**The Ten Main Issues in Wittgenstein – A Teaching Paper**

Language is what separates us from other animals, and is why we are able to solve complex logical problems, and, as far as we can tell, experience consciousness.

Wittgenstein is the philosopher of language par excellence. He asks: what is the role of language in philosophy, and in the wider sphere of thinking in everyday life?

His writings have a reputation for being abstruse and scattered. This paper is an attempt to bring his main ideas together – mainly for the beginner, but also in the hope that it will provide and agenda for discussion by more experienced Wittgenstienians.

**1. Language Pictures the State of Affairs in the World**

Language is the basis of science, philosophy, and most of our views and opinions about the world. While music or the visual arts play a part in communication, it is language that we rely on for precise expression of our thoughts, actions and observations.

What does language do? Wittgenstein initially tried to answer that question in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

He thought that the world is structured and that it's structure is expressed through language. The language reflects the structure, particularly by allowing us to form grammatical sentences. So grammar reflects structure in the world. Words form thoughts as pictures, and language gives names to the pictures. The hearer hears words and sentences and makes the conversion back to pictures. The statement "that is blue sky over there" is understood by the hearer in terms of experiences of blueness, sky, distance, and the sentence holds these experiences for us, constructing a meaningful statement about the world.

Wittgenstein opens the Tractatus with the statement: "The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts not of things. What is the case - a fact - is the existence of states of affairs". He famously ends with the statement: "Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent". He has, in the course of a short book, tried to find out what we can know, and concluded that what we can know is limited by language. Many interpretations of this conclusion have been suggested. Perhaps the best is by Grayling, who does not consider it to be the positivist, pro-science statement that many have taken it to be, or a pre-postmodernist statement, but a "protection of value from fact".

In Tractatus Wittgenstein thought that he had proved that language was limited to factual statements which form a basis for empirical statements. While in ordinary experience it is extended to other uses, it loses it's accuracy and logical basis, and for making statements about the arts, consciousness, ethical issues, the mind, and, particularly, metaphysics, it is limited.

Having in this way dismissed language as of limited use for metaphysics, or any other activity which is not strictly scientific, he gave up philosophy for some years.

**2. Language Determines How We Structure the World**

Wittgenstein came back to philosophy because he started to realise that he had based his early conclusions on a misconception. The world is not necessarily structured. We only think it is because we use language to structure it. Language structures the world, not the other way round. What "seems reasonable" in the above paragraph is not reasonable at all.

Language is not only a means of expressing what we observe as the state of affairs in the world. Nor is it limited to factual statements. It is the means by which our minds make sense of the world. The work he did on this lasted the rest of his life, and it was contained mainly in a single posthumous publication, the Philosophical Investigations (PI).

The most important conclusion to draw from this new approach is that, outside empirical statements of the kind discussed in the Tractatus, false assumptions about what language is telling us can give misleading guidance in philosophy. Many philosophical arguments fall or become obscure when the meaning of the words and sentences being used is analysed. But as well as these obscurities language also provides possibilities for philosophical investigation. The nature of pain and sensation are not correlates of any natural thing, and are therefore hard to describe in language except by analogy. Concepts such as the good and truth, the staples of ethics and morality, give a lot of philosophical mileage because they are concepts that are (arguably) intuited and can only be understood in context. Both psychological and philosophical discourses are therefore both obscured by and dependent on language and the way we use it to describe and structure the world.

**3. Language Games**

Wittgenstein considers the word "game". It is difficult to define. We use it in many concepts, both with pastime type games (snakes and ladders), sport (football), trying to deceive (playing games with one another), party games (postman's knock) etc. It is a general term for a number of activities which have rules, are usually (but not always) played for entertainment, and which are often (but certainly not always) a contest. He uses this discussion as a jumping off point to describe what has become one of the classic theories of philosophy, the looseness of definition of words which allows us to play language games with one another without even realising it. Even the word game itself has several subtly different meanings. Words like good are always played out as language games: a good man, a good performance, a good experience etc. Our use of the word "good" in this way imbeds a meaning which is hard to define exactly, and which disqualifies good from being regarded as any sort of exact term except in closely defined contexts.

