philosophy has pathological consequences in many realms outside philosophy, and doing it well might help heal us.

First, note the distinction between how we go about our work when we are working on a philosophical problem, on one hand, and how we go about setting up the problems on which we work, on the other. Philosophical questions often come to us as though they are already formed, with the words and their arrangement and the question mark all already in place. Can we be assured that the way we represent reality is the way it really is? Is it possible for one person to know the mind of another? How is it possible for a word to designate or refer to an indefinitely large number of things? Can we rely on our perceptions? What is justice, really? or knowledge? or language?

In answering any of these we work diligently step by step and argument by argument. But in asking them we work with what presents itself.

From Wittgenstein we may learn to be suspicious, and not just to be suspicious of the arguments for answers but also to be suspicious of the asking.

For instance. We look at a conversation between two people communicating facts to each other and take that to be a paradigm case, a central case, of language, and we see in it a great deal that cries out for a philosophical explanation. John Searle's first paragraph of *Speech Acts* exemplifies this. Any of the questions he asks there after describing such a conversation would do. How do the sounds I make mean something? (Well, my goodness. Sounds? What sounds?) Apparently we see a great deal going on in that conversation which in the conversation would not be seen. We see acoustic blasts, meanings, using sentences, strings of noises, and a host of other things, all of them capable of raising puzzlements of the most difficult kind. The need to explain what language is and how it works is generated not by the two people conversing but by how we philosophers look at them and by what we think we see when we think about the conversation. The trouble is that what we think we see can be brought by us to the example, and the source from which we get what we bring to the example is our prior philosophical training, our philosophical temptations, our philosophical baggage, our begged questions. In the case of language we suppose that any two people conversing instantiate a mind-body split, and that language serves to help people to communicate by way of sounds (sensible, public events) that which would otherwise be hidden and invisible. After Wittgenstein, that seems suspicious. Perhaps we could slow down, articulate the steps by which we came to feel the questions are so pressing.

For another instance. We look at human beings looking out at the world and take that to be a situation which raises questions about the possibility of knowledge, and find questions then about the nature of empirical knowledge, the nature of perception and of reality. How can I be sure that the way I represent the world is right or indeed is even in the right ballpark? Isn't it the case that all the information which comes to me by way of my senses could be the same whether based on reality or based on some mental aberration, dream or hallucination? Have I any access to things in themselves other than by way of my senses? And when I reflect that other human beings are part of the world on which I look out, then it becomes puzzling how I could ever know the contents of another's mind. Again Wittgenstein might teach us to look at the thinking by which we have quickly and perhaps unawares led up to the questions, and to carefully and consciously retrace our steps. Doing so, we might begin to worry about the extent to which the basic picture of looking out at the world was framed in dualistic terms, terms which might be part of what is at issue rather than to be taken for granted or taken as calling for explanation.

Here's a result, then, which cannot be summarized as a specific claim on some philosophical problem. Rather, it is a recommendation regarding all philosophical problems. The recommendation is that instead of taking our task to be answering those problems we should instead take as our task to be paranoid, to be deeply questioning of the questions. When the recommendation is followed, however so hesitantly, one finds oneself on some of those questions having made silly mistakes. We have begged questions, we have been guided by overly simple pictures (often Platonist or dualist in spirit), we have engaged in debate only with people who also accede in the same crucial missteps we made, and we have finally said nothing to anyone outside that sphere defined by shared delusion. To the extent we find such things, it is more evidence for the advisability of paranoia.

This is deeply corrosive. It puts us at odds with most of the history of philosophy and at odds with

every single school of thought, western and eastern, which defines itself by its stances regarding the central problems in philosophy. Some then might think we are only saying with Mercutio "A plague on both your houses!" That is, this paranoia regarding the problems before we get to possible answers is anti-realist, but also anti-anti-realist. This is anti-idealist, but not by contradiction or denial, for it is also anti-physicalist or anti-materialist, and anti-pragmatist.

But we have not said the grimmest part yet--it also puts us at odds with our own reflexes, our own temptations, our own desires for answers. Are we Platonists regarding math? connectionists regarding mind? do we like intention-based semantics? pragmatism regarding truth? are we contextualists (or standpoint theorists) regarding knowledge? are we deconstructionists regarding texts and authorship? do we think arguments are objective and their validity is crucial to our work, or do we think that arguments are irredeemably expressions of ideology? If we said yes or no to any of those, then we have taken stands on philosophical issues without realizing we stand on quicksand. We have gone too far. We have to come back.

It may not be clear there is anywhere left to which we could come back. This is one of the hardest things to teach, that Wittgenstein is not a relativist, not an absolutist either. It is not the case that anything goes. It is not the case that there is one set of coherent answers by which all philosophical problems may be unified into one system. It is not the case that any position is as good as any other. It is not the case that there is one position which can be toted around and unpacked in the contexts of various issues. Nonsense, unintelligibility, begged questions, trotting along through the discipline guided by a primitive picture of how it's got to be--none of those are to be tolerated. But, then, operating without engaging in nonsense is also almost intolerable because we do want to explain, we want to figure out answers, very badly. So this first result, the result which requires us to be paranoid, is painful.

