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Wittgenstein's Radical Alternative

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How Wittgenstein Completed the Linguistic Turn
Replacing Analysis with Grammar as Method
Replacing Knowledge with Clarity as Goal

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Introduction

In the first part of his career Wittgenstein was a logician of first rank, along with Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. His first book, the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, not only incorporated and deepened the new symbolic logic that was due primarily to Frege and Russell but also developed new tools for the clarification of thought by means of logical analysis. Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, along with G. E. Moore, are the pillars of the "linguistic turn" in philosophy. Wittgenstein, however, came to disagree with the other three in fundamental ways, and the divergence resulted in (or perhaps consisted in) pushing epistemology into the back seat. In this paper I will largely ignore the first part of Wittgenstein's career in order to concentrate on how his later work contrasts with both "Ordinary Language Philosophy" and mainline academic philosophy.

Ordinary Language

In the first part of Wittgenstein's career, when he worked with Bertrand Russell, he conceived the task of philosophy to be clarification of thought through logical analysis. One very popular view, shared by Russell in the 30s and 40s, is that when Wittgenstein abandoned logical analysis he came to rely instead on "ordinary language." As a result the dominant Anglo-American school of philosophy following WWII was known as "Ordinary Language Philosophy." This way of looking at Wittgenstein was encouraged by some prominent philosophers who had studied with Wittgenstein, including Gilbert Ryle in England and Norman Malcolm in the United States. In his paper "Philosophy and Ordinary Language," Malcolm wrote, "Ordinary language is correct language," a mantra that drew a line in the sand and claimed a criterion for challenging or rebutting whatever a logician or linguist might say. Although Wittgenstein's work teems with terse aphorisms, he avoided slogans, slogans being characteristic of movements, which Wittgenstein abhorred. Malcolm's words, however loyal he may have felt to Wittgenstein, are distinctly his own. Ryle, characteristically, was more subtle, blunting the crude criticisms of Russell and others by distinguishing between use and usage as well as between the ordinary as common and the ordinary as standard. He made use

of the resulting analysis in his trend-setting book, *The Concept of Mind*, and for decades presided over the nurture of Ordinary Language Philosophy at Oxford University.

There is room for ongoing dispute about what is "ordinary" about ordinary language. There is room for even more dispute about whether the rubric, or Malcolm's mantra, captures what is characteristic about Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Wittgenstein described his work differently, although certainly with respect to standard uses of language. Before considering whether Ordinary Language Philosophy is faithful to Wittgenstein we need to turn to his own way of expressing himself.

Language-games

Although generally averse to technical terminology, Wittgenstein introduced the expression 'language-game' in the early sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) to try to clarify his method. He never gives a definition of language-games but says roughly four things about them that deserve careful attention.

The first is that a language-game is speech integrated with action. In PI §2 he describes the activity of a builder and his assistant, who have a language consisting of just four expressions. Whenever the builder utters one of the expressions, the assistant performs the action corresponding to that expression. In PI §7 Wittgenstein urges that "we think of the whole process in §2 as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games 'language-games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. . . .I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'." This first point entails that Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis does not begin with words or syllables, or with language as it is examined by grammarians and linguists, but rather with patterns of action into which language is woven. Because of this emphasis on activities and patterns of action, Wittgenstein's thought probably has greater affinity with pragmatism than with either rationalism or empiricism.

The second point is that there are *countless* language-games. The early sections of *Philosophical Investigations* culminate in §23:

> How many kinds of sentences are there? Perhaps assertions, questions, and commands?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of all that we call "signs", "words", "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, something given once and for all; rather new types of speech, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others wither away and are forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture*

of this from the changes in mathematics.)

The word "language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence that *speaking* a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools of language and the ways of their being used, the multiplicity of kinds of words and sentences, with what logicians have said about the construction of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*.)

I believe that the principal reason why language-games are countless is not that one could never finish counting them but that one could never begin. Wittgenstein's German word *"unzählige"* could be translated "uncountable" rather than "countless." Our actions are layered and interwoven in such complex ways that it would be hard to say what is just one single action. Consider a simple thing like pulling the trigger of a gun: in different circumstances it could constitute any number of different actions, and even in a single situation there are likely to be a number of overlapping actions.

