

## OBSERVATIONS ON WITTGENSTEIN

*Popular Appeal.* Wittgenstein attracted followers during his lifetime, many of whom went as far as to imitate the kind of shopping bag he used, his plimsolls, the kind of bed he slept in, as well as his casual mode of dress. They would be present to give their unconditional support whenever he spoke in public, and this for a thinker who did practically nothing but criticize. Such things indicate strongly that what was really involved here was not philosophy, because philosophy by its very nature creates a certain independence of its teachers through the very act of understanding them. If his appeal was and is to people who feel the need to join cults, it could only mean that truth was taking second place to personal agendas.

The fact that his only published work was a book of about fifty pages of unargued assertions adds to his appeal for those whose interest in philosophy is peripheral. His concluding statement that "That whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," could on the one hand be a claim to a vast and inexpressible knowledge, while on the other hand it could fold away into a mere truism, like "you can't get a quart into a pint pot," if anyone argued with it. This kind of statement is typical of what is liable to appeal to cultists. His life revealed a very strange mixture of dynamism and dominance, along with a drifting, feckless and rather empty life. This is why he is most likely to attract people who suffer more from inner conflicts than from a desire for truth.

Wittgenstein most famously asserted that philosophical problems were really only verbal puzzles, and would disappear when words were used correctly. This gave rise to the objection

voiced by Popper that we must be able to identify verbal puzzles, and to do that, we should have to cope with real problems. In other words, the Verbal Puzzle Principle cannot itself be a verbal puzzle. This is clearly analogous with the fact that the Verification Principle is not verifiable, but when that was found to be the case, the VP was abandoned, because those involved were to their credit *bona fide* thinkers engaging in philosophy, and not in a form of underground religion.

It is different with the Verbal Puzzle Principle, however; although Ernest Geilner has shown how self-contradictory it is, few of its adepts have abandoned it. This is another indication that what is involved here is not philosophy, no matter how much the word may be used. Wittgenstein has clearly told a lot of people something which they very much want to be told, revealing a kind of genius which more usually comes to the top in politics. Gaps in the argument are filled with dogmatism, as I shall try to show, and criticism is held off by a systematic lack of unity and coherence. This is why Popper said he could not disagree with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* because there was nothing in it worthy of disagreement.

**A Question of All or Some.** One can reasonably say that some philosophical problems are verbal puzzles, or even that most philosophical problems are, and these are observations

which could be tested case by case. But the moment when, like Wittgenstein, one asserts that *all* philosophical problems are verbal puzzles, one is setting up a principle, a "theory of everything" which must by definition be more than an effect of a verbal puzzle. Words have to connect authentically with realities, and not just with other words, if this kind of thought is to be established. To work out how this principle applies to actual cases, and how it divides valid statements from invalid, can only mean real problems.

For the same reason, this conception also fails the test of creativity, which continually requires one to distinguish real content from verbalism. An obscure passage may convey something significant, even though not well expressed, or it may be a puzzle owing to a confusion between words and things. If this idea were applied to mathematics, could anyone believe that mathematical problems were just puzzles generated by the notation we use to express them? It may be said that mathematical problems are different in that they have definitive solutions that mathematicians have to agree upon. Conclusions of philosophy are not unassailable in this way, and for that reason, it may be argued that they are mere puzzles, but that is to assume that there can be no knowledge above the level of that at which ideas correspond to individual concretes or to individual abstractions. In reality, metaphysical thought applies by definition to intelligibles with a universality far beyond individuals, and in this case there is no reason why there should be a one-to-one correspondence between such truths and the formulations by which they are expressed. For this reason, they can always be disputed in various ways without their essential content being invalidated.

Wittgenstein's criticism of philosophy is thus comparable to an attempt to show that the purpose of physics is to make collections of instrument readings. Never mind how stupid such an attempt would be, it would be very hard to refute on the level of facts and individual concretes. According to Edmonds and Eidinow,

"The kernel of Popper's critique (of Wittgenstein) was this. If Wittgenstein wants to reject out of court a question in the form. of 'Can anything be both red and green all over?', then he needs to explain on what grounds. To differentiate propositions that are acceptable from those that are not, some sort of *theory of meaning* is required. And this must be a *problem*, not a puzzle.

