

## Wittgenstein on Philosophy

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The paragraphs 109 to 133 put forward a very striking conception of philosophy. It is very hard to interpret paragraph 128 in any way other than a blatant case of self-defeat. It says that all philosophical theses would be agreed to by everyone. Yet it is a philosophical thesis that is not agreed to by everyone. (At least I don't agree with it.) So it is false. The only ways out of this look like denying that 128 is a thesis and denying it is philosophical.

Since the German word 'Thesen' used here basically just means claim, it can hardly be denied it is a thesis. It is conceivable that Wittgenstein is using 'Thesen' here to talk about distinctive kinds of claims, but there is little textual support for that.

The better position is to deny that 128 is philosophical. That way we get consistency. But to make this denial we need a reason to say that it is not philosophical. In this handout I'll put forward one idea about what Wittgenstein may have meant by 'philosophy' here that could have that consequence. The result is that 128 is dubious, but not obviously *false*.

### *Soames's Interpretation*

Soames interprets Wittgenstein as making the following argument

1. No philosophical theses are empirical (in paragraph 109)
2. All true philosophical theses are necessarily true (from 1)
3. All true philosophical theses are a priori knowable (from 2)
4. All true philosophical theses are analytic (from 3)
5. All true philosophical theses are trivial (from 4)

And 5 is just what he is saying in 128. The problem, says Soames, is that the inference from 2 to 3 is invalid. That's true, but I'm not sure it would matter, since the inference from 1 to 3 directly is plausibly valid. In any case, I think there are many reasons to doubt that anything like this is Wittgenstein's argument.

First, the textual evidence for Wittgenstein's believing 1 is a little weaker than Soames represents. The word 'empirical' crops up twice in 109, and nowhere else that Soames mentions. But at least one of those appearances, the first, is a rather dubious translation. Perhaps the second use is enough to ground Soames's premise though.

Second, Wittgenstein doesn't really talk about necessity in anything like our sense. So it is unlikely that his argument goes via our concept of necessity.

Third, Wittgenstein took seriously the Kantian idea that some propositions are synthetic despite being a priori. (He mentions that the distribution of primes might afford some examples of this.) So if this was his reasoning he'd balk at moving from 3 to 4.

Finally, he makes a point in 124 of distinguishing mathematics from philosophy. If all he cared about here was the modal status of philosophical claims, as Soames suggests, he wouldn't have the resources or the inclination to make that distinction.

### *Practical Implications of this Section*

Before we get to interpretation I want to note two different kinds of implications you might draw from the overall tone of the section. (By the section here I mean 109 to 133.)

Many philosophers seem to agree with the claim in paragraph 38 that "Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday." And there are a lot of claims in this section that back up that way of looking at things, especially in 116 and 117. The view of those paragraphs seems to be that to understand the meaning of a philosophically significant term, such as 'knows', we have to see how it is used in ordinary settings.

There is an obvious practical implication to be drawn here, namely that we should shy away from the use of bizarre philosophical examples. Followers of this strand of Wittgenstein's thought are strongly opposed to the kind of fantasy/science-fiction example you commonly see in many debates in metaphysics (esp causation and personal identity). Rather, they say, you should look at more ordinary uses of the word to see what it really means.

But this isn't the only strand of thought in the section. Wittgenstein also says that philosophical problems arise because we are "running up against the limits of language" (119), and suggests that by looking more closely at language itself we'll get greater clarity in our philosophical work. Now Wittgenstein doesn't say this, but the practical implications of *this* advice might be quite different, indeed opposite in force, to the previous suggestion. As David Lewis always used to say when introducing some new example about wizards or brain-transplants or amnesiac Gods or whatever, what is striking about these examples is how smoothly our ordinary terms apply to them. An ordinary person who is competent to make judgments about causation can tell that it's this wizard not that one who caused the prince to turn into a frog (or whatever).

