

Wittgenstein: Whose Philosopher?

One of the ways of dividing all philosophers into two kinds is by saying of each whether he is an ordinary man's philosopher or a philosopher's philosopher. Thus Plato is a philosopher's philosopher and Aristotle an ordinary man's philosopher. This does not depend on being easy to understand: a lot of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is immensely difficult. Nor does being a philosopher's philosopher imply that an ordinary man cannot enjoy the writings, or many of them. Plato invented and exhausted a form: no one else has written *such* dialogues. So someone with no philosophical bent, or who has left his philosophical curiosity far behind may still enjoy reading some of them.

What I call a philosopher's philosopher is one who sees problems, interest in which is the mark of a philosopher, and whose principal thoughts can be derived from his discussion of those problems. When Socrates in the *Phaedo* says he cannot understand how both adding one to one and dividing one can yield two; when in the *Republic* he says that the domain of knowledge is being, of non-knowledge non-being; when he ties Euthyphro into knots because he thinks that the pious pleases the gods *because* it is pious and that the pious is pious *because* it pleases the gods—at least, Euthyphro seems to begin with thinking both and Socrates proceeds to derive a contradiction and to leave the question what piety is in a state of *aporia*; when Plato reproduces arguments of the Sophists to prove that there cannot be such a thing as false belief, because what

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is false *is not*, and so he who thinks what is false thinks nothing, i.e. does not think anything; when he argues that there must be more than One, Parmenides' *being*, because it has a name and if the name of the one were the same as the one you could just as well call it the one of the name as the name of the one, so the name must be something different; when Socrates argues that if anyone can speak he can be found to know the whole of mathematics, though he has forgotten it and has to be reminded of what in fact he knew before he was born — I will stop because I have given enough examples. When this quite characteristic sort of thing is found argued for in the dialogues, the arguments will say little to interest non-philosophers, but almost always are likely to excite people of philosophical bent.

There is also the fact that where Plato does—or does make Socrates—draw conclusions from discussion of his problems, they do not seem credible. That the Forms are the only really real things; reincarnation and the eternal pre-existence of the souls of men; that it is impossible to want what is bad and all evil-doing is a matter of ignorance that it *is* evil; that there is something called the 'dyad' which makes whatever is two to be two: these and many other Platonic doctrines seldom exercise much appeal to philosophers, though some may appeal to non-philosophers for non-philosophical reasons.

By contrast, Aristotle is not often so much concerned with what are apt to strike non-philosophers as weird or boring problems, and his conclusions very often seem to be down-to-earth and about pretty familiar things. Sometimes this is because he made them familiar: consider the concept of *relation*. Plato had distinguished between what was *per se* (*kath auto*) and what was *to something else*; Aristotle replaced 'to something else' by the simple 'to something', for, as we would now say, a thing may stand in a relation to itself. Again, the concept of *matter* is one we owe to Aristotle: such a concept as is implicit in the reasonings of Lavoisier when he re-obtained mercury by heating mercury calx (as it was then called) in a closed vessel. The same matter but a change of chemical substance and an increase in how much of the matter in the vessel was air.

I will say no more in explanation of my distinction, but will proceed to argue for my main thesis: Wittgenstein is, like Plato, a philosopher's philosopher.

First, however, I will note with sorrow the sad fate that seems to be befalling him. For reasons which I do not understand, there are some philosophers who become cult figures. Plotinus is one, Spinoza

another. I know hardly anything about Plotinus; of Spinoza, I know a certain amount—enough to find this vulgar elevation of him incomprehensible. He is a very tough thinker and it is hard work to study him. I doubt very much that *this* fact gives him his superior aura. Nor would the same facts about Wittgenstein account for the same phenomenon in his case. Having regretfully noticed it, I wave it away from my considerations.