There's another result which cannot be stated as a claim regarding some problem. It has to do with ordinary language [you knew this was coming]. If we grant that there may be some reason for apprehension as we set up our problems, that it is possible for us to beg questions unawares, then we have to figure out how to achieve a kind of heightened consciousness as we embark on those first steps. We need to cultivate an ability to see when we are likely to be importing philosophical entities, when we might think we are seeing them in our examples though they are there because we have their silhouettes taped on the fronts of our flashlights. Looking for clues as to whether we have deluded ourselves or whether we have begged questions unawares as we set up our philosophical problems, we find we cannot rely on our philosophical reflexes, our philosophical background, our philosophical intuitions, our training in arguments, because the clues we need to see are partly meant to serve as a corrective for that training and that background when it leads us astray.

J.L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* could provide an example, in its treatment of the argument from illusion. The first premise of the argument from illusion, that the way things look to us now could be the same whether based on reality or on illusion, illicitly imports an entity, the way things look to us, into every instance of seeing; the entity which is imported winds up doing a great deal of the work of dividing the world into appearance and reality at the same time it does a great deal of work of carving the world into physical and mental, all without being argued; the clue that this entity is illicit is to be found in what we would say about seeing any time we are not doing philosophy. If we look to those cases, we find that the way something looks to us shows up in some particular cases but, conspicuously and clearly (though like a mill smokestack's plume that is no longer there) not where we need them for the argument.

So far we've got two results that go beyond making particular claims. One is paranoia. The other is recognition of a place for ordinary language examples.

The rest of this is leaping ahead. I'll suppose that given what I've said so far we could do work on an array of philosophical problems, enough work so we could begin to see some common threads in our results, enough work that we could anticipate the results of still further work. Were we to do this, I think we might come to understand why Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* has some of the thematic aspects it does. And we might begin to see how doing this kind of philosophy as therapy on philosophical problems (like psychotherapy on neuroses)--to see how this might have therapeutic implications which reach beyond philosophy.

Wittgenstein does have some themes. One already remarked on is to draw attention to how we often look at perfectly ordinary occurrences and how we think there is a great deal going on beneath the surface which cries out for philosophical explanation. That impulse to give a general explanation (e.g. of human beings looking out at and knowing about the world, of human beings conversing with each other, of justifying moral judgments, of names and the things of which they are the names) turns out often to be founded on our reading into the ordinary occurrences exactly the entities which then would, had they existed, require explanation. Another theme is the business of dismantling various aspects of Cartesian dualism--the identification of some things like understanding or meaning or sensation of pain as mental processes, the supposition that we learn our internal states purely by introspection. Another is our tendency to opt for Platonist explanations in the face of problems about universals and existence of categories.

Percy Shelley remarked that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," forgetting that the main bits of legislation he and his fellow Romantics were interested in were all cribbed from the German philosophers (and William Godwin channeling them into English) whom they sat around and read to each other. He should have said philosophers. Suppose we should be successful at doing the work revealed in those three themes remarked on above. What would that do? That is, suppose we should be more subtle and careful before we should think general explanations are required, that we should be successful at dismantling dualism, that we should understand names and categories without being Platonists. These are hardly imaginable, but suppose.

Platonism first, and most cursorily: one effect of Platonism is to shift our attention from here and now, from the thing in front of us, to something apprehended, as Plato suggests in the talk of the divided line, through the intellect. I'm not saying this is bad, unless it leads us to diminish unfairly the importance of what is front of us, what is specific and individual, in favor of an unfairly inflated abstract category. I'm passing over, of course, whether we need to answer any of those questions (what makes a thing the thing it is? why do we call a thing by its name? how are we able to speak consistently across contexts?) because we don't. There are things, contexts, examples, curiosities, problems, where intellect is just what is needed, but, usually, bringing out a chair to sit on the grass is not one. We are in an intellectual discipline, and so we may sometimes be inclined to think that intellect is always relevant. We may want, though, to be cautious about that.

To the extent that I am an arrogant intellectual product of Western academic history, it has been a hard lesson that much of the academy over-values the intellectual and underestimates nonintellectual virtues. (Please do not mistake this position as a kind of anti-intellectualism--I see the insight as one I got to by hard thinking, and I hope to teach it as a philosophical result.) Our theories of human beings

(economic, psychological, anthropological, sociological, philosophical models) have little to do with human lives. Among the circles of academic friends with whom I talk, we find ourselves taken aback by just about everything--by our kids' rebellions, by our own attractions, by the small satisfactions we get, from catching a trout on a fly we tied ourselves to coming over the ridge and seeing the ocean before us.

