

Wittgenstein and God

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Br Vincent Magat OP takes us on the road from the Tractatus to the Philosophical Investigations and back.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was born into a rich Jewish family that had only recently converted to Christianity. The family was marked at once by an abundance of genius and an abundance of suffering, both of which are represented time and again in his own life. His own work in philosophy flourished only despite the wishes and plans of his parents, though the fate of some of his siblings was much more tragic.

His philosophical work can be roughly divided into two parts, the first defined by mathematical logic, the later by language. During both periods, Wittgenstein was concerned with the limits of what logic or language can in fact communicate, aiming to develop a methodology that could eliminate the kind of problems that arise in philosophy only when logic or language are stretched beyond their proper bounds.

As a logician, Wittgenstein's brilliance quickly outpaced that of his master, Bertrand Russell, but his early work is clearly restricted by the narrowness and technicality of the subject matter and by a tortured inner life that sought absolute clarity or death. The Tractatus, the major work of the early period, presents a fascinating worldview of precision and accuracy based and organized entirely around the rigors and dogmatism of mathematical logic. In this context, morality, religion or the self only survive as the 'mystical', a precarious category occupying the limit of intelligibility, whose exact nature is disputed by commentators.

In the Philosophical Investigations, the major work of the later period, Wittgenstein switched his attention to language, which possesses a broader scope than the technicality of logic and which regulates and determines relation within areas of human life which mathematical logic rightly finds unintelligible. Many commentators however assume that by rejecting the narrowness of the tractarian world, Wittgenstein has also rejected the 'mystical', which no longer needs to specify the limits of intelligibility.

What I propose to argue however, is that while the first period of Wittgenstein's philosophical work showed that scientific logic must be silent about (and before) God, in the second period, he set out to liberate philosophy from science and reassert once again a fruitful way for humanity to speak about life, universe and (nearly) everything, without thereby excluding the peculiar worldview proper to science developed in the Tractatus. ~

'The world is the totality of facts'[1] and 'the world is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts.'[2] Few books of philosophy begin with such frankness and certainty, especially if they are one of the first major works of the given author. It is perhaps in part for this reason, that Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus has too often been misunderstood as an exercise in metaphysics, the last hoorah of a now outmoded way of thinking that received here its final champion and, in Wittgenstein's later works, also its final defeat. But does the seemingly radical reworking of Wittgenstein's own thought in the Philosophical Investigations really refute the doctrine of the Tractatus? Or does it instead help to locate it better and thus in fact sharpen the focus on a number of leading ideas?

Quite apart from the intentions or disposition of the author, the most striking feature of the opening sections of the Tractatus is the immediacy of the facts Wittgenstein subjects to analysis. At once dissolved into their constitutive elements, yet instantly reformed, at once the smallest building blocks of reality, yet at the same time the totality of what is, Wittgenstein seems to have the world at his fingertips in a way that philosophy after Descartes has rarely dared to affirm at all and certainly not at the outset of the investigation. Without condescension, Wittgenstein's manner may well remind one of a child enthralled with a collection of Lego pieces, because in the child's hand and imagination each piece takes on the seemingly limitless capacity for being combined with other elements, as Wittgenstein himself affirmed. One is at once immediately in touch with reality as it is, but also, and with equal immediacy, open to all possible worlds, to the limits of imagination.

Wittgenstein's philosophy naturally moves beyond the awareness of the child, though not in its technical brilliance, nor in finding new ways to combine or distinguish, but in being mindful of the transcendental conditions of such an awareness. Underneath his discussion of the facts of the world, Wittgenstein implicitly unravels another account marked also by the self-same immediacy. That is, in Wittgenstein's mind, the world of contingent facts, of obtaining and non-obtaining states of affairs, functions only on the back of an analytic a priori logical structure that determines the character of reality. But, if Wittgenstein's philosophy has a thoroughgoing immediacy about it that is entirely lacking in any edifice constructed atop Cartesian doubt or in Kantian idealism, it is because this structure, these transcendental conditions are recognised as ones that ought never to be put into words.

Language is thus affirmed as being able to communicate any and all of the contingent facts and obtaining states of affairs, but it also must reflect in some way the logical structure of the world. While the former aspect is essentially propositional, the later is proto-propositional, communicating in the very structure of language those things that are essentially unsayable, but which alone make language possible. Moreover, falling into the Wittgensteinian category of

things that cannot be said strengthens rather than reduces their importance, for it implies that Wittgenstein accepted them for deeper reasons than claims about contingent factual truth. Since to put essentially true things into language is necessarily to imply the possibility of their being denied, thereby irrevocably falsifying them, Wittgenstein came to believe that "propositions cannot express anything sublime";[3] and that the truly important things in life are not among those whereof one may speak. Thus in certain circumstances, language cannot but vulgarise what it attempts to capture, while silence can be pregnant with importance that surpasses the resources of language itself.

