

Review of Paradox and Platitude in Wittgenstein's Philosophy by David Pears (2006)

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ABSTRACT

Pears is an eminent philosopher, notable among W scholars for his "The False Prison: a study of the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy" in 2 volumes published 20 years ago. Based on these facts I expected some deep insights into W in the current volume. There were certainly some good points but overall it was profoundly disappointing. All of behavioral science is about our innate human nature and since W was the first to elucidate the axioms of our universal psychology, I expected this to be front and center in a work written during the golden age of evolutionary and cognitive psychology and with much good recent work on W appearing. However one would never guess from this book that W or philosophy had any connection with psychology or indeed that there is such a thing as evolutionary psychology. Hence, I cannot recommend Pears works and recommend a framework for rationality totally lacking in Pears (and most writing on human behavior).

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).

Reflecting on Wittgenstein (W) brings to mind a comment attributed to Cambridge Philosophy professor C.D. Broad (who did not understand nor like him) which ran something like 'Not offering the chair of philosophy to Wittgenstein would be like not offering the chair of physics to Einstein!' I think of Wittgenstein 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 scribbles 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.

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There were certainly some good points but overall it was profoundly disappointing. All of behavioral science is about our innate human nature and since W was the first to elucidate the axioms of our universal psychology, I expected this to be front and center in a work written during the golden age of evolutionary and cognitive psychology and with much good recent work on W appearing.

However one would never guess from this book that W or philosophy had any connection with psychology or indeed that there is such a thing as evolutionary psychology. If we understand that our brain, like our heart is governed by genes and functions automatically according to its evolved axioms, W and

all psychology make sense. If not, then animal behavior is, to paraphrase Toynbee, just one damn thing after another. But Pears does not have a clue. He starts (page ix) by saying “How can our thought and language possibly have internal standards of correctness” and claiming that “This is the central paradox of Wittgenstein’s later Philosophy.” Of course everything in our body runs on “internal standards”(genes) and the paradox is that 150 years after Darwin, and with our every thought and action manifesting this, there are still people who do not get it. He tells us the writings of our greatest natural psychologist (which at age 76 and after reading countless hundreds of books and thousands of papers I still find some of the most exhilarating and brilliant prose I have ever seen) are “flat and platitudinous”!! What this means is that, like most who read W, most of the time he just does not really get the point.

He starts with W’s early work, which, as all know, W later rejected. If you understand that it contains W’s first attempts to lay bare the foundations of our intentional psychology, and know his later work, the *Tractatus* mostly makes good sense, but if like Pears (and just about everyone else) you do not, then it seems bombastic nonsense.

He tells us (p18) that it is very difficult to say what W’s answer to the question of linguistic regularity is, but I claim that it is totally transparent—our evolved intentional psychology, which W outlined with the greatest detail and clarity in over 20,000 pages included in his *nachlass*, most of it now translated and published in some 20 books and several searchable CDROM’s, all available on Amazon and p2p. In fact at the bottom of the same page he has a long quote which ends “What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases.” (PI 1 S201). It’s not an interpretation but regularity due to innate rules and W makes this point in countless ways throughout his corpus. Pears then says that the extra resource is “vaguely human nature” but there is nothing more vague about this than about the fact that our blood is pumped by the heart.

On the next page he says we impose regularities on our thoughts to understand the world but our innate psychology is automatic and the cultural extensions are trivial (agency, causality, space and time, ontology etc are not modifiable). And so it goes throughout the book—obliviousness to the overweening dominance of our evolutionary psychology and conflation of it with our learned extensions. This is of course the almost universal mistake of regarding humans as blank slates. Wittgenstein refutes it on nearly every page, if you know how to read him. The best recent refutation of blank slateism is Pinker’s ‘The Blank Slate.’