For an example of this in action, consider contextualist theories in epistemology. Contextualists say that problems about knowledge (or at least some of them) arise because we don't realise that 'knows' is context-dependent, like an indexical. Figuring out whether this is true requires some careful attention to how 'knows' behaves in non-standard contexts, as well as some general knowledge about syntax and semantics. It's not really the kind of thing you do if you take 116 and 117 particularly seriously. (Though there is a causal chain I think from Wittgenstein to Rogers Albritton to Keith DeRose in this debate, so we shouldn't overstate the disconnect here.) But this kind of analysis is what you should do if you think the philosophical problems arise as we 'bump our heads against the limits of language'.

Now of course this kind of analysis is not what Wittgenstein does. When he investigates language he uses stylised examples (as we all do) but his usually involve *removing* complications from the language rather than adding them. But note that this doesn't follow from just the claim that we should focus on the ordinary use of language. Perhaps we could learn more about ordinary uses by isolating out some of the terms and using them in extraordinary ways. This is somewhat similar to what Chomsky does when he says that the behaviour of *wanna* in questions tells us a lot about ordinary grammar. Laboratories usually don't look like the environments they are set up to study. But Wittgenstein doesn't take this path, and I think he doesn't because he has a special view about what features of language the philosopher should be looking for.

#### *How Philosophical Puzzles Arise*

Here's a fairly typical (if extremely stylised) example of a philosophical puzzle. When we start to think about free will we can easily find the following two claims plausible (at least in the sense of it being worth investigating whether they can be made perfectly true by adding suitable caveats).

6. If I am the cause of my doing X, then my doing X is free.
7. If something wholly distinct from me is the complete cause of my doing X, then my doing X was not free.

The problem is that these two claims are inconsistent. Consider a causal chain where earlier steps are complete causes of everything that comes after them, where the first step is something wholly distinct from me (say the Big Bang), where I (or my decision-making) am the penultimate step, and my doing X is the last step. Since I cause my doing X, 6 says it is a free action. Since the Big Bang causes my doing X, 7 says it is not free. Either that kind of causal chain is impossible, or 6 and 7 are inconsistent. But that kind of causal chain is not impossible, in fact it is the most common thing in the world. So we're completely stuck.

Perhaps tinkering with the antecedents of 6 or 7 will help here, though I doubt it. Perhaps we can learn to live without one or other of these two, and there are plenty of smart philosophers who have put forward views trying to convince us which of these is correct. The reason that there's a philosophical problem here, however, is that both of the claims may strike us as being plausibly true. The standard way to present the free will problem is using determination rather than causation, but I think it is more persuasive this way. In any case, the example doesn't matter because the general picture, that philosophical puzzles arise when we are attracted by incompatible theses is easy to see instantiated.

Our colleague to be, Matti Eklund, has worked this into an interesting philosophical picture. One very popular line of thought, inspired both by the 'meaning is use' strand in Wittgenstein and some work in proof theory, is that the meanings of expressions is given by their 'inferential role'. That is, to understand what a word means just is to be disposed to make the canonical inferences using that word. Most people who work in this tradition (and it is a *very* large tradition nowadays) think that the inferences you have to accept for understanding are *valid* inferences. If it's part of the meaning of *F* that all *F*s are *G*s, i.e. if you have to be disposed to infer from *That's F* to *That's G* in order to understand *F*, then it is true that all *F*s are *G*s. Matti worked on developing a theory where we drop that requirement. Some of the inferences that we have to be disposed to accept in order to understand the term are incorrect. Indeed, in some cases they lead to inconsistency.

This is meant to explain why philosophical problems are so resilient. The picture (and I don't want to commit Matti to saying anything about the particular case of free will) is that if you don't find *both* 6 and 7 compelling, then you haven't really grasped what we're ordinarily talking about when we talk about free will. Well that's not quite the picture, because 6 and 7 need some massaging, but that's the rough picture. You shouldn't *ultimately* accept these, because as noted they are inconsistent. But you better find them compelling if you want to know what we're talking about.

