Review of Ludwig Wittgenstein by Edward Kanterian (2007)

Michael Starks

ABSTRACT

Overall, it is first rate with accurate, sensitive and penetrating accounts of his life and thought in roughly chronological order, but, inevitably (i.e., like everyone else) it fails, in my view, to place his work in proper context and gets some critical points wrong. It is not made clear that philosophy is armchair psychology and that W was a pioneer in what later became cognitive or evolutionary psychology. One would not surmise from this book that he laid out the foundations of the modern concept of intentionality (roughly, personality or higher order thought) which has been further advanced by many (most notably in philosophy by John Searle in "The Construction of Social Reality" and "Rationality in Action").

There is no clear explanation of how W defined the class of potential actions, which he called dispositions or inclinations, (now often called propositional attitudes), differentiating them from perceptions, memories and actions and showing how they lack truth value. He notes that W spent much of his time discussing the foundations of mathematics but fails to provide any explanation as to how this relates to his work on language and logic. In fact, as W came to realize, they are all names for groups of functions of our innate psychology with many differences and none are dependent on the others. It is not really made clear that all our behavior depends on the unquestionable axioms of our evolved psychology and thus differs totally from the testable empirical facts which they enable us to discover. It is not explained that W's frequent references to "grammar" and to "language games" refer to our innate psychology. All these failings are the norm in behavioral studies.

He notes that W described thinking and other dispositions or inclinations (W's terms)-- (i.e., judging, feeling, remembering, believing etc.)-- as behaviors and not as mental activities but I don't see that he really makes it clear that another pioneering discovery of W's was that dispositions describe public actions and cannot be mental phenomena for the same reason that he so famously rejected the possibility of a private language.

He repeatedly and correctly notes (e.g., p176) that the core of W's work is the nature of language but (again the universal failing) does not make it clear that language is for humans (as opposed to animals) almost coextensive with thought (public behavior as W insisted) and thus with our evolved psychology. Like most people, philosophers or not, Kanterian has not followed W and taken the final step towards understanding and describing behavior from an evolutionary standpoint, the only viewpoint that makes sense of it, or indeed of anything.

Those wishing a comprehensive up to date framework for human behavior from the modern two systems view may consult my article The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language as Revealed in Wittgenstein and Searle 59p(2016). For all my articles on Wittgenstein and Searle see my e-book 'The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language in Wittgenstein and Searle 367p (2016). Those interested in all my writings in their most recent versions may consult my e-book Philosophy, Human Nature and the Collapse of Civilization - Articles and Reviews 2006-2016 662p (2016).

When thinking about Wittgenstein, I often recall the comment attributed to Cambridge Philosophy professor C.D.

Broad (who did not understand nor like him). 'Not offering the chair of philosophy to Wittgenstein would be like not offering the chair of physics to Einstein!" I think of him as the Einstein of intuitive psychology. Though born ten years later, he was likewise hatching ideas about the nature of reality at nearly the same time and in the same part of the world and like Einstein nearly died in WW1. Now suppose Einstein was a suicidal homosexual recluse with a difficult personality who published only one early version of his ideas that were confused and often mistaken, but became world famous; completely changed his ideas but for the next 30 years published nothing more, and knowledge of his new work in mostly garbled form diffused slowly from occasional lectures and students notes; that he died in 1951 leaving behind over 20,000 pages of mostly handwritten scribblings in German, composed of sentences or short paragraphs with, often, no clear relationship to sentences before or after; that these were cut and pasted from other notebooks written years earlier with notes in the margins, underlinings and crossed out words so that many sentences have multiple variants; that his literary executives cut this indigestible mass into pieces, leaving out what they wished and struggling with the monstrous task of capturing the correct meaning of sentences which were conveying utterly novel views of how the universe works and that they then published this material with agonizing slowness (not finished after half a century) with prefaces that contained no real explanation of what it was about; that he became as much notorious as famous due to many statements that all previous physics was a mistake and even nonsense and that virtually nobody understood his work, in spite of hundreds of books and tens of thousands of papers discussing it; that many physicists knew only his early work in which he had made a definitive summation of Newtonian physics stated in such extremely abstract and condensed form that it was impossible to decide what was being said; that he was then virtually forgotten and that most books and articles on the nature of the world and the diverse topics of modern physics had only passing and usually erroneous references to him and that many omitted him entirely; that to this day, half a century after his death, there were only a handful of people who really grasped the monumental consequences of what he had done. This, I claim, is precisely the situation with Wittgenstein.