These concern the phenomena of mental life called ‘understanding’ and ‘thinking’. I will begin with *understanding*. Now we (usually) understand the meaning of a word when we hear or say it. Not always: we may think we understand it and not do so. (Think of how some people are fond of using the word ‘parameters’ in philosophical discussion.) However, we mostly understand words that we hear or say. *When* do we understand them? Well, when we hear them or say them. So is understanding, in that context, an event of a moment? Still more, when we *suddenly* understand a word whose meaning we did not know before. Now Wittgenstein’s observation at Part I, section 43 of the *Untersuchungen (PI)* is surely quite correct: ‘For a large class of cases of employment of the word “meaning” — even though not for all, it can be explained thus: The meaning of a word is its use in the language.’ But if the meaning is the use we make of the word, how can I grasp it in a flash? For use is sometimes extended in time. So what I grasp in a flash must, must it not, be something different from use: the whole *use* of a word cannot come before my mind in a flash. And the verb ‘to mean’ has the same feature. ‘When you said “funny” did you mean queer, or funny like a joke?’ And there is such a thing as ‘experiencing the meaning of a word’. Suppose I utter the sound *bord* to you. You may be able to answer the question ‘what did you hear that as: the word “board” or “bored” — the noun or the past participle of ‘to bore’?’ and if you say ‘the first’ did you hear it as meaning something like a plank or something like a group of people with some official purpose? And if you say ‘the past participle’ was it connected with boredom or with boring holes? Of course, you may say you didn’t hear it as anything, you just heard me make that noise and wondered why I did so. But if you do have one of those answers, which you very well may, then haven’t you experienced a meaning? However, we cannot say that understanding in a flash is experiencing a meaning.

Suppose you envisaged a plank, the polished leaf of a table round which a board sits—would that prove that you heard the word ‘board’ as meaning ‘plank’? No, the same thing may come before

your mind on different occasions when you hear that word and the application still be different. But, once again, application is complicated and extended in time and applications of a word 'in the same meaning' may be various: e.g. in the sentence 'The board was liquidated'. Certainly, then, there is such a thing as experience of meaning and also an experience of understanding a word, but these just by themselves do not, or need not, tell the whole use. (I say need not, because in the case of very idiomatic connectives like the German 'wohl aber' there can be an experience which gives you its whole meaning: or so it has seemed to me. To anticipate, however, this may depend on antecedent circumstances.)

Suppose you are being taught something and are given examples of the kind of thing in question – as it might be a series of numbers, and you have a sudden reaction: 'Now I know what this one is, now I can go on'. 'Various things may have happened here', Wittgenstein says. You may have thought of a formula that fits the bit of the series you have been given; you may have asked yourself 'What is the series of differences between one number and the next?' and got a familiar series; or it may strike you that the series itself is a familiar one which you know how to continue; or you may recognise the series as something and have a mnemonic for going on, like the mnemonic for π : 'How I want a drink, alcoholic of course, after all those lectures confuting Fregean doctrines one by one', or you may simply go on with the series without any device.

But 'understanding the principle of the series' cannot be any of these happenings: it must be more, or it must be something *behind* them.

Here Wittgenstein says:

If there has to be anything 'behind the utterance of the formula', it is *certain circumstances*, which justify me in saying I can go on – when the formula occurs to me. [And further:] In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process.¹

Thus [he continues] ... when [the man] suddenly knew how to go on, ... then possibly he had a special experience ... but for us it is the *circumstances* under which he had such an experience that

[1] *Philosophical Investigations* I, § 154.

justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on.²

I will here note that in modern philosophy since Descartes there has been a strong tendency to amplify Descartes' list of *cogitationes* to include memory, even knowledge, probably understanding. I will not pause to consider the inwardness of the limitation of Descartes' list – though I suggest it might be a fruitful enquiry.

However that may be, Wittgenstein now proceeds to a very detailed consideration of *reading*: his purpose, he says, is to make clearer the fact he has just alleged: 'it is the *circumstances* under which he had such an experience that justify him to us in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on'.

The choice of *reading* proves to lead us on a very complicated enquiry. It is here that I can most easily justify my thesis that Wittgenstein is a philosopher's philosopher. Non-philosophers are apt to think that there are no philosophical problems about reading: reading is just a special inner experience which you may or may not accompany by utterance out loud of the words you read. And perhaps under the post-Cartesian influence some philosophers too would say this, if they thought about it at all. That understanding and thinking are topics for philosophy none would doubt; that reading might be, it takes a philosophic bent to conceive. The enquiry on reading occupies nine pages of the English edition of the *Untersuchungen*; twelve if we include the corollary enquiry into *being guided*. Not long after Wittgenstein's death I was asked to produce something about him as a BBC programme; I innocently thought: 'This examination of *reading* is a whole and not too long passage and extremely interesting, so I'll read it.' I did, but I heard only rumours of how boring people found it, going on about something not in the least problematic.