### *Wittgenstein (Finally)*

This is where I think Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy comes in. Let's posit that Wittgenstein believes the following three things.

- Matti's views about meaning are broadly correct; to understand some terms is to be disposed to accept various claims involving them, and philosophical puzzles arise because these claims are inconsistent
- It is the business of the philosopher to state as clearly as possible what these principles are
- It is not the business of the philosopher to resolve the paradox that arises

If you read Wittgenstein as endorsing these claims, the whole passage makes sense. A philosophical thesis would just be the kind of thing you have to be disposed to endorse if you understand it at all, because philosophy is just about stating principles like 6 and 7, which is why in 128 he says that once you state a philosophical thesis everyone will agree with it. Because we're just setting up the paradoxes not resolving them we 'leave language as it is'. The view is descriptive, not explanatory as 109 says. To be sure, we are explaining the sense of puzzlement, but that's just the kind of 'therapy' Wittgenstein says philosophy can do. It's because meanings have disparate, and competing, strands that we can explain what's going on in "I didn't mean it like that" things, as in 125. It's all about getting clear on what the contradictions are (125) and doing what is possible before new advances (126). It's not the kind of thing that fancy mathematics can help solve (124).

Further on the interpretative point compare paragraph 599 (from a part of the book we certainly won't be getting to)

599 In philosophy we do not draw conclusions. "But it must be like this!" is not a philosophical proposition. Philosophy only states what everyone admits.

### *Evaluation*

The position I'm attributing to Wittgenstein is consistent. What grounds might we have for believing it? The first bullet point is a big topic of debate, and I won't go into it here. But it is the kind of thing one finds natural if you're moved by the examples from earlier in the book to thinking that linguistic understanding is a matter of practical skills, rather than dictionary internalisation. And the second bullet point should be uncontroversial. The tricky thing is what to say about the third bullet point. Why isn't solving these problems the business of philosophy?

Here I have to guess even more than before, but I don't think Wittgenstein endorses a uniform solution to this question. As I see it (imagine him seeing it) there are two cases to consider.

- Cases where the tension should be resolved by someone else
- Cases where the tension has no resolution, where all we can do is learn to live with the inconsistency

Matti's view, by the way, is that philosophers can sometimes have a role to play here, though I suspect he assigns a smaller role to philosophers than others (say, me) do. But I imagine Wittgenstein thinks the cases divide into those two.

In the first category are those puzzles that should be resolved by others. Some problems that seem like philosophical problems at first are best resolved by science. Maybe problems about mind/brain interaction, or about the nature of time, or the nature of perception are like this. Philosophers can state the problem clearly, say why we feel a problem, scientists solve it. Perhaps some problems can be solved by logicians and mathematicians. I suspect that's the point of the distinction between philosophy and mathematical logic in 124. The semantic paradoxes (one of Matti's favourite examples of inconsistent meaning principles) could be like that.

In the second category are puzzles that no one will solve, and hence philosophers won't solve them. These are puzzles to which the solution would be analytic if it exists, because science and mathematics will be of no use here. But there's nothing to meaning over and above the principles, and the principles are, as Ronald Reagan might have said, part of the problem not part of the solution. There just isn't anything in our meaning that makes it the case that 6 is true and 7 false, or vice versa. And there isn't anything in science or mathematics either. So there just isn't a solution to be found.

This I think is why Wittgenstein doesn't think the philosophers' method of extreme (and often extremely gruesome) examples is of no use. That method is usually used to push us towards thinking that one or other principle can be dropped. But really all it could do is raise a situation where one of the principles is operative, and that makes us think it is really the true one. What I mean by 'operative' here is that to get by with these terms governed by inconsistent rules, we have to have practices that guide us towards only appealing to one of these rules in a particular situation. Philosophical examples just appeal to these practices, which presumably aren't part of the meaning. (We might ask why not, though in raising this I don't want to suggest that Wittgenstein or his followers couldn't provide an answer.)