Over half a century after his death and after decades of relative neglect (considering he is viewed by some as the greatest natural psychologist of all time) Wittgenstein is again attracting considerable attention. Though there are hundreds of books dealing wholely or in large part with him, few have really grasped his remarkable advances in understanding behavior, so this fresh look is most welcome.

Overall, it is first rate with accurate, sensitive and penetrating accounts of his life and thought in roughly chronological order, but, inevitably (ie, like everyone else) it fails, in my view, to place his work in proper context and gets some critical points wrong. It is not made clear that philosophy is armchair psychology and that W was a pioneer in what later became cognitive or evolutionary psychology. One would not surmise from this book that he laid out the foundations of the modern concept of intentionality (roughly, personality or higher order thought) which has been further advanced by many (most noteably in philosophy by John Searle in "The Construction of Social Reality" and "Rationality in Action").

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Kanterian notes (p41) that in W's first talk on philosophy, given in 1912 at the age of 23, he is reported to have said that philosophy is the totality of all propositions that are taken as unprovable and basic in science. If one understands that "philosophy" is observational psychology, and that "propositions" are sentences which depend for intelligibility (truth) on the innate axioms of our psychology, it appears that W understood the basic problem of philosophy (behavior), and its answer in what I see as the modern two systems of thought, right from the beginning—a feat few have accomplished to this day. He again made this crystal clear in a letter to Russell quoted by Kanterian (p86) in which he stated that the point of TLP :

"is the theory of what can be expressed by propositions –i.e., by language-(and which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown (*gezeigt*) which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy. "

Note also W's identification of thought with language and his rejection of the idea that there is, between language and thought, another entity such as "the language of thought", a point which he discussed directly and indirectly for the next 30 years but which still bedevils behavioral literature nearly a century later--another sad consequence of the oblivion to one of our greatest teachers.

Kanterian describes the famous distinction in W's Tractatus between what can be said and what can only be shown but does not explain that one can understand this in terms of W's later denotation of the difference between our axiomatic innate psychology, which submits to no test (e.g., this is my hand, I am reading this page etc.), and the factual or empirical applications of this evolved axiomatic system (i.e., our intentionality). Perhaps one should not fault Kanterian, since, to my knowledge, nobody else has noticed what I regard as this basic and essential interpretation of W's TLP either—though a few have noticed it in his later work. It is essential to understand this distinction because any description (following W's frequent injunction that we cannot EXPLAIN but only DESCRIBE our psychology) of animal behavior must do so in terms of evolution for the same reasons we must describe the genetics, physiology, anatomy and function of the heart in evolutionary terms. The alternative "blank slate" view that heart functioning is a matter of one's environment is just as preposterous for the brain.

He does a good job (eg, pg 170-171) of describing (as have others, notably Hacker) W's transition from the confusions of TLP to the clarity of his later work, but (again in my view following universal practice) does not really grasp that W's ideas of the "atomic facts" and "crystalline logic" that formed the foundations of his TLP world view evolved into the notions of an innate axiomatic psychology that he explicated for the last 20 years of his life.

He also notes (p80) that by discovering the innateness of "depth grammar" (i.e., our inherited psychology that makes language (thought) possible), W anticipated Chomsky and others by decades. I noticed this some 40 years ago but I have never seen anyone else point it out, so it's hats off to Kanterian!

With his penetrating understanding of our psychology, W was also prescient about larger issues such as the desireability of progress.

