

Ludwig Wittgenstein



- Born 1889, in Vienna; Passed away 1951, in Cambridge
- Came to England in 1908 to study engineering at Manchester
- Moved to Cambridge in 1911 to study philosophy of mathematics with Russell
- Wrote the 1st of his 2 major works (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) while a prisoner of war in Italy in 1918
- Pursued various non-academic careers (teacher, architect) in Vienna before returning to Cambridge in 1929
- Completed his 2nd major work (*Philosophical Investigations*) in 1945 but withdrew it from publication at the last minute
- For more, check the BBC radio doc at <http://goo.gl/wIv2j>

THE TRACTATUS

His work

- Wittgenstein (henceforth 'W') was one of the most idiosyncratic 20thC philosophers
- He made influential, if typically cryptic, contributions to the study of metaphysics, language, logic and mind
- His outlook radically changed over his career:
 - *TLP*: an abstract, grand theory of the manner in which language represents world
 - *PI*: a patchwork of comments and observations relating to the complexities of language as a social practise, reneging on most of his previous claims
- Continuities include an alleged resolvability of philosophical problems through a better grasp of the workings of language

Overview

- The spirit of *TLP* is captured in the famous statement
'What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about, we must consign to silence'
- W's key aims:
 - To (i) provide a theory of what meaningful sentences 'really' ultimately mean and hence (ii) outline the boundaries of what can be expressed in language
- Root of interest in (ii): conviction that philosophical problems arise from attempting to transgress these boundaries
- In spite of its apparent rigour, *TLP* is a deeply puzzling piece, whose exegesis is far from settled

The style of *TLP*

- *TLP* has a 'peculiar literary character' (Ogden): a long numbered list of terse propositions offered with little or no argument
 - '1 The world is everything that is the case.
 - 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
 - 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts.
 - 1.12 For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case.
 - 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
 - 1.2 The world divides into facts
 - 1.21 Any one can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remain the same.'

Atomic sentences

- **Logical atomists** like W took these chains of determination to bottom out with **atomic sentences**
- For him, atomic sentences are such that
 - their individual truth values are not determined by the truth values of any other sentences
 - their individual truth values are mutually independent
 - their collective truth values determine the truth values of all other meaningful sentences
- Question: what determines the partition for *atomic* sentences?
- W takes atomic sentences to be **arrangements** of **names**
- They are used to assert the existence of particular **atomic states of affairs**—arrangements of **simple objects**—in the world

Meaning, truth conditions and complex sentences

- A popular ('**truth conditional**') way of thinking about the meaning of a sentence *S*:
 - a **partition** of the space of **possible worlds** (ways the world could have been) into those in which *S* is true and those in which *S* is false
- Question: what *determines* this partition for a sentence?
- For many sentences (**complex sentences**), the truth value of that sentence in a world is determined by that of *further* sentences
E.g.: 'He jumped out of bed and ran downstairs'
- Note: W (following Russell on *definite descriptions*), thought these dependencies weren't always obvious

Atomic sentences (ctd)

- The relation between atomic sentences and atomic states of affairs is one of **pictorial representation**
- W's analogies:
 - (i) toy cars being used to represent an incident in court
 - (ii) a score being used to represent a symphony
- In an analogous manner:
 - the names represent the objects
 - the arrangement of names represents the arrangement of objects
- Note: W also (arguably!) appeared to hold a similar representationalist view of thoughts, taking them to be 'logical picture[s] of facts'

Note on objects

- Question: why are the objects supposed to be *simple*?
- W:
If a sentence included a name for a complex object, its truth value would depend on that of further sentences pertaining to the object's parts and hence that sentence wouldn't be atomic (see Soames *DoA* pp. 200–203)
- Question: can you give me an *example* of a simple object?
- W:
They don't have any of the kinds of properties we are familiar with, rather, combinations of simple objects give rise to the properties of complex objects (see Soames *DoA* pp. 206–213)

The place of philosophy

- Meaningful sentences, in W's view, are those that can be made true by the existence of combination of simple objects
- He claims that this characterisation entails the meaninglessness of the claims debated in
 - ethics
 - religion
 - philosophy
- Determining the truth value of meaningful sentences is the job of the *natural sciences*:
'The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science'

The place of philosophy (ctd)

- What's the job of philosophy?
'Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts'
- But if this doesn't amount to aiming to make true pronouncements, what does it involve?!
- Outlining a view that he largely held on to in *PI*, he says:
'Philosophy is not a theory but an activity...
The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions', but to make propositions clear.
Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.'

PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

A peculiar style and method

- Like *TLP*, but in a very different way, *PI* is, stylistically, quite an unusual book:
 - Extremely fragmented, with a first part consisting in ≈ 700 numbered comments and digressions
 - No particularly clear conclusions or arguments
 - Frequent repetitions of various themes and claims
 - Ubiquitous use of dialogues and examples
- Upshot: the proper exegesis of *PI* is still very vexed

What is going on? (ctd)

- It is however tempting to ignore W's proclaimed aims:

'W's writings seem to me not only summarizable but in positive need of summary...Nor is it true that W's writings contain no systematically expressible theories, for indeed they do. It is the difference between what W says and the way he says it which is relevant here; the fact that his later writings are unsystematic in style does not mean that they are unsystematic in content.'
(Grayling, 1996)
- I'll follow suit

What is going on?