To make these points Wittgenstein did of course have to cross the boundary of what he considered sayable and he clearly realised the implications for his own book. Thus the sobering warning at the end: "… anyone who understands me eventually recognises [the propositions of this book] as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) … and then he will see the world aright." [4] However, far from destroying his project, this apparent own goal serves to highlight an important aspect of education and of the process of upbringing, while also perhaps elucidating the reason this brilliant logician and philosopher gave up his craft for a decade in order to become a primary school teacher. That is, the teaching of the principles of any science broadly conceived, involves the putting into words of truths that can be grasped only one step beyond the words of the teacher and beyond the science itself. Thus, when denied for whatever reason, including aimless rebellion, the science and its teacher ought to be brought to their knees in a most eloquent silence that shows what language can only express crudely as: these simply are things which cannot be denied. [5] ~

Here it is useful to distinguish the proto-propositional truths so far considered from extra-propositional flights of fancy, properly impossible thoughts made vaguely possible only by illusionary twists of language. It is the former that carry supreme importance in the tractarian world and from among the list of these that Wittgenstein proposes, two areas are especially relevant for this essay: Wittgenstein's views on morality and religion.

Since neither morality nor the existence of God can be counted among the contingent facts of the world, neither are subject to being put into language. In the case of morality, it either means that morality does not exist and is therefore extra-propositional, making the word "ought" essentially meaningless, or it is elevated to the status of the unbreakable logic of the world. Morality either is not, or it is the same for all possible universes and all possible times, an element of the irrevocable order of the world that God himself cannot alter. Relativism of any sort is thus excluded as a matter of definition, but one does not thereby move a step closer to resolving the dilemma. Nor, it seems, can one actually move any closer, taking the nature of tractarian logic into account; though the celebrated own goal may well here function as the first intimation of a direction Wittgenstein was to embrace in his later work.

In the case of the existence of God, similar logic must be embraced in the tractarian world: God either is, or is not and the possibility of any debate about this point obtains only on account of another extra-propositional trick of language. Perhaps here, Wittgenstein is in some way indebted to his Jewish heritage and its profound devout silence before God even when he does reveal his name. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides long ago argued that making God an element of mere human intellection and speech immediately falsifies the ineffable mystery, and similar arguments can be found in St. Thomas Aquinas and in the mystical writings of Master Eckhart and others. However, perhaps the most eloquent testament is given by the Carmelite saints John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, both of whom were prolific writers on matters spiritual but whose eloquence failed at what may well appear to be the crucial point for justifying the whole edifice. The beauty and rigor of their teaching depends on the moment of silence, when, we believe, they beheld God face to face.

Nietzsche's approach to the question of God fits surprisingly well into this context, because it makes explicit one crucial move in the logic of the Tractatus, whose importance could otherwise be missed. For Nietzsche, the nonexistence of God is a matter of instinct, because it is also the matter of a simple syllogism. As soon as one asks the question whether God is, one has already placed reason above God and then God must of necessity die of the will to truth, since as subject to reason, he can no longer retain his claim to the supreme metaphysical status.

The same pattern of logic is applied in the Tractatus to the question of the status of the ego, with the same conclusion. Since the self is the point of view from which all experience and reasoning proceeds, it cannot be a possible object within the world to be encountered. Nor can it be simply posited as waiting on the other side of a divide between experience and reality that finds no support in the tractarian world and must be discarded as yet another extra-propositional illusion. Instead, the "metaphysical subject" is the inner limit itself, the unplaced point of view and, as Wittgenstein indicates, an empty point without magnitude. [6] In this context, the question of other minds cannot arise unless one begins to open up the tractarian world to elements of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as Elizabeth Anscombe does. But even in her commentary on the Tractatus, the metaphysical subject, though divisible into individual persons speaking a common language, retains a strange, but crucial unity thus making the tractarian world a whole that is fully and immediately knowable (though not fully or immediately known) in all its aspects from a unified perspective.

The dilemma concerning morality and God can now be partially resolved in this direction: The tractarian world has sacrificed all obstacles for the sake of absolute knowability, which other forms of philosophy have obscured or rejected. Wittgenstein is correct to reintroduce it forcefully into contention by restating its rigor and respectability that were lost

under the influence of Descartes. Moreover, unlike materialism, naturalism and other forms of reductionism, those elements that were sacrificed for the sake of absolute clarity are not discarded but exulted by Wittgenstein. Although they do not find a place in the tractarian world and although one must pass over them in silence (that which cannot be said cannot be whistled either), they are nonetheless present. They are neither in the world, nor on the other side of an impossible divide, but in that point without extension, in the subject that remains to float freely above the collections of objects, states of affairs and facts. This is, I believe, not only the direction the Tractatus makes its own, but also the direction in which Wittgenstein's critique of the Tractatus in the opening sections of the Philosophical Investigations leads.

In at least six general theses covering roughly the first one hundred sections of the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein criticises the narrowness of the tractarian world and seeks to open up philosophy to, or rather remind it of, the richness of human experience in the world. Perhaps it was the ten years spent as a primary school teacher that opened up Wittgenstein's mind to elements of human life which needed to be taught besides the natural sciences in order to furnish a child with the capacities necessary for human flourishing, but which analytic philosophy under the guidance of Wittgenstein's mentor, Bertrand Russell, had prevented him from exploring. The common thread throughout his critique of the Tractatus is the 'unnaturalness' of the assimilation and simplification forced upon many aspects of human life for the sake of clarity. Even if these elements are retained in the exalted transcendental form I argued for above, their status is nonetheless obscured by the many faced nature of silence. Sadly, the devout profundity of the Jews (mirrored in an interesting way in Raymond Gaita's ethical philosophy) and the silent eloquence of the teacher are comparatively rare occurrences in contrast to indifference, ignorance and outright stupidity.