Wittgenstein explains that he will give a special restricted – but also partially widened – sense to 'reading'. He will not count understanding what is read as part of reading for purposes of his investigation: it is there the activity of writing from dictation as well as those of rendering out loud what is written or printed and playing from a score.

A reader reads a newspaper: his eye passed along the words; perhaps he says the words; some he takes in as wholes, others he reads syllable by syllable, occasionally letter by letter. Even if he says

[2] *Op.cit.* § 155.

nothing while reading we would count him as having read a sentence if he could afterwards reproduce it, or nearly so.

A beginner in reading, by contrast, reads the words by laboriously spelling them out. He may guess some, or know some by heart. If he does that the teacher will say he is not really *reading* those words, and perhaps that he is pretending to.

But — Wittgenstein tells us he wants to say as far as concerns uttering any *one* of the printed words, the same thing may take place in the consciousness of the pupil who is 'pretending' to read, as in that of the practised reader who *is* reading it. The word 'read' is applied differently in the two cases.

The first word that someone *reads* — it makes no sense to ask what word that is, unless you stipulate that you are, for example, going to call 'the first word' the first in a series of 50 words that he reads right or something of that sort. But if 'reading' is to stand for a certain experience of transition from marks to spoken sounds, then it does make sense to speak of the first word he really read.

Wittgenstein imagines that someone argues that if only we knew more about the brain and the nervous system, we could look into the pupil's brain and say 'Now the reading connection has been set up.' But why does it have to be like that? If we feel it *must* be, that means that we find that form of explanation very convincing. But we really do not know if it is even probable that there *is* such a mechanism with a 'reading connection'.

If on the other hand we think that the only real criterion is that the 'reader' has a conscious experience of reading, we may be thinking of the contrast with someone who is a conscious fraud, pretending he can read Cyrillic script. He of course knows he is not reading — he knows he is not having the characteristic sensations that accompany peering, guessing with some confidence, misreading, and so on. The 'and so on' includes the contrast with repeating what you have learned by heart. But now, suppose a practised reader is reading a text fluently — but has the *sensations* of repeating something learned by heart — though he never saw the text before. Or suppose that someone is presented with what look like written characters, but which belong to no known alphabet, and he comes out with words, showing all the outward signs and having the characteristic sensations that go with reading. If he is systematic and consistent in what he does with uttering sounds in connection with the text, there might be disagreement about whether he was reading or not — or, indeed, whether he was making up an alphabet and reading accordingly.

Repeating something you know by heart—is that incompatible with reading? Look at your watch after saying the numbers 1 to 12 and now *read* the numbers. What did you do to make it *reading*?

We might want to say: reading is deriving the spoken sounds from the written characters. And we can describe clear-cut cases of such derivation in which a taught rule is used, or a rule for passing from print to handwriting. Such a ‘rule’ might be a pair of columns with printed letters on the left and written ones on the right; the pupil is to look at a text, check what written letter is immediately to the right of a printed letter, a sample of which occurs in his text, and copy the written letter. Of course he has to have been trained in the practice of using the adjacent columns as a rule, and as *that* rule. If less simple correlations are used, we can describe a series devolving into randomness. This, however, does not mean that there is really no such thing as a clear case of derivation. There is a variety of cases—and this fits in with the fact that a variety of circumstances provide us with cases of reading; from the first, we had to admit that for a beginner and for a practised reader we would apply quite different criteria. A child once said proudly when visiting his grandmother ‘I can read!’ ‘Good’, she said, and put a book before him. ‘Oh no’, he said, ‘that’s not the right book.’

A ‘special experience’ or ‘words coming in a special way’ do not function as explanations of what reading is. A word might come to you in the ‘special way’, and *any* special way you care to describe otherwise than as ‘the way the sounds come to you when you are reading the words’ might be found in cases which are *not* cases of reading. As for *that* description, it is useless: one wants to know ‘what way *is* that?’