On p27 he says W rejects the a priori as the source of regularity, citing the above passage in PI, but this is clearly wrong in this case and shows a total (but extremely common) failure to get W’s constantly repeated point. At the bottom of pg 30 he quotes a passage he thinks is “cryptic” but it’s quite clear to me. W explains that we are hypnotized by the vague words “grasped in a flash,” which have various uses but we know perfectly well what they *mean* (ie, how they are used in a given context) and that is the end of it. As he says many places, the problem is not to find the answer but to recognize it as the answer.

Though there is much of value here as Pears has extensive quotes and good discussion, he ultimately always wanders off the path. In his discussion of private language, after noting W's demolition of the concept of the private object, he says it's too far reaching as it could be used to eliminate something that "actually did occur" in the mind. He just does not get that there is no test for "actually did occur" in the absence of a public language. Again on the next page (57) he does not understand W's famous manometer example which repeats this same point. Again, he correctly states (p41) that "His leading idea is that the language in which we report sensations owes its meaning to their connections with the physical world and cannot survive separation from it." But, he does not tell us that this applies to all language about "inner processes" (ie, thinking, believing, intending, imagining, etc) and that the connections are the public criteria, without which we have no way to decide when a term is correctly applied. On p42 he says Stroud made a new interpretation of W's objection, namely that we could not give ourselves an ostensive definition (ie, point to an apple to remind ourself of the word for it) but this seems to me to be just another way to state his objection. Isn't this just the same as saying we have no criteria since there is still no test unless it's shared (eg, how do we know that we remember the word correctly—we could have some mental quirk or get hit on the head and not use the right word or use several—this after all happens quite normally in our life and the cure is to ask someone or look in a dictionary etc.).

Such mistakes are repeated throughout the book and forces us to classify this as another contribution to the mountain of literature which gravely misrepresents W and by so doing, misunderstands our evolved psychology.

Likewise Chap 4 on W's treatment of logical necessity shows a near total failure to understand him. W commented in great detail from many different perspectives and made it very clear that logic, like language, math, music and games is an extension of our innate psychological axioms and he explained via long explications of examples how this works and how easily we are misled. Nevertheless, like most, Pears manages to badly confuse the situation time and again. Though W was not entirely consistent and clear (we are after all looking at unpublished and largely unedited notes) he spoke many, many times of the innate nature of our psychology (and logic) and definitely did not believe we "create" it (Pears p67). He pointed out with countless examples how we must be born with all the basic capacities of logic, math and language (thought) in order to create its myriad extensions. On p71 Pears says we can have no conception of reality in its "raw unconceptualized state" which happens if we "subtract our own intellectual contribution", but it was W's constantly made point that this sort of language lacks sense—lacks any clearly defined use in our life (e.g., what is the test that distinguishes between a "raw" and "cooked" view of a tree?). W noted that nearly anyone who starts to philosophize (ie, to talk about behavior rather than just behaving—ie, using words in context) immediately goes astray and this book, like most, illustrates this continually. The very quotes that Pears uses give deep insights into this process, provided one has the insight to understand them. One has only to go back and forth between the (mostly) surgically precise dissections of examples by W and the (usually) vague generalizations by others to see the hopelessness of much behavioral discourse.

On p74 Pears attributes to W the view that “logically necessary truths are not tested in anything like the way that contingent truths are tested” but W clearly and constantly showed that there is not, and there cannot be, any test for the innate axioms of our psychology since they are themselves the basis for testing. On p78 he again shows a fundamental failure to grasp W (and so our intentional psychology) when he quotes from his RFM: “The truth of the proposition, that  $4+1=5$ , is so to speak, *overdetermined*. Overdetermined by this, that the result of the operation is defined to be the criterion that this operation has been carried out.” Pears claims that this “new necessary truth is adopted arbitrarily” and that this sort of situation created a problem which W “tried, but failed, to solve later” but I claim that he solved it splendidly by showing that this “problem” instantiates our innate axiomatic psychology, which determines the necessary modes of operation of math, logic, language, thought and life. This is the most basic point about behavior and everything about life and the world, for nothing makes sense except in the light of evolution.