Wittgenstein writes of family resemblances between such words as "game"and "good". It epitomises his view that language itself is a fertile area for philosophical research, but a rather crude tool for logic and argument. His view of language was "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use".

While the vagueries of meaning imply that anything but picture words militates against reason, especially metaphysical modelling, we need to get busy and see what we mean by words, and test our meaning when tempted to build up theories outside mathematical proofs and physical science.

**4. Lack of a Private Language: Rules**

Wittgenstein's second major point about the nature of language is that it must be public. It is defined by it's use, and it's use is to communicate. It is a game that requires participation, co-operators, opponents, readers, listeners. It is used to communicate our perceived structure of the world to others. It is learned by use, experience, and trial and error. It becomes part of our being. It is not learned in the main, and certainly not wholly, by ostensive showing or demonstration.

It follows that to understand one another, we need to have rules of grammar. These rules, as in any other game, can be broken, are subject to continual revision, and to interpretation. Different conceptions of the rules by users can lead to misunderstandings, so widespread acceptance is paramount. There can be no private language - it would be futile. Language is a game with public rules set out by custom.

**5. Lack of Private Language: Inside - Outside**

Wittgenstein also used the impossibility of a Private Language to criticise Descartes, who assumed that we form a mental concept and then give voice to it. Wittgenstein says that we can only observe how people behave and what they say, and so our concepts about the world are received from others through language. He says "An inner process stands in need of outward criteria". The starting point of a concept is not in us; we process what we hear or read and pass it on, maybe with our own modifications, in turn based on mainly language communication from elsewhere. The mind (the inner) is entirely made up of our experience of the world (the outer) via language. There are no souls, "ghosts on the machine", duality or even introspection. Mind and the world are not dual entities because language connects to two. For these and other reasons, Wittgenstein has sometimes been taken for a behaviourist.

**6. Theories of Knowledge, Scepticism and Language**

What is agreed between us come from practical used of language. "Truth" is, according to Wittgenstein, the product of our agreement about the public use of language. We can't introspect our own minds without input and exchange with others; what is agreed through language in practice. There is no metaphysical, introspected concept of "truth" as such. Truth is to metaphysics as energy is to physics. In physics, energy can be defined and measured in units referable to standards kept in laboratories. But truth is a more subjective and received notion, and as a result metaphysics is built on shaky foundations compared to our knowledge as of the physical world.

It follows that scepticism in philosophy is a waste of time as sceptical problems cannot be solved because of the limits of public language rules used to investigate it. In the spectrum of theories of knowledge ranging from verificationist to introspective, Wittgenstein's linguistic, context based approach, with it's behaviourist overtones, is midway.

It is worth looking at the sceptical problem further revisiting the argument summarised elsewhere on this site, in Kant's View of the World:

It may not necessarily be the case that what we think is an object from observable evidence and reason is actually what the object is. There are optical illusions, and conjuring tricks. But there are also mistakes in observation and interpretation. Descartes famously said that God would not allow us to be fooled in such situations. Kant wanted to show, without invoking God, was that in fact an entity in the phenomenal world could in most normative cases be taken by the observing agent as real. His deduction is, however, widely regarded as inconclusive. It relies heavily on continuity of experience, reproducibility of reaction, and an assumption of the continuity of time.

In his excellent Very Short Introduction to Kant, Roger Scruton points out that none of these arguments completely deals with the problem. For a more satisfactory deduction, we have to wait for Wittgenstein, in his “Philosophical Investigations”, where he points out that all our understanding of objects involves language, and that language exists to make public our perception of objects. If there is an objective world, it is the world of language. There is no such thing as certainty about what is real and not real. Only a set of thought structures which each of us agree on, dependent on time and continuity and language, which is, fortunately, good enough for most practical judgments in the world. In practice, language exposes the world but limits what we can know.