The third thing that Wittgenstein says (§§25, 415) is that these language-games are part of the "natural history" of humans. There is nothing hidden or recondite or esoteric about natural history, as there might be about nature or natural science. Natural history consists of plain facts that lie right in front of our noses. The language-games that Wittgenstein refers to are, therefore, not cultural phenomena, varying from one society to another, but actions that are common to humans, such as greeting, asking, reporting, and chatting. So in PI §206 he says, "The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language." That the patterns of action in question are common to mankind rather than belonging to a distinctive culture means that Wittgenstein is not doing sociology any more than he is doing linguistics. At PI Part II, p.174 he notes that hoping is something that we do not attribute to dogs and it therefore counts as one of the distinctively human activities, interwoven with characteristic expressions: "The phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life," meaning, surely, our human form of life with its countless language-games.

The fourth thing he says is that language-games are basic to philosophic understanding. At PI §654-656 he writes,

Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a 'proto-phenomenon'. That is, where we ought to have said: *this language-game is played.*

The question is not one of explaining a language-game by

> means of our experience, but of noting a language-game.
>   What is the purpose of telling someone that a time ago I
> had such-and-such a wish? — Look on the language-game as the
> *primary* thing. And look on the feelings, etc., as you look on a
> way of regarding the language-game, as an interpretation.

Although the central point is clear enough, this is not an easy passage to understand. It is clear that Wittgenstein wants us to regard language-games as primary—that is, he wants us to understand other things (such as feelings) in terms of language-games, rather than to attempt to explain the language-games. But it seems wrenching to suppose that feelings are not basic, but instead are "interpretations" of language-games. At this point we can sense how radical Wittgenstein's philosophy is. René Descartes' philosophy begins with subjective awareness: it is consciousness, not a language-game, that is primary. Hume begins with a different sort of subjectivity: for David Hume it is "impressions" rather than language-games that are primary. Descartes set the tone on the continent and Hume in Britain, and most ordinary thinking follows philosophical thought in taking something subjective as primary. When people say that they have trouble understanding Wittgenstein, it is not because he uses strange words or complicated sentences, but rather because it is so difficult to get one's mind around the idea that what is primary is something objective rather than subjective.

In PI Part II (p. 226) he makes almost the same point with the intriguing observation, "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*." This observation contrasts with usual conceptions of the given, which understand the given to be particulars or universals rather than anything so broad and undefined as *forms* of any kind. It is not clear what Wittgenstein means by "forms of life." With regard to the present text, however, there is an alternative wording in Wittgenstein's notebooks, with "forms of life" [*Lebensformen*] replaced by "facts of living" [*Tatsachen des Lebens*], which makes it more likely that he meant to refer at least in part to language-games in this text. He certainly did think of language-games as facts that belong to the natural history of human beings. The central point, again, is that we understand other things in terms of what is given, and in that sense what is given is what is primary for philosophic understanding. By saying that language-games are primary Wittgenstein is revising, radically, the whole conception of what philosophy is for and of how it does what it does.

Throughout the reign of Ordinary Language Philosophy in Britain and America hundreds of books and articles were published that discussed and analyzed in detail various words and sort of words. World famous distinctions included Ryle's distinction between task words and achievement words and J. L. Austin's distinction between constative and performative verbs. There was at least one book published just on uses of the word "good". I myself published

several articles on particular words, such as "violence", "necessary", "identity", and "meaning". No doubt there was some overlap between these studies and Wittgenstein's work, but such an overlap only obscured the dramatic contrast. Wittgenstein contrasted actions, not words—though, of course, words are involved in the actions being contrasted.

Near the end of a long conversation with Elizabeth Anscombe some fifty years ago she asked me whether I thought there was anything of philosophic value in Ryle's distinction between task words and achievement words. When I responded in the affirmative, she cut me short and ended the conversation before I could elaborate, saying, "You will never be a philosopher!" Why did she, one of Wittgenstein's most favored followers, answer that way? It took me many years to understand. The point, I believe, is that Ryle, Austin, and others of us focused on words, whereas Wittgenstein focused on actions or types of activity. Wittgenstein's points and method, therefore, are not so much semantic as pragmatic. Wittgenstein would hate to have a label hung around his neck and perhaps "pragmatic" is unfair or inaccurate. However that may be, it now seems to me that there is indeed as vast a difference between Ordinary Language Philosophy and Wittgenstein's work as is implied by Anscombe's abrupt dismissal.

Knowledge and Certainty

The way ordinary people ordinarily speak, nothing can really be known unless it is absolutely certain. "I don't just believe it, I *know* it." A large part of the difference between belief and knowledge seems to be the certainty of knowledge, and absence, in the case of knowledge, of subjectivity and mere probability. Even scientists, aware that all the best scientists of the past have been in some way or another refuted, commonly disclaim real knowledge, saying only that this or that theory has so far withstood efforts to disprove it.