Wittgenstein's claim that there are only puzzles is itself a philosophical claim, Popper asserts. This claim may be correct, in the context of purely practical and non-intellective thought, but Wittgenstein has to prove his case, not assert it. While trying to prove it, he must be drawn into a debate about a real problem, the problem of justifying the exact position of his frontier between sense and nonsense. So even if most philosophy was about puzzles rather than problems, there must therefore be at least this one problem. Wittgenstein had foreseen this objection, but his response was to remain mute. (There was obviously nothing else he could do! ) Just as in the *Tractatus* the pictorial relation between language and the world could not itself be pictured, so to try to mark the boundary between sense and nonsense was to trespass over this very same boundary. 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. ' "( *Wittgenstein 's Poker*, Ch.20, pp.201-202, D.Edmonds and J.Eidinow).

If Wittgenstein were right, it would mean that none of the great philosophers ever understood philosophy, or what it was really about, since they nearly all thought that philosophical problems were real. This clearly does not include complete sceptics like Pyrrho, who quite consistently denied any positive role to philosophy. But the question, how can this position be adopted by a philosopher who believes that some sort of real answer can always be found for what are taken to be problems? The question of madness is worth considering here, because any normal mind would know itself well enough to know whether it was essentially sceptical or whether it believed it could find truth of some kind. Wittgenstein apparently never perceived these alternatives.

To return to the former point, no one ever dreams of claiming that none of the great composers ever understood music, or that Shakespeare and the translators of the King James Bible did not understand how to use the English language, or that none of the great theologians ever understood Christianity. In all claims of this kind, there is a basic incomprehension which it could be represented by someone measuring the Imperial Standard Yard with a tape measure, and saying he has found it to be too long or too short. What is involved in this is what I call the Fallacy of Paradigmatic Inversion. What might be called the paradigm or "gold standard" of any art or science cannot be judged in terms of anything derivative from it or simply external to it. That Wittgenstein never took this into account can be seen from the fact that he never studied any of the great philosophies at first hand, but only what modern philosophers like Russell had said about them. It is therefore questionable as to how far he understood what he was attacking.

It is an academic sin to attack a book which one has never read, so what should be said about a thinker who attacked a whole philosophical tradition he had never read? He is in any case open to the vulgar assumption that one is bound to want to attack something which one has never really understood; even if this were not true of Wittgenstein himself, it is surely true of many of the linguistic philosophers who have arisen in his wake. The idea that philosophy was "just about words" fits perfectly with the ignorant and self-defensive prejudice of many of those who know nothing about the subject. Any other subject which one did not understand could likewise be travestied as a cult of words. Consequently, it is only just that followers of Wittgenstein today feel they have to make the same kind of complaint against Post Modernism as orthodox philosophers made against Wittgenstein.

The followers of Wittgenstein believe him to be profound because he took the position that ultimate reality could not be conveyed in words, hinting that he was acquainted with it in his "That whereof one cannot speak . . ." The flimsiness of this position has been made perfectly clear by Bryan Magee, where he points out that while words may not be able to convey noumenal reality, they are just as little able to convey something as commonplace as, say, eating a ham sandwich. Similarly is there any verbal expression to convey the crumpled shape made by a towel when it falls to the floor? Facts like this reveal pretension for what it is. In this case, why was Wittgenstein making this deficiency of language into an issue, if he understood the peculiarity of language involved?

On one level, if we use the word "convey" in the way we say that a pipe conveys water or a bus conveys passengers, it is clear enough that language as such never conveys anything. So then, why does language work? The well-tried answer is that, no matter what the subject, words need only to trigger the appropriate memories in the persons to whom they are addressed.