"It isn't absurd... to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately by known; that there is nothing good or desireable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are.") (Kanterian p114 from W's Culture and Value).

Kanterian quotes, without I think fully understanding its implications (again like everyone else so far as I know), another very fundamental discovery by W—our natural tendency to subsume all uses of a word or sentence under a single meaning rather than recognizing that eg, "space" is a complex family of uses or concepts (language games as W liked to call them) with quite different applications (meanings) in our life (our intentional psychology).

He notes that W described thinking and other dispositions or inclinations (W's terms)- - (i.e., judging, feeling, remembering, believing etc.)-- as behaviors and not as mental activities but I don't see that he really makes it clear that another pioneering discovery of W's was that dispositions describe public actions and cannot be mental phenomena for the same reason that he so famously rejected the possibility of a private language.

The probable evolutionary explanation for a route to such usage of disposition words seems to me to be that several hundred thousand years ago (give or take) when we evolved the ability to vocalize events, objects or actions (i.e., when an animal as agent was involved), sentences first substituted for them (get spear, hunt deer) and only later became usable in a dispositional or displaced manner (I want you to get the spear, I think we will hunt deer soon). Again, to my knowledge, W was the first to point this out in any detail with such examples as how pain language functions (see p 182).

Kanterian describes (p174) how W (so famously and notoriously) felt he had put an end to philosophy as it was understood and how most philosophers reject this view (or more commonly simply ignore it if they are aware of it at all), but his comments that this narrows the range of what we can know by abstract thought and that metaphysical questions make no sense, seem to me to completely miss the point. I think W just called our attention to the fact that "knowing" is another set of games or psychological functions which we can only accept as they are. Much (we might say ALL) of W's work can be seen as describing how "knowing" works and his last writings published as "On Certainty" regarded as the crowning achievement of his life (and of 20th century philosophy/psychology). Metaphysical questions have no traction because questioning the axioms of our psychology lacks a use in our life (this is not "really" my hand, maybe 2+2=4 is not "really" true, perhaps you are not reading this page, etc.). Abstract thought (games, music, math, literature, science) is limitless but entirely dependent on the axioms.

Kanterian is one of the rare persons who gets it correct (p185) that W rejects a "language of thought" for the same reason he rejects private languages and dispositions such as thinking, believing etc. as mental processes(p 180-183); namely that this would make it possible to make systematic mistakes in our "translations" of thoughts to actions (e.g., thinking "I want that apple" to saying "I want that apple") which is absurd. A translation could always be wrong and what test could tell us? We lack the criteria for correctness. We would then need some test for showing what we *really* thought! I might say "I want the apple" or " I don't want the apple" and what connects that to my thought—even for me? The words are my thoughts (approximately) which are descriptions of acts.

Kanterian also mentions that, in spite of the fact that a large percentage of W's writing concerned the philosophy (i.e., psychology) of mathematics, very little attention is paid to his work by most of those writing on the foundations of math over the last 50 years. Unfortunately he fails to tell us why. One reason is the nearly universal failure to understand what W has done as a result of his originality, style, failure to publish and premature death. Another is that it took so long to properly gather, translate and edit the 20,000 some pages of his *nachlass* that several generations have grown up without access to the full body of his work. Even to this day some of the German text remains untranslated and one of his most famous and largest works—The Big Typescript—was only translated and published in 2005. In addition, many who were regarded as experts on the subject of math and logic (e.g., Dummett, Kreisel, Chihara, Godel) totally failed to understand him and much of the writing by others on the foundations of math is not about its psychological foundations at all (of which they are generally oblivious) but about the details of how math is done. The few who have made progress in understanding his mathematical comments have been largely ignored (e.g., Gefwert, Shanker) or have published so recently that their work has not had time to diffuse (e.g., Rodych, Floyd). Those interested will find further comments and references in my other reviews. I claim that W's work on this is continuous with the rest of his corpus, and overall, the most original and stimulating ever done.

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