One of the common uses of the words "I know...." is to claim certainty, that is, to remove the issue in question from the possibility of doubt. No one looking at the ordinary use of these words can entertain any reasonable reservations on this score.

Wittgenstein, however, carefully elaborates a contrary view. It is not that he denied what ordinary people ordinarily say. It is rather that he regarded the language-games as primary and concluded that knowledge and certainty do not go hand in hand. It is not that they do not always go hand in hand, but rather that they do not *ever* go hand in hand. The collection of his remarks published under the title *On Certainty* (OC) presents the pros and cons of his views, in somewhat random order. He begins by considering G. E. Moore's view that he (Moore) "knew for certain" a large number of commonplaces, contending that Moore did not really *know* these things at all, though he had every right to be

certain about them. One of the most dramatic presentations of Wittgenstein's view comes in OC §308:

> 'Knowledge' and 'certainty' belong to different *categories*. They are not two 'mental states' like, say, 'surmising' and 'being sure'.

Wittgenstein rarely uses technical philosophical terms, but here he not only uses the term "category" but also italicizes it. What can it mean? From the following sentence it appears that he considers "mental states" to be a category. But what would that category contrast with? What comes first to mind is the traditional contrast of mind and body, so that mental states might be one category and bodily states another. The point, then, would be that what falls into one category cannot also fall into the other. Looked at in this way, framing a matter in terms of categories presents us with an either-or situation. So Wittgenstein's point seems to be that anything that counts as knowledge cannot be certain and anything that counts as certain cannot be knowledge.

Wittgenstein himself conducts his investigations through queries rather than premises or pronouncements. For that reason the pronouncement of §308 is a bit out of character. But the investigations that lead up to it have prepared us for the pronouncement, even if we think that it might have been dropped in an edited version. *On Certainty* begins (OC §1) with a direct challenge to Moore's claim to know various things for certain–not, indeed, by challenging his certainty but by challenging his knowledge: "If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest." Later he elaborates:

> I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry. (OC §151)

The ensuing queries, meditations, and meanderings are fascinating, occasionally resulting in splendid aphorisms (as in §308) or penetrating metaphors ("Light dawns gradually over the whole" OC §141) and frequently leading to insights. It is never easy (or safe) to try to summarize Wittgenstein. Nonetheless I cannot see how to avoid the conclusion that he set himself against the popular and standard view that knowledge and certainty go hand in hand.

Knowledge and Certainty as Belonging Together

The view that knowledge and certainty go hand in hand is ancient, dating at least from Plato and Aristotle. Plato in the *Theaetetus* proposes that we define

knowledge as justified true belief. His discussion is brilliant and, like Wittgenstein's, impossible to summarize. Here I will make only two points. The first is that Plato is surely right that there is no such thing as "false knowledge", that is, something that might be considered on a par with false belief. If my belief turns out to be false, it was indeed a belief, but it never was knowledge, no matter how confident I was in it at the time. The second is that Plato was also surely right that only justified beliefs count as knowledge. One reason for this is that it always makes sense, in response to a knowledge-claim, to ask, "How do you know?" That is, the possibility of asking for reasons is part of the game, and indeed a part of the game that makes it reasonable to put more credence in knowledge-claims than in statements of belief. Any respectable response to such a question will constitute a justification for the belief.

There is, of course, the problem that "justification" may turn out to be a weasel word. Aristotle saw the problem and cleverly insisted that the justification be a proof. Perhaps then the criterion becomes stricter than everyone would be comfortable with. But requiring proof does seem to bring the definition in line with the common idea that knowledge must be certain.

Beginning in the 16th century the conflict between science and theology became a dominant factor in considerations about knowledge and certainty. Both Galileo and the Church claimed certainty, but of course they claimed it on different grounds. In retrospect it seems perspicuous to say that they were playing different language-games. Though he also tried to present an overview, Descartes initiated modern philosophy by proposing that there are really two different games. That idea is contained in his metaphysical theory that there are two substances, mind and matter, and that what holds in one cannot be used to infer what holds in the other. In this way his metaphysics served to liberate science from theology. Knowledge and certainty, however, remained conjoined in both domains.