On p91 he claims that W did “less than justice” to our natural tendency to our research and “proof in logic as the discovery of necessary truth” but in fact W exhaustively explores the operation of and relations between logic, math and language as “necessary truths” (i.e., expressions of our innate psychology), and states again and again that their extensions (i.e., all of math, logic, music, art, language, games etc.) are *inventions*, not discoveries. Otherwise, we have to say that Michelangelo “discovered” David in the block of marble and anyone else might have done so as well. Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics and much of his other work explores the ideas of necessity and compulsion to get a result vs. prediction of results. We ought to keep in mind that W claims that all we can do is to give clear descriptions of how we behave (ie, use language, logic, math etc.) and that we cannot give explanations. Also, W’s point in his later work was not that certainty is based on “truth by definition” (Pears p93) but rather that if we comprehend a situation at all, the truth or falsity of statements about it come free with our understanding. Part of the problem is that Pears constantly refers back to the TLP, dragging its confusions into Wittgenstein’s later work.

On nearly every page of every book and article in philosophy and to a lesser extent in all the behavioral sciences, much of science, politics, religion and everyday discourse, we see the same confusions that W so brilliantly described in his works beginning 80 years ago (with clear anticipations in his earliest comments nearly a century ago). Whenever people stop using language in the normal flow of life and try to step back and talk about behavior (language, mind, meaning, god, truth, the world etc.) they nearly always go astray. One of the many simple and beautiful statements of this is quoted by Pears (p42):

“Time and again the attempt is made to use language to limit the world and set it in relief—but it can’t be done. The self-evidence of the world expresses itself in the very fact that language can and only does refer to it. For since language only derives the way in which it means, its meaning, from the world, no language is conceivable that does not represent this world.” Wittgenstein  
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Of course we have to pay our dues with years of study to understand this in depth—in our bones. No pain, no gain.

I suggest that those wishing to understand W, or anything deep about behavior, might wish to begin with one of his least studied works—‘Remarks on the foundations of Mathematics’. It will likely strike most as austere, boring, obvious, repetitious and trivial, when it is not hopelessly obscure, but for the persistent and perspicacious who approach it as what I claim it is—one of the clearest, most careful and penetrating analyses of the basic mechanisms of how the mind (language (thought), math, logic) works ever written, it will gradually open the eyes in a revelatory manner. The seemingly picayune belaboring of the obvious regarding proofs, propositions, meaning, and interpretation, with the aim of clearly describing (not explaining as W so often insisted) the actual role of these words (concepts) in our real practice, is the pain and the dawning of understanding of our mind and our life is the gain.

In the last chapter on ego, though there are many good points, Pears again disappoints by failing repeatedly to get W’s point that when it comes to the first person point of view and our presence in the world, there are no tests, nothing that can make us say “Oh yes I was mistaken –I was not the one who had that pain!” E.g., on p125 he says that there are cases where “some doubt is cast on the referential character of ‘I’”, and on p127 that he is “unconvincing” and “implausible” in describing the difference between the use of ‘I’ and “he” but W constantly stresses that there is no possibility of such doubt as the game of doubt applies only when there is a test and what test is there for the pain belonging to myself? Again on p128 Pears refers to “the usual criteria of personal identity” when W has exhaustively explained that normally we do not have any such criteria.

Of course these topics are by no means easy and we have no choice but to take W at his word in each of his raw unedited notes, often isolated from a satisfactory context. However I have found that as one gets a better acquaintance with him (especially using the searchable CDROM of his English books as well as that of the entire German *nachlass*, both widely available in libraries and on p2p), I find that W is rarely mistaken. W explains with many examples how we are led to misunderstand the role of language and give way to the pernicious urge to look deeper. Few can accept our innate psychology for what it is and resist that urge and Pears is not among them.

Those interested in all my writings in their most recent versions may download from this site my e-book ‘Language Games of Philosophy, Psychology, Science and Religion - Articles and Reviews 2006-2016’ by Michael Starks First Ed. 648p (2016).