

Wittgenstein, Early and Late – Continuities and Rupture

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Why do we talk about early and late Wittgenstein? Very briefly, I would say it is the timing of and the difference between his picture theory and his tool analogy. The picture theory is his reply to his own question: "Is there an order in the world a priori, and what does it consist of?" (Schwarz p.128). This order consists, according to Wittgenstein in a structure isomorphism between the world ("what is the case") and the picture. This led him to develop symbolic logic, building on, as well as criticising, Frege and Russell. Later however he concluded that an a priori order is an illusion and that he had to abandon his early work and replace it with a view in which ordinary language and its use in daily situations was the primary object of study. He likened language with tools and games people played.

However, such a summary is partly misleading. In fact, already in *Tractatus* his insight is that the question above has not got any satisfying answer. His foreword ends with mistrust of his capability for the task, although he claims he has essentially brought it to a solution. Even so, he humbly admits his solution only showed how little had been achieved. And later, after several years, he denounced it completely.

In this essay I will try to explain the "rupture" in his thinking and the shift in it from the picture theory to the tool metaphor. In addition, I will consider if there are any continuing themes in his thinking.

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When Wittgenstein arrived in Cambridge, he was a freshman in philosophy. He was educated as an engineer and had hardly read any of the classical texts. But he was interested in mathematics and was inspired by Frege's and Russell's ambitions to put it on firm logical grounds as well as of their attempt to complement an imperfect natural language with a perfect logic one without ambiguities. However, with time, he considered their attempt mistaken (of which there are several passages in *Tractatus*) but accepted their starting points: the fundamental role of words and languages is to name entities and form sentences that describe the reality of the world and how we can speak about it clearly without vagueness. (Actually, he did not share their view about the vagueness of the natural language and considered the function of language to be primarily communication, a line in his thinking that continues in late Wittgenstein.)

Although Wittgenstein was almost illiterate in philosophy, he had read Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, and I dare say that if his own original thinking could be filed under a similar title it would be *Die Welt als Sachverstände*. And I also dare to say that he started off with an engineering constructive attitude, almost from scratch and not very concerned to link to traditional philosophy. The result was *Tractatus*, unique in the philosophical world by its paradoxical aphoristic and numbered points. In the sequel I will refer to points under their number but without citing them in words, assuming the reader have the book available.

In English *Sachverstände* becomes *State of affairs* which is maybe not the luckiest translation since it can be comprehended in two ways.

State of affairs is, according to Wittgenstein, something which obtain or do not obtain *between* objects. (It could also mean, but what is not intended here, I believe, as states *of* an object). Objects are simple, they cannot be divided further, but can have both internal and external properties and, most important, can be combined with other objects. Of objects there are many sorts, but we have better think of them as a kind of proxy or variable, like x where x can be substituted by whatever is adequate in the context. He refers to what he calls logic (mathematical) multiplicity (4.04), which is

a way to say that objects can vary both in quantity and quality.

State of affairs can, as said, obtain or not obtain between objects. This obtaining or non-obtaining Wittgenstein calls *facts*. Absolutely essential is that there can be both positive and negative facts. A positive fact is a state of affairs or, more concretely, a situation, that obtain, whereas a negative one does not obtain. His introduction of two sorts of facts I regard as his most genius draw, but it took me considerable time to appreciate it. What in the world can a *negative* fact be? That it is not!? I will elaborate more on this below but, for the moment, let's say that the salient feature of a fact is its *possibility*. It can be realised or not.

Elementary states of affairs are *atomic* and *independent* and are represented in language by elementary *propositions*. Independence follows from (1.21). A proposition is the "dressing" (my choice of word, not Wittgenstein's) of a state of affairs and shows its *meaning* if it, when undressed, turns up as a positive fact (4.022). Composite or complex propositions are made up by elementary propositions and form sentences, but this formation does *not* ruin the independence of elementary propositions (which I will say more on below).

Now, how do we know whether a proposition presents us a positive or negative fact? Wittgenstein claims that the proposition is a (logical) picture of reality and that we must check the proposition with reality, only then it can show up as true or false. Until then it only shows possibilities (see above). In a way we must *verify* the proposition, and I think therefore his thinking interested the logico-empirists of the Vienna circle and that he was wrongly(?) comprehended as a positivist. In their eyes the proposition was seen identical to a hypothesis.

Surely this was not his ambition. The proposition, and the logic represented, *showed* the structure of the world. And here his picture theory comes in. He kind of projected the language onto the picture. It was a one-to-one mapping. Each proposition, not its truth, but the fact had a correspondence in the picture – and remember facts were of two sorts, positive and negative; facts wore, so to say two faces, *also* in the picture. And that picture was not a picture "of what there *is* in the world" but of facts, *logically* possible worlds, thinkable worlds; real, as one cannot think "unlogically".

This is my comprehension, but who knows what *he* thought, maybe his vision was greater and deeper than he could clearly express, and therefore he finished *Tractatus* with the famous words "of what one cannot speak, one must be silent" (7).

Let me, as a parenthesis, wage one alternative picture, more like a film. A film is just 25 pictures in a minute. Imagine a framed two sides picture which I can turn around, as quickly as needed by the context. What I see, sitting on its frontside, is only the verified/realised state of affairs i.e., positive facts. The backside, which I do not see, is Wittgenstein's picture, showing *all* facts i.e., possibilities. When I turn the frame, some possibilities verify/realise and others vanish, whereas the disappearing presence of a verified state of affairs changes into new (unverified) possibilities. A *changing* picture.