- In a nutshell: a collection of reflections on very specific aspects of language use aimed at dispelling various philosophical confusions
- McGinn (1997) puts it nicely:

'W uses his evocations of concrete examples of our practice of using language, not as a source of generalizations, but as a means to overcome the particular misunderstandings and false pictures that our urge to explain throws up, and to achieve a recognition that there is nothing that needs to be explained. W's philosophical aim is not to arrive at conclusions, but to bring about a gradual acceptance of the fact that our attempts at explanation are empty and that 'since everything lies open to view there is nothing to be explained.'

Key themes

- Understanding language involves understanding the practical **function** or purpose of linguistic behaviour
- The functions of linguistic behaviour are **variegated**, the representation, or picturing, of reality being one of many
- To the extent that representation is one of these functions, previous understandings of it were muddled
- One particularly misguided idea: that which a sentence has the purpose of representing is determined by an **inner mental cause**
- Rather, what determines the correct production and consumption of utterances is a **social pattern of behavioural regularities**

The variegated purposes of language

- Understanding language is understanding the heterogeneous purposes of linguistic behaviour:

‘Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a ruler, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screw.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.’ (PI 11)
- This diversity is concealed by a similarity in appearance:

‘It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike....But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro.’ (PI 12)

Shopkeeping

- One such game:

‘I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked ‘five red apples’. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked ‘apples’; then he looks up the word ‘red’ in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers...up to the word ‘five’ and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer...But what is the meaning of the word ‘five’?—No such thing was in question here, only how the word ‘five’ is used.’ (PI 1)
- The example also aims to illustrate the diversity of word functions (‘apples’: get the shopkeeper to open a drawer; ‘red’: get him to look up a colour sample, ...)

A family of language games

- Throughout *PI* W describes a broad spectrum of linguistic activities (**language games**)
- He famously claims these practices have little unity, drawing an analogy with games simpliciter:

‘Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games’...What is common to them all?—Don’t say: ‘There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.’ (PI 66)
- In connection with most of these games, meaning or reference is claimed to be at best a peripheral explanatory concept

Ostension

- One of the key puzzles of *PI*:

What settles the **rule of correct use** (e.g. representational, but not necessarily) of a sentence?
- Early in *PI* W puzzles over how the denotation of a term could be introduced solely by **ostention** (pointing)

‘The definition of the number two, “That is called ‘two’”—pointing to two nuts—is perfectly exact.—But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know what one wants to call “two”; he will suppose that “two” is the name given to this group of nuts!’ (PI 28)
- The issue has simply been shifted one step back, to the issue of what determines that which is being pointed at

Inner representations

- Tempting thought: what entirely determines that which is being pointed to is a **mental representation in the speaker's mind** that guides his ostensive behaviour and use of the term
 - '[W]e do here what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify any one bodily action which we call pointing to the shape (as opposed, for example, to the colour), we say that a spiritual activity corresponds to these words.' (PI 36)
 - 'What really comes before our mind when we understand a word?— Isn't it something like a picture?... (PI 139)
- This temptation should be resisted, says W, as it again simply invites another question (+ there may be no representation to be found!)

The community of speakers

- What then does the job?
 - 'Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule—say a signpost—got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here? —Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react.
 - But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it came about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only insofar as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a **custom**.' (PI 198)

The cube

- Well, suppose that a picture does come before your mind when you hear the word "cube", say the drawing of a cube. In what sense can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word "cube"?—Perhaps you say: "It's quite simple;—if that picture occurs to me and I point to a triangular prism for instance, and say it is a cube, then this use of the word doesn't fit the picture."—But doesn't it fit? I have purposely so chosen the example that it is quite easy to imagine a method of projection according to which the picture does fit after all.
- The picture of the cube did indeed suggest a certain use to us, but it was possible for me to use it differently.' (PI 139)

Kripke on 'plus'

- To reinforce the point, an example drawn from Kripke (1982) on W on rule following
- What determines the fact that I mean plus (+) by 'plus' ('+')?
- It won't suffice to point to my previous uses:
 - There is an infinity of functions consistent with these!
- Example: If I have only ever applied the operation to numbers < 50, these uses wouldn't distinguish between my meaning plus and meaning quus, where

$$x \text{ quus } y = \begin{cases} x + y & \text{if } x, y < 50 \\ 5 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Kripke on 'plus' (ctd)

- It won't suffice to point to some mental representation of a procedure:
 - That invites, as we've seen, another question of the same nature!
- Appealing to my **behavioural dispositions** could perhaps single out a unique function, but
 - It would fail to account for the fact that I should *in principle* be able to make mistakes in the application of the relevant rule (i.e. doesn't account for the **normativity** of meaning)
- What then? Appeal to the dispositions of the community!

Next week: Austin & Ordinary Language Philosophy

- Required reading:
 - Soames, S. *AoM*, Ch 8
- Recommended reading:
 - Austin, J.L. 1962: *Sense and Sensibilia*. London: Oxford University Press. Sections I & II.
 - Austin, J.L. 1961: Performative Utterances. Reprinted in A. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*. Oxford University Press (2008).
 - Lycan, W. 2000: *The Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction* (Second Edition). London & New York: Routledge. Ch. 12.

References

- Grayling, A.C. 1996: *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP.
- Kripke, S. 1982: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- McGinn, M. 1997: *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*. London: Routledge.