The theory of altruism leaves us baffled by instances of altruism. And there are a great many words one could substitute for "altruism" in that last sentence. The reflexive impulse to intellectualize our lives, to give a general explanation, winds up discounting these moments in which in fact we do live. Seeing them plainly and being present to them is a different matter from explaining them, as though a photographer should put down her camera and come around it into the scene. I think Wittgenstein probably had a great deal of trouble with this, but at least he recognizes it in himself. This at least raises the possibility that doing philosophy better might make us better at not discounting the particular moments in favor of the general explanation.

And dualism. My goodness. Consider some of the pathologies of dualism. We absorb dualism so deeply and so pervasively in this culture that it is like the air we breathe, so permeating our world that we cannot see it. Yet it divides and alienates for all that. Before we ever get to the mental aspects of human beings, the basic taken-for-granted part about our physical existence is an account that emphasizes separation, individuality, boundaries, countability and position and extension as though that were what we were. Human beings' bodies are bounded by their skins. Humans weigh a certain amount, should never be confused one with another, always have a particular location in space which cannot be the location of another human being at the same time no matter how much we might try, are individuals and separate. Separate from everything. Separate from the landscape, separate from the earth, separate from the universe, separate from our neighborhood and neighbors to the extent that loving them seems a paradoxical notion because it is flatly impossible. Nothing in the story about dualism overlaps with the other stories we might tell about being together or being a part of something, being in a group or family or couple or discipline or situation or church or pickle or love or neighborhood so thought I would stop by. Instead it is all about being alone and separate and divided by space from every other human being and we haven't even got to the place where we really live up there behind our eyes where we are pulling levers and shouting to the engine room. That's the other side, the mental.

The mental, especially to the extent that it is private and inaccessible to others, provides us with yet another grand set of dissociations and divisions and alienations, all in a realm that is already spectacularly separate, one that threatens to float isolated in a Never-never land beyond the reach of our friends and family. Characterizing the mental and the issues which arise in connection with the mental calls forth an array of horribly mixed metaphors. The relation of the mind to the body, however we would like to settle the philosophical problem (even mind-brain identity stories, founded on heroic denial, leave intact the problems about how my hopes that you will call can interact with my leaping to the phone when it rings), winds up being an account of how the captain on the bridge can understand the messages from the lookout and can convey orders to the engine room, an account which leaves me connected to my own feet by the most fragile and mysterious lines of communication--that is, if I am connected at all. Besides being characterized as a captain of a ship, the mind sometimes is conceived as an inner theater, or as a windowless room within which we live and on whose walls we see portrayed for us the world as the senses paint it, along with the world as we dream and imagine and hope and dread and hallucinate it, a room one could rent out if one were a brain in a vat. I pass over the part of this story about rationality as the one thing we can trust, rationality conceived as that faculty which evaluates

arguments impartially, and impartiality conceived as the deliberate dissociation (because they are never a help and often a hindrance) from our families, our bodies, our hopes and memories and histories of victories and defeats, our desires and our appreciations. But one clear result of the standard accounts of mind is that within the mind is where we exist with our thoughts and hopes and significances and associations and feelings and memories and dreams, and that in there each of us is irredeemably alone.

Wittgenstein has at both pieces of this account. It is part of his accomplishment that he increases our awareness of how many of our philosophical lines of thought rely on fragments of dualism, as though they are carriers of this recessive gene. "Only I can have my pain." Josiah Royce castigates people who would say, "Your pain is not the same as my pain, for your pain is much easier for me to bear" with the remark that pain is pain, after all, and this puts Royce on Wittgenstein's side in this battle against our own ontogeny. After all, it is not always the case that your pain is much easier for me to bear, not when I am speaking to our children or to lovers or when truly being compassionate.

Suffering with others is one clue that dismantling dualism might have a therapeutic effect on more than academic philosophy. Outside philosophy we easily acknowledge things which are of the greatest puzzlement to philosophers. "This is the same headache the previous tenants used to get." "She's a great one for stoicism, but I know she's in pain." "We're in this together." "Madame Chairman, I've not met the previous speaker, but I am of the same mind on this matter as he."

This therapeutic work might lead in part to a simple recognition. In this way it is reminiscent of some literature of enlightenment. It's a recognition which would prompt us to express humility on behalf of the profession of academic philosophy and on behalf of all of the academic world who have swallowed and now in their work express those unacknowledged bits of philosophical legislation. The recognition would be that in philosophy and in the academic world we are accounting for things which are not our property--we are accounting for knowledge, justice, language, art, science, argument--and that what we are giving accounts of are things we need to keep our eyes on. We have not done this. If we give, and we have given, an account of knowledge which has nothing to do with the cases in which people claim to know or ask whether someone knows or deny knowing or correct claims to know or confirm that they do know, then this is a clue that perhaps we have gone astray. And to the extent that we are working on accounts of what it is to be human beings, we might be led to a recognition that sometimes we are not alone in the way philosophy so quickly and deeply assumes we are. We'll need to keep our eyes on human beings too. Doing so, we might find that philosophy could rejoin the human race, be its ally and its friend.

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