Some generalisations we can make—but they are of a restricted sort. There is a uniformity about reading printed pages when one is familiar with the printed words—for one thing, there is a uniformity in the appearance of many such pages. But reading is not restricted to this class of ‘texts’. Wittgenstein remarks on how different the text would look where a sentence was written in Morse code. And if one tries to read out printed lines from right to left, i.e. reading the *letters* from right to left, there is a struggle quite unlike what we experience reading from left to right.

‘But when we read do we not feel the word-shapes somehow causing our utterance?’—One would do better to say they grounded it—we would point to the text as a justification for the way we read it out loud.—Wittgenstein says ‘I would like to say I feel an *influence* of the

letters on me' – but he does not want to say that about a solitary letter. The contrast is between a row of printed words and a row of arbitrary printed marks like §, ?, %, *.

We repeatedly have as an argument against explaining *reading*, or *deriving*, or *influence*, or *being guided* in some way that is supposed to apply quite generally, that our cases are particular and that cases vary according to circumstances, and our 'explanation' is not borne out in a different sort of case. In the last example the marks are perfectly familiar, and we would have no difficulty about saying we read them when they occur functionally in appropriate positions. And we might *copy* such an arbitrary row of them – which conforms to Wittgenstein's specifications of what he is counting as 'reading' for his current investigation. One of the other explanations – the use (implicit) of a rule which could be constructed in the form of two columns, one of the printed signs, the other of the written ones – would be more like a justification than an account in terms of 'feeling an influence'.

In short, the whole enquiry in these pages consists largely in rather convincing arguments against generalising particular expressions that we are inclined to use in highly particular situations and cases.

We must remember the purpose which Wittgenstein claimed for putting his investigation of *reading* at this place in the *Untersuchungen* (PI). It was to help his contentions about *understanding* to become clearer to us. Of these, the principal one was: 'If there has to be anything "behind the utterance of the formula" [a formula you may use to continue a series] it is *certain circumstances* which justify me in saying I can go on – when the formula occurs to me.'³

'Now I understand the principle' does not mean the same as 'The formula ... occurs to me.' The argument that it does not is an argument for a quite clear variety of cases in which one might say 'Now I understand the principle'; the formula ... occurring to me was just one of the possible cases, and a case in which no such thing happens is not thereby shown *not* to be a case in which I could justifiably say 'Now I understand the principle'. But note this: the formula occurring to me *is* a particular experienced event, and with that we have explained how there can be 'experiences of understanding'. For *that* experience in *that* case is an experience of understanding – though this is true only because of the circumstances, which include much that went before the moment of the formula's occurring to me. That is why 'Now I understand the principle' does not mean the same,

[3] *Op.cit.*, §154.

even just in this case, as 'The formula occurs to me'. This is illuminated by the discussion of reading: there are experiences connected with reading, but 'reading' is not the same as any of them. Similarly there is a variety of experiences connected with an occasion of understanding, but 'understanding' is not the same as any of them.

Now I do not believe that the investigation into reading which Wittgenstein conducted and compressed into these tight pages is of the sort to appeal to a reader without a philosophical bent. As a contribution to a certain clarifying of the concept of understanding, it plays a part in some major themes of his work — it is not just an eccentric preoccupation with a concept of very marginal importance.

This is my case for saying that Wittgenstein is 'a philosophers' philosopher'.

Understanding was not an abnormal topic for a philosopher: it is the questions, like 'when did understanding take place?' and 'if you understand the integral calculus, when do you do so? all the time, or every now and then?' that surprise. The latter not so much, as it may excite the ready answer: 'Here we are speaking of understanding as something dispositional'. So one also speaks of belief — and of knowledge. Wittgenstein's relevant contribution here was to reject the 'scholastic' suggestion that where there is a 'dispositional' sense of a word like 'belief', there is also and primarily an 'actual' sense of it. I mean as if one could answer a question: 'What are you doing?' by saying, for example, 'Believing that smelling is having molecules hit your smelling apparatus.' 'Believing', Wittgenstein said, has no such 'actual' sense. Clearly *coming to a conclusion*, if it is not just seeing that q follows from p , is arriving at a belief; but belief is not an activity which you can, for example, practise before breakfast every morning. Yet someone can say 'Believe me, it is better to steal than to beg' or recommend you to believe what someone else has said — using an imperative again. Coming to a conclusion, I said, may be arriving at a belief, and certainly is that if it is not finding the implications of a possibly rejected proposition. That means that, here at least, thinking, unlike believing, is an activity. (I am not speaking of the usage in which 'I think' means 'I believe'.) Anyone might say 'So far so good: obviously thinking is an activity, which may or may not accompany your utterances and your other actions, but we want to know what this activity, thinking, is.' Here Wittgenstein begins to jib — thinking may be talking — one does not usually have to think a sentence before saying it — though there may be talking 'without thinking'. So too with other activities: in some cases 'I did it without thinking'