Descartes solidified the conjunction of knowledge and certainty through his method of doubt. For Descartes, one might say, doubt was primary. His quest for knowledge/certainty began with doubt. It was not actual doubt that was primary, for he continued to believe all the ordinary things that the rest of us believe, but the *possibility* of doubt. He resolved not accept anything as known or certain unless he *could not* doubt it. When he found an idea that he could not doubt, he took that idea as the foundation for his system. As is well known, that foundation was his inability to doubt that he was a thinking being: *Cogito ergo sum.*

Descartes' method of doubt continues to strike most people as reasonable, and that is one of the principal reasons why most people continue to view knowledge and certainty as going hand-in-hand. Hume's empiricist philosophy was radically different from Descartes' philosophy, but Hume accepted that

nothing can be known unless it is certain. Many scientists today follow Hume in this regard, saying that the only thing they know is that today's views are likely to be discarded in the light of future discoveries. Such views are powerful evidence of the continuing power of Descartes' insistence that knowledge and certainty go hand-in-hand.

Knowledge and Certainty as Incompatible

Wittgenstein's alternative begins with his insistence that science and philosophy are utterly unlike one another. He made that point in the *Tractatus* (TLP 4.11-4.113), where he says that science is the totality of true propositions, that philosophy is not one of the natural sciences, that philosophy is activity (rather than doctrine), and that it aims at the clarification of thought (rather than at knowledge or truth). In PI §109 he reaffirms this aspect of the *Tractatus*: "It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically 'that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such' — whatever that may mean." Wittgenstein thought there are many errors in the *Tractatus*, but here is one point that he explicitly reaffirms. Since, as we have seen, he incorporated a kind of natural history into philosophy, his later philosophy implies a sharp distinction between natural history and natural science–not an easy distinction to understand, and not one that conforms to his earlier views.

To understand this distinction, we need to appreciate Wittgenstein's departure from Descartes on the matter of doubt. We have seen that Wittgenstein refers to some language-games as primary, meaning that they can be learned without first having learned some other language-game on which they depend. Lying, for example, is not a primary language-game, because you must first learn how to make statements before you can learn how to lie. In the early sections of *Philosophical Investigations* (esp. §§26-45), in what is widely considered (rightly) as an attack on his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein undermines the idea that naming objects or ostensive definition might be a primary language-game. "One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name" (PI §30). "When one says 'He gave a name to his sensation' one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense" (PI §257). A principal aim throughout *On Certainty* is to show – over and over, through a variety of considerations – that doubting is not a primary language-game. One learns a language in contexts where doubt does not enter. It is only after one has mastered the basics of language use that one learns to doubt–and even then doubting one thing always depends on not doubting other things. For example, a doubt of any kind normally depends on *not* doubting that the meaning of your words remains fixed from one moment

to the next. "Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt" (OC **§519**).

One of the differences between natural history and natural science is that the facts of natural history are neither doubted nor challenged. They come to us simply as facts, as given. Of course this does not mean that they *cannot* be doubted. For Wittgenstein what is important is that certain facts *are not* doubted, not that they cannot be. The findings of natural science, on the other hand, are regularly doubted. Doubt and challenge are an integral part of science. It is through doubt and challenge and counterexamples that received views are overthrown and science makes progress. Natural history is static, science is dynamic. Scientific progress is progress in knowledge. This progress is one of the defining characteristics of our civilization, one that Wittgenstein understands as well as anyone. His point is that if knowledge is the domain of natural science, and sciences progress through the disciplined use of doubt, then knowledge and doubt belong to the same language-game. They are not incompatible, but inseparable.

For Wittgenstein the paradigms for knowledge-claims are the findings of scientists, that is, of investigators who do *not* rule out further doubt. That is the language-game of knowledge. There is another language-game, very common in everyday conversation, that uses the expression "I know . . ." precisely to rule out doubt. That is the language-game of certainty. In the first case you willy-nilly change the game by ruling out any further challenge or investigation, and in the second case you change the game by proposing challenge or investigation. Notwithstanding that the words "I know . . ." belong to both games, these are distinct language-games. That is Wittgenstein's reason–decisive, in my view–for holding that knowledge and certainty are incompatible, that they belong to different *categories*.

To sum up, in his later work Wittgenstein adopts a radically different conception of clarification (based on grammar and uses of language rather than analysis), a significantly different conception of science (based on knowledge and method rather than on the totality of factual truth), and a different conception of knowledge (excluding certainty but including theories and explanations). The new approach also features sharp distinctions between knowledge (which invites doubt) and certainty (which excludes doubt) and between science (which involves testing, explanation, and progress) and natural history (which is limited to the description of plain facts).