**7. Metaphysical Theories**

Wittgenstein was against metaphysical theory, because each definition of a language game gives a different interpretation of a word or sentence in a different context. In philosophy, there can be no overall theories as there can in science. Many experts on Wittgenstein think this is overstating the case. An instruction such as "if you do theorise, mind your language" should suffice.

The missing ingredient from philosophical theorising is often causation, and reasons for actions are often therefore surmised. Some of this is down to the lack of empirical evidence, but also it is because of assumptions about the linkages between concepts which are not logical. In turn, the language in which the concept is described may suggest logical connections or causal factors which are not there, or are not present in other contexts.

Because of the tendency of modern philosophy to attempt to theorise in linkages of this kind, it tends to be scientistic in approach, to over simplify problems, to unreasonably inflate analogies, and to unwarranted dismissal of irregularities.

But all is not lost, says Wittgenstein. If we can't theorise we can still clarify, and often "dissolve" the problem. We can expose irrationalities. Above all, we can use philosophy as therapy, to banish misleading and disturbing chimeras.

Other experts see Wittgenstein's view of metaphysics as overly reductive. There may be many different kinds of truth, as the language game would imply. That being so they need to be identified, and the theory developed accordingly. It may need to become complex and multilayered, or limited to a certain context. But we shouldn't give up easily. Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Hobbes, or Maddison in his work on the US constitution, or Mill who influenced him, have managed to understand the good and the true sufficiently in their contexts to develop the meaningful, wide ranging concepts on which Western society is based. Rather we should eschew trite theories which are based on misleading linguistic constructs, while at the same time lacking empirical proof.

**8. The Language of Emotions, Pain, and Feelings**

We can describe how fast a vehicle is travelling in metres per second, we can say that the vehicle is blue or compare it with a chart of various shades of blue to be more exact. The first is a physical measurement, the second not necessarily a physical measurement (although we could measure the wavelength of the reflections from the car) so much as a partially successful attempt to grade our perceptual response to the shade of blue we see by reference.

When it comes to feelings, the problem becomes more difficult. How do you accurately describe the intensity of a pain? As with our perceptual response to shades of blue, we could make neurological test to find the electrical response of the nerves responding to the pain. But responses may differ even then, because other psycho-physical factor come into play. There is no simple chart we can turn to. And, of major interest to Wittgenstein, we cannot describe it accurately in words.

We can't accurately compare our pain with someone else's. Yet we learn to identify it, as we learn all linguistic responses, from others. This is a typical inner-outer problem. If the inner exists at all, it only consists of what the outer has given to it. Our view of our feelings does not start from us. We learn to identify it from others.

Wittgenstein also points to the difficulty of describing sensation except by analogy with external reference. We describe smells or tastes, for example, by referring to something else that smells approximately the same. A smell of violets, for example, or a taste of oranges. Such identification is not an introspective process, but a matter of public demonstration of psychological states using language within its rules and constructs. That is, there is no introspection, no inner responding to the outer, only ostensible analogies.

Sensation and pain also share the same difficulty of perception with respect to memory. Is the pain in my large today better or worse than yesterday? Does this meat or fish smell the same to say as yesterday? We can't recall it, or re-feel it, or even measure it. We can only recognise it from how we represent it to ourselves, and our recollection of how we received it yesterday. It is also confusing that we describe, for example, ownership in the same terms for objects as for sensations. Compare "I have a car" with "I have a pain".

Emotional intelligence is therefore unreliable. There is an asymmetry in our lives. We can feel our own sensations and our own emotions, but we cannot accurately identify their intensity in others. This cannot be assisted by measurement, only by received descriptions, through language, by us (into our inner) from description by others (from the outer) so that our inner exists only a pale reflection of the outer. It is not something that we can use to add to knowledge by introspecting. This illustrates Wittgenstein's view that philosophy can help us clarify and understand, but without empirical input it cannot add to knowledge.

**9. The Psychology of Perception**

The psychology of perception is something Wittgenstein realises toward the end of the second an final part of Philosophical Investigations.