explains what sort of mistake in action, psychologically speaking, I committed: I did not deliberately take the wrong turning. So does doing something deliberately involve doing it *with thought*? No, not necessarily, as doing something with practised competence may show us.

We have only scratched the surface, but it is already clear that Wittgenstein was right in saying that the grammar of 'to think' is extremely complicated. To think is an activity, yes, but the activity may be one of, say, sharpening a pencil with a pencil sharpener that requires the pencil to be held in a particular way if the lead is to be given a point. Familiarity means that one can do it 'without having to think about it' – but if asked: 'Why are you pressing the pencil sideways like that?' one can immediately give the reason. The activity is one of thought (as speech can be) if there is no distinct *accompaniment* of thought.

Our few examples might lead into thinking that 'thinking' is like 'paying'. If someone claims to have paid some money, the question may arise 'In what way did he pay it?' For example, was it by cheque, or with money; by post or messenger, or did you in person hand something over, or cancel an equivalent debt? But no: all I have indicated is that certain activities may *eo ipso* be thinking; they may contain moves that have an aim and are decisions, as playing chess or darts do. Here, though, as with *understanding*, a background of some custom is needed to constitute the practices as what they are. Suppose – to take an example from the discussion of *being guided* – I am copying a line that describes a complicated course. Is what I do, in that I draw a line that corresponds to – is in detail *like* – the other, *copying*? That is, is it *eo ipso* copying? We say children copy their parents. Do sheep copy one another? But the case of copying the line is more specialised than these. What do I mean by saying that? I mean that you could *imagine* circumstances, a background in my society, even in the development of people of my ancestry, which would mean that I was not engaged in the activity of copying. This would be decidedly odd – the conception *here* is of a natural regularity like that men grow beards. The construction of such 'philosophy fiction' does not have the purpose of recommending scepticism about whether you can know that I am copying that line; but only of showing what, other than what can be seen to be happening here and now, is involved in the fact that I am doing so.

A lot of things that are not necessarily 'overt actions' are thinkings: deciding, forming an intention, some exercises of imagination,

calculation 'in the head', interpretation. 'Interpreting is thinking, is an action; seeing is a state', Wittgenstein remarks in Part II, section xi of the *Untersuchungen*. If I say: 'First I thought I would tell him and then I thought I would not', is there a difficulty about understanding such a report? Some have thought that such a 'thought' must be sub-vocal movements of the larynx. But how can one know one had such thoughts without knowing anything about such movements? Besides, it seems to hint that that thinking must have been a 'saying within oneself' as one may recite a whole poem 'in one's head'. What, then, did having those two thoughts *consist in*? We have no idea — or no reasonable idea — and we ought to call the question into question. For how does one learn to say such things? Perhaps I can show you how to saw a plank; I cannot show you the way to have a thought like that — so how do you learn? And what is the relation to its expression in words? Do these constitute a sort of translation as if from one language into another? How could that be, and how could the translation be checked?

One useful method of enquiry would be to construct misuses of these terms, 'thought', 'translation', 'meaning', etc., which show hopeless error about their grammar. 'I know Russian.' 'Right, translate "I'm going out" into Russian.' Silence ensues. 'Well, do it.' 'I did do it, but I can only do it in my head.' I cannot sing in tune — suppose I said that I can think a song in tune, only not out loud.

I will end with a story. I went with my little girl, then four-years-old, to look in on Kanti Shah in Trinity.[†] He was not in his rooms, but there was an offprint on a table. I sat down and picked it up. 'Shall we go now?' asked the child. 'Yes, but first I'll read this a bit.' She waited expectantly and then said 'Read it'. 'I am reading it.' A bewildered silence followed, then she angrily shook my arm, exclaiming 'Read it, read it!' I could not explain.

[†] The location and date: Trinity College, Cambridge, 1947.