Theory of Knowledge

Through the Middle Ages the primary focus of philosophical work remained on metaphysics and logic. Of course all sorts of other topics were discussed, but logic and metaphysics had the place of honor. In some ways Descartes remained in this tradition. His doctrine (or doctrines) of substance and his metaphysical

dualism stood out, and his *Discourse on Method* might be considered as practical logic. The great contribution of Descartes to the history of philosophy, however, was to raise the theory of knowledge into first place. He was followed by Spinoza and Leibniz in what has become known as the Rationalist tradition and challenged by David Hume and John Locke and George Berkeley in the Empiricist tradition. The dispute between the Rationalists and Empiricists was a dispute about knowledge, a dispute that continued, with variations, through the 20th century. The "Critical Philosophy" of Immanuel Kant attempted to ground knowledge differently, but failed to achieve acceptance by either Rationalists or Empiricists. Russell once quipped, for example, that although Hume may have awoken Kant from his dogmatic slumber, he soon went back to sleep.

Given Wittgenstein's insistent distinction between philosophy and science, and his identification of science with knowledge, it comes as no surprise that he considered the primary focus on knowledge to be mistaken. Indeed, he sounds almost medieval when talking about philosophy in a paper he wrote for Russell in 1913: "Philosophy consists of logic and metaphysics: logic is its basis" (NB 106). Here epistemology and ethics both vanish entirely, which is a good deal more than happened in medieval philosophy. The disdain is worded differently in the *Tractatus*: "Theory of philosophy is the philosophy of psychology" (TLP 4.1121). His goal was not knowledge but clarity. In 1930 the disdain for scientism and western values is more pronounced; he writes:

> It is all one to me whether the typical western scientist understands or appreciates my work since in any case he does not understand the spirit in which I write.
>
> Our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress. Typically it constructs. Its activity is to construct a more and more complicated structure. And even clarity is only as a means to this end.
>
> For me on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself.
>
> I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible buildings transparent before me.
>
> So I am aiming at something different than are the scientists & my thoughts move differently than do theirs. (CV 9e)

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had said that the aim of philosophy is the clarification of thought, so his later remark seems a continuation of his early perspective. But it is not easy accepting clarity as an end in itself. I have discussed Wittgenstein's conception of clarity at length elsewhere (Garver 2006) and here

will make only four observations.

Note first that the clarification of thoughts cannot be a "primary" language-game. There must first be other language-games before there are thoughts to clarify. It follows that if seeking clarity as an end itself is the primary aim of philosophy, philosophy cannot provide a foundation for thinking. It cannot be, as Kant had it, the queen of the sciences.

Note second that there is and can be no criterion of clarity. When he wrote the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was committed to logical analysis. In such a system there is a criterion for when a proposition is completely analyzed, so that logical considerations provide criteria for clarity. In his later work, however, Wittgenstein abandoned analysis for contextual clarification, generally hinging on various kinds of use or usage (see Garver 2006, chapter 10). He himself achieves remarkable clarity time and again, but such clarity depends on the perspicuity of carefully chosen examples rather than on criteria. Wittgenstein is deservedly comfortable with the consequent vagueness, and so am I, but readers should be aware that this validation of vagueness in the pursuit of clarity constitutes as radical an innovation as anything in 20th century philosophy.

Note third that the absolutism of Wittgenstein's commitment to clarity seems to entail saying nothing about moral, religious, political, social, or metaphysical matters. At least not as a philosopher. Wittgenstein ended the *Tractatus* with the pronouncement that utterances in these domains (which I take to go beyond mere matters of fact) are bound to be nonsense, and in his own life he made remarkably few such pronouncements–especially for a man who lived through the suicide of three older brothers, World War I, prison camp at Monte Cassino, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust. Silence seems a concomitant of the primary commitment to clarification.

My fourth point is a confession. I cannot bring myself to accept "clarity, transparency," as an end in itself. Perhaps this is a weakness on my part, or an indelible stain of bourgeois conventionalism. Be that as it may, as much as I admire Wittgenstein, as clearly as I see his later work as both continuing and revising the earlier work in its search for absolute unconditioned clarity, as certain as I am that sound philosophy seeks clarification rather than knowledge, I do not feel easy about joining Wittgenstein in either the absolutism of his commitment or the abstinence from moral and political comment.

Summary

Wittgenstein's achievement in the history of philosophy consists in turning philosophy away from logical analysis toward contextual explication, and even more in undermining the dominance of epistemology that had characterized mainstream philosophy since Descartes. Intellectually it is an achievement of

monumental dimensions, but since a majority of academic philosophers continue to work in ways that Wittgenstein disdained, it remains unclear how decisive a mark he will have made in the history of the discipline.

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