He looks at visual imaging, which we can share through language. If you describe a room to me, I can visualise it to a greater or lesser extent depending on the vividness of your description. But I cannot see beyond your description. If you do not say a thing is in the room, I cannot assume that it is even though it may have been there (assuming it is a real room) and you forgot to mention it. The image could be represented better (that is to say, more accurately) in a picture. But even then I cannot see beyond what the picture tells me - what is hidden behind a chair, for example.

Once again, the inner is received from the outer, and it can add nothing to it. The inner is only filled in by the outer. As with sensation and emotion, the inner will gain nothing from introspection, and it is only partially shareable.

We fail to recognise things, and miss things on crowds. We concentrate on one thing and miss another. "The elephant in the room" of the cliche has been replicated by a film of a chimpanzee dancing in a room which observers miss if they are told to look for something else such as count the number of black shoes worn by the dancers. Our attention is diverted. The rules and structure of our observation and the fact that what we receive as knowledge is only as good as what we base it on coming to us from outside ourselves, and the lack of our ability to add to it by introspection without further empirical input, limits our knowledge to perception, which is always incomplete. It allows us to be fooled by charlatans, marketing men, philosophers, politicians, rhetoricians.

Furthermore, we add an intellectual component of our own. This is not introspection but interpretation.

In this final part of Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein starts to move away from language to pictures, and also expression of emotion. But the rules are the same, and his analysis follows a similar line.

**10. Criticism and Conclusions**

When he was alive, Wittgenstein was a genuine celebrity in the world of philosophy. He was regarded as probably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. This reputation has been modified somewhat since his death, but many still regard him as a revolutionary who left the whole of philosophy in a quite different position from that in which he found it. Certainly his founding of a school of linguistic philosophy, which, together with it's many branches (not necessarily due to Wittgenstein but to others such as Austin and Ryle and their followers) has dominated the whole of philosophy since the mid twentieth century, and which is still flourishing.

But what is suspect about his work? Some of the most telling criticism has come from Grayling, in his early monograph. His points are worth listing:

the Tractatus oversimplifies language as a sum of propositions connected by a picturing relationship, a criticism Wittgenstein made of it himself;

in spite of the reputation of Wittgenstein, based largely, according to Grayling, on his vagueness and personality, his influence on his contemporaries in the linguistic philosophy ​field is actually very small. The great British linguistic philosophers of the twentieth century (Austin, Ryle, Moore, Broad, Russell and Ayer) have taken little notice of him;

he is too reliant on the notion that language is all important to philosophy. Language is not always vague, it can be very precise, and not all philosophy is so dependent on language as Wittgenstein seems to think;

he is wrong to say that we can dissolve error and rely on our understanding of language in context without further analysis;

​equally he is wrong to say that philosophy's job is to dissolve error and not build ​explanatory systems;

he is also inconsistent in his opposition to theory. In fact, he sets out a workable theory, as set out in 1 to 9 above, especially as regards language games, private language, structure and rules, and the philosophy of mind.

These points are telling, but not damning. It is debatable whether or not Wittgenstein is as great a philosopher as some of his disciples claim, but his ideas are useful astringents to much philosophical discourse which relies too much on grand theorising, is scientistic, seeks to establish laws and theories where none exist, and where analysis claims too much.

When doing philosophy, "watch your language" is good advice.

**Further Reading**

The following give good accounts of Wittgenstein's work:

A Very Short Introduction to Wittgenstein by A. C. Grayling (Oxford, 1988 and 1996)

Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations by Marie McGinn (Routledge, 1997)

Dialogue 15 of The Great Philosophers by Brian Magee, in conversation with John Searle (BBC Books, 1987)

Dialogue 5 of Talking Philosophy by Brian Magee, in conversation with Anthony Quinton (Oxford, 1978).

New York Times, 3 March 2013: Was Wittgenstein Right? by Paul Horwich

New York Times 5 March 2013: Of Flies and Philosophers: Wittgenstein and Philosophy by Michael P. Lynch

Two excellent books by Ray Monk: Ludwig Wittgenstien: The Duty of Genius (2012)

​ How to Read Wittgenstein (2005)