Thus for example, they may evoke memories of having eaten sandwiches the same as, or similar to, the one referred to, just as, in a very different context, they may invoke memories of a fleeting experience of some supernatural reality. In this way, and in this way alone, words can be said to "convey" the things they are about. On one level they convey things, and on another level they do not. Possibly Wittgenstein never understood this ambivalence, and remained wedded to a materialistic idea of words supposedly trying to convey realities as pipes convey water.

This question is very relevant to the nature of man and of philosophy. It appears that we can convey knowledge in words because vast knowledge is native to every rational soul, even though it is in submerged, confused and disarticulated forms. Philosophy can in this case bring latent knowledge up to the surface when it awakens vague memories, so that the hidden truths can be cleaned and polished, so to speak, and placed in conscious relations to others. Thus philosophy, when it is true to itself, is a means to self-realization.

***Real Problems and Morality.*** Wittgenstein's philosophy is not one which is likely to sustain a social conscience. Moral issues, along with the application of values generally, belong unavoidably in the class of philosophical problems, which are represented as verbal puzzles. If moral issues were, on this basis, mere puzzles, we would have a right to ignore them in the outside world and be free from any involvement in them. This negative conclusion was rejected by both Russell and Popper, who were deeply involved in the public issues of the day, whereas Wittgenstein was not.

It was always recognized that one might justifiably not have a social conscience if one is sufficiently engaged with more subtle problems, but here for the first time, one has a philosophy according to which one does not even need any justification for this kind of non-involvement. The big, threatening world can thus be made to look small and harmless, and the whole difference between authentic or meaningful behaviour and meaningless or inauthentic is either blurred or even non-existent. This makes self-judgement easy and unthreatening, hence the seductive attraction of a form of thought which can guarantee emotional comfort. Worldliness and otherworldliness, supposedly exclusive, are in this way blended: the denial of worldly realities does not imply any corresponding affirmation of spiritual or divine reality. Instead, the real and the true can be taken for whatever one feels them to be at any given time. There is no general theory of reality to relate oneself to, just a manipulation of ideas according to various developments of common sense thinking.

Similar remarks apply to religious beliefs wherever they have any application in the world. At the same time, the conception of the Unspeakable allows room for a vaguely-conceived God who can be believed in without any particular religious commitments. One's creative endeavours, whether in the spiritual sphere or elsewhere, are not an issue because they too involve the solution of real problems. In this way, the satisfaction that creativity can afford is pre-empted by linguistic philosophy, even if one does next to nothing. Thought and experience outside the "box" of ordinary life are either suspect or unreal, and the effect is thus both very democratic while at the same time allowing a sense of superiority owing to the demands of confining the real to common sense. Thus the elect and the democratic are combined as well as the worldly and the otherworldly, but with what kind of justification?



***Words in Relation to Words.*** Words are undoubtedly *things* of a certain kind, and this creates problems for the hypothesis that they can relate only to other words. The realm of things is also that of real problems, and if words do not relate to things then *neither can they relate to other words*, and there is no reason to object to post-modernism. Here is the central self-contradiction in linguistic philosophy, showing it to be a mere movement of transition between traditional philosophy as an exploration of reality, and post-modernism for which the very idea of meaning is discarded.

Since it is no easier to prove that words relate to other words than to prove that they relate to problems, the ideas of "meaning," "meaningful," and "related to" can only be pieces of residual metaphysics in a linguistic philosophy. They are not discarded by the disciples of Wittgenstein, however, because they are pragmatically necessary for there to be a semblance of philosophy, but that is not enough to put it into a category different from that of post-modernism.

One cannot draw a distinction except by means of a concept which transcends both sides of this distinction. Thus to claim that one side of the distinction includes the whole of one's universe of discourse is to deny the possibility of defining one's position in relation to any others. This in fact is what happens when all philosophy is classified as verbal puzzles, and the refusal to engage with anything except as a puzzle denies one the right to explain what constitutes one's position. But there is a kind of consistency here, because to define linguistic philosophy would be to think outside the realm of puzzles, however briefly. This style of philosophy depends on the thing it denies: that the relations between words are real relations

and give rise to real problems. Such an option is like jumping off a cliff in the belief that one could stop when one wanted to, while the inevitable impact with reality is manifest in post-modernism.