And here is my first objection to Wittgenstein's picture theory. If it is, as he says, intended to be *a* picture of a real world; in this picture there is no change whatever, no time, no *events*. In reality state of affairs change with time. In *Tractatus* time seems to have frozen, even if there are many logically possible worlds in that very minute of frozen time. And even if you could in that minute verify the truth of the picture (and the world) it is like a picture at a museum of a frozen world. It does not help to say that the totality of true propositions is the total natural science (4.11). In fact [sic] it is the end of the universe. Or the beginning, an a priori structure? Maybe.

The next problem I recognize, is the sheer number of states of affairs. The world is all that is the case (1). The "case" is clearly, according to *Tractatus*, the totality of all states of affairs (1.1). However, there must be more states of affairs in the world (since there can possibly be combinations of them) than all grains of sand in the universe, more than Archimedes could count to (in the formula in 4.27 *n* should rightly approach infinity).¹ However, we are not considering practical details here, but the principle. So let us so far accept the picture.

Such an order might be coexistent with our contingent, changing world. This is what I believe was Kant's starting point, space and time are a priori. Any point in spacetime (i.e., the four-dimensional world) might be such a frozen picture as hinted at above, presented in an ever-turning frame as change of location in spacetime. But I do not think Wittgenstein ever considered such a (film)scenario, although it is known he was a frequent visitor to cinemas.

The potential to blow up the picture theory lies in the assumption of independence between facts (2.061, 2.062). The assumption is essential for the validity of the calculus. The latter is constructed upon the assumption and only valid under it. Even if one must admit that Wittgenstein's version of symbolic logic is a great advance, this condition cannot obtain for *all* states of affairs in the world, except haphazardly. At least it cannot be verified. The constructor, symbolic logic, was ok, but not for its purpose.

I think the problem with the independence assumption was his insight already when he wrote *Tractatus* and its pessimistic conclusions a consequence ("throw away the ladder etc."). It was a *metaphysical* wreckage, although it left a calculus useful for other, less ambitious, projects.ⁱⁱ So he abandoned his picture theory and joined "language" philosophers attack on his own work and on other logicians'. Space does not permit to elaborate much upon this so I will be very brief on the subject and focus on continuities in his thinking.

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Whereas in the picture theory the name and meaning of a word/sentence in the language is the object in the world it signifies and positive facts, now he focusses on their *use* in the language. Hence the tool analogy. He likens words with tools. And the tools are used for varied purposes, doing, modifying, something.

Moreover, one uses the language tools as if one is playing games. There are rules but different rules for different games. The tools are for public use, one must adhere to the rules; if one plays a game and others play a different game one would not understand each other. And there are an unlimited number of games, although there are resemblances, a certain familiarity among them.

Early Wittgenstein intended logic to be an ideal language where each sentence had a precise meaning. Now he holds the opposite, language is and should be both vague and open-ended, developing with the use. But in fact, this was his view already in *Tractatus* in opposition to Frege and Russell.

What he probably did not realise at the time was that tautologies and contradictions was also a consequence of his logic. But if his logic was not adequate for a metaphysical purpose, his claim of tautology for logic in general and especially mathematics was also inadequate. Maybe this was a late insight. Paradoxically, the failure transcended into one of the most famous books in the literary world, maybe enforced by his unordinary life. In a way he became the philosopher icon.

To sum up, I think there are more rupture than continuity in Wittgenstein's thinking. But he had from start an appreciation of language as communication with an inherent logic which mirrored the world which he kept over time. When he confronted the Cambridge philosophers he seemed, as a philosophical freshman, to have a more practical, pragmatic view of language but was fascinated by the vision of an ideal language free from ambiguities. This vision was behind *Tractatus*, however he failed to express it and admitted it.

Notes

ⁱ Archimedes' famously said that "there are more numbers in the word than grains of sand in the universe".

ⁱⁱ The film scenario is my idea. I have given a simple example from the contingent world in an appendix, to illustrate the problem. Hacker writes: "For the independence of the elementary proposition was the pivot upon which turned the whole conception of the logic and the ineffable metaphysics of the book. Without it, the idea that the logic of propositions depends only upon the bipolarity of the elementary proposition collapses. (Hacker p.78)

Literature

Hacker, P.M.S *Ludwig Wittgenstein* in Martinich, *A.P A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, Malden 2005

Schwartz, S.P *A Brief History of Analytical Philosophy*, Malden 2012

Wittgenstein, L. *From the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in Martinich, *Analytic Philosophy*, An anthology, Malden 2012

Appendix

To illustrate how propositions can become dependent let me compare them with connections in a telephone network. Consider three subscribers A, B and C, each having its own line AD, BD, and CD to a telephone exchange at D. Then see these lines to the exchange as elementary propositions (AD), (BD), and (CD). Give them truth-values *A(vailable)* when the corresponding lines for a connection to be made are not used, else to have truth-values *N(on-available)*. Further see a connection e.g. from A to C using AD and CD as a composite proposition (AD.CD). If no connection is made the state of affairs as seen from all subscribers is *A.A* meaning that all lines are available and any of the connections A to B, A to C and B to C are *possible* (going through the exchange D). However, a connection made from e.g. A to C changes the state of affairs for connections from B to both A and C to *A.N* as neither AD nor CD is no longer available for B. Thus, a change in the state of affairs of one proposition changes the state of affairs of the others – they are dependent.

One can (without referring to event happenings) express the state of affairs at a certain moment as "a connection is possible for a subscriber if and only if there is no other connection made" e.g., connections are dependent.