Here however, we are already moving along lines contrary to Saul Kripke's interpretation of the Philosophical Investigations that significantly influenced the first few decades of Wittgensteinian scholarship and to a large extent determined Wittgenstein's reception in analytic philosophy. For Kripke and other anti-metaphysicians, the metaphysical subject and its resources hinted at above are replaced in the Philosophical Investigations by communitarian models of rule followers that revolve around assertion rather than the immediacy of contact with reality as Wittgenstein had hitherto argued for. If there is a richness in humanity, this approach in effect argues it is built entirely on wilful differentiation and cultural relativism.

Wittgenstein's self-criticism does not, however, have to be read in this light. Far from relativising everything, Wittgenstein may well be interpreted as adding substance to those issues which in the Tractatus were shunned for the sake of clarity. What has pushed the ego, morality, God and other issues into the realm of the metaphysical has been the fact that they are not objects of a particular kind of experience and thus cannot be expressed in the kind of language that retains the immediacy of experiencing the material objects of the world. But inasmuch as they nonetheless are objects of human experience broadly defined, Wittgenstein now finds room for them by redefining language away from a uniform picture theory to a many layered approach that can sustain its application to varied sui generis spheres or language games. That is, on the one hand, what was once impossible to speak of in the tractarian world is now speakable in its own specialised area of language, without though on the other hand, discarding completely the idea of an essential limit. Contrary to Kripke, Wittgenstein's methodology ought to be interpreted along quietist lines, a methodology that seeks peace and at the point of the resolution of all problems, seeks also the end of philosophy. In this way, the silent immediacy of the 'metaphysical' indicated in the Tractatus can be found even in Wittgenstein's later works.

Without exploring this area fully (for it deserves its own treatment in another article), it is useful to illustrate this point by a simple, but often forgotten example: the purpose behind being raised in a tradition or a culture is that one affirms and makes one's own the traditions one is initiated into. As the principle behind education is affirmative acquisition, so cultural formation, in the midst of which alone can critical faculties be acquired, is a gift given which must not be spurned easily or at all, extreme examples apart. The ideal governing culture is that each child initiated into it can safely make it his or her own without fear, without the need for continual questioning and with the distinct possibility of enriching and bettering it further. It can thus be said, that it is where philosophy ends that one's engagement with culture really begins. ~

The richness of the world opened to philosophy in the Philosophical Investigations does not, however, ipso facto exclude the stern rigor or the narrow scope of the tractarian world. Although it is made difficult by those who misinterpret the Tractatus as an exercise in metaphysics, it is in fact possible to argue that Wittgenstein's first book instead outlined the philosophy of the scientific method with which analytic philosophy has been, and continues to be, pre-occupied. The narrowness, immediacy, rigor and single-mindedness which duly borders on solipsism in the scientific search for the 'view from nowhere', are proper to physical sciences and their methodological denial of semantics. John McDowell underscores this fact well by attempting to enrich analytic philosophy in respect of the breath of human and thus philosophical endeavor, while retaining unchanged the scientific attitude, the dehumanised first nature worldview. The richness of the Philosophical Investigations thus complements and locates the rigor of the Tractatus as a subsection of the total field of excellence proper to man, without forcing semantics onto physical science, or physical science onto semantics.

This leads to the inescapable conclusion that the natural sciences rightly look upon God with total incomprehension and

with all the reservations Wittgenstein expressed in the Tractatus. All propositions of science are of equal value and there is thus no value to speak of in the world, nor can God reveal himself in the world without thereby silencing science.[7] The dilemma concerning his existence, partially resolved by the rediscovery of the 'metaphysical' locus of the subject and brought to its completion when Wittgenstein's philosophy opened its eyes to all aspects of the human world, remains unsolved for the scientific world and rightly so. On the one hand science can indeed boast of its immediate access to the world and its technical proficiency, but on the other, it must be wary of invading or denying areas that are not properly its own. In the later cases, the apparent wisdom of the scientist does nothing but reflect the bruises of his futile attempts to run against the walls of his own methodology, failing to realise the true wisdom Wittgenstein went back to primary school to rediscover. It is only in light of the Philosophical Investigations then, that the vanishing of the problem of life[8] at the conclusion of the Tractatus can be seen in its proper light: at once excluded from the view of natural sciences, yet retaining undiminished importance for human life as a whole.

[1] Tractatus, 1.1[2] Tractatus, 1.11. emphasis proper.[3] Tractatus, 6.42.[4] Tractatus, 6.54.[5] To even consider relativism at this point is already to sin against the world.[6] Tractatus, 5.64.[7] Tractatus, 6.4, 6.432.[8] Tractatus, 6.521.