The contention that philosophical problems are just verbal puzzles is not separable from parallel cases, such as the contention that promises are "just words." If one fails to keep a promise, why may not that be justified in this way? In either case, the connection between words and things is denied. Those who are inclined to accept Wittgenstein's view of puzzles may suppose that it is in a common class with the scientific claim that diamonds consist solely of carbon atoms. In this case, we take it for granted that scientists obtained real diamonds, reduced them to carbon, and created diamonds out of carbon in the laboratory. No one supposes that scientists just pronounced diamonds to be carbon because that conclusion suited them, but this is in fact the case where linguistic philosophy is concerned.

Its claim does not result from any engagement with real problems or objective issues, because they are not admitted to be real. Here, one argues in a circle: one cannot engage with problems because they are only a mask for puzzles, and they are said to be puzzles to justify this avoidance of them. This shows a refusal to think critically about one's own position, even though there may be nothing but criticism for everything else. Here is a parallel with the systems of Freudianism and Marxism which are mysteriously immune from the critical method they apply to everything else. As for the circularity of the linguistic position, this shows a parallel with the thinking of those who believed in witchcraft. That belief was also exempt from actual experience of the activity in question, where this inexperience was presented as a merit, not a deficiency, and it too proceeded on the assumption that it did not need to prove its position. Sub-rational thinking and paranoia are mixed in equal proportions in either case, as might be expected of minds which

have a problem with the outside world which they cannot solve on its own terms.

*Provisional Truth.* Another source of confusion which can work in favour of linguistic philosophy concerns the general practice of reasoning from presuppositions which are provisionally held to be true. In such cases, the logical implications of the presuppositions are developed, and if the results are convincing, and have some explanatory value, one can then accept the presuppositions as proven. This is common knowledge, and it leads some people to suppose that Wittgenstein's method is really just the same as this. He starts by assuming that problems are verbal puzzles, and then uses his method to reduce problems to puzzles, on his terms at least. Does not this serve as retrospective proof of the initial proposition that problems are puzzles in the same way as in the general case, referred to above? In fact it does not, because in this case the applications of the presupposition do not develop it at all, but merely reiterate it. There is no *deduction* of puzzles from problems or vice versa, instead one asserts that a puzzle is there and proceeds to find it; the connection with problems *per se* is never made.

This means that linguistic philosophers are really proving that problems can be treated as *if* they were puzzles, which is a conclusion so trivial that no one could have any reason to either assert or deny it. If the facts that a dessert spoon can be treated as if it were a gardening trowel, a book can be treated as kindling wood, and public property can be treated as if it were one's own, give us no knowledge of spoons, books and public ownership, why should this kind of philosophy reveal anything about problems as such? Such questions are not pressed as a rule, because this involves a doctrine which is willingly believed in because of the escapist and nihilistic pleasure it gives. As such it is a key part of the modern cult of reductionism.

To bring psychology into a discussion of this kind is not normally legitimate, because philosophical truth is not affected in itself by the subjective conditions of its exponents, but in this case there should be an exception because linguistic philosophy itself depends on a mingling of the philosophical with the psychological. This is another fundamental objection to it. A puzzle is by definition personal, individual and *subjective*; it only exists because of some limitation in the faculties of the person concerned. As such, it gives no one a right to assume that all other persons must experience the same thing as well. Likewise, it provides no means of proving that this condition applies to other persons, since a puzzle is an essentially personal problem. On the other hand, problems properly so-called are objective realities, their nature and content being the same for all, regardless of how easy or difficult it may appear to different minds.

Consequently, if all problems are treated as puzzles, one has no means of knowing whether one is speaking of objective reality or merely about oneself. The distinction between the objective and the subjective is thus systematically suppressed. When one calls something a puzzle, one should therefore say for whom it is a puzzle, but that would expose the deception, the re-branding of the subjective as objective. Here is the self-contradiction of this kind of thinking: we are taught on the one hand that words relate only to other words, while on the other hand, this kind of thinking connects with physical reality sufficiently to influence people's minds and lives.