WITTGENSTEIN: THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

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Underlying much of Wittgenstein's later thinking was the wish to reach a correct understanding of the nature of philosophical utterances, and this wish is also discernible in his *Tractatus*.[1] His later investigations led him to some iconoclastic ideas about what a philosophical theory is and what a philosopher does who supports his theory with an argument. Wittgenstein saw more deeply into philosophy than anyone before him; but, for the most part, he seemed to prefer to express his perceptions in metaphorical language rather than in the language of straightforward reporting. Part of the reason for this may have been the wish to soften the hard things he saw. Remarks like "A philosophical problem arises when language goes on holiday"[2] and "What is your aim in philosophy? —To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle"[3] give expression to disturbing perceptions into the nature of technical philosophy but uses a variant of the mechanism of *sotto voce* to deflect them. Where their translations into prosaic language would tend to stir up anxiety, these words can be accepted as colorful jibes which need not be taken seriously. If we permit

* Mientras se preparaba este número fuimos informados del fallecimiento del Prof. Morris Lazerowitz, acaecido el 19 de marzo de 1987. Queremos dejar aquí constancia de la profunda consternación que ha producido en nosotros la pérdida de quien fuera colaborador y amigo muy cercano de *Crítica.(N. del D.)*

[1] See for example 6.53.

[2] *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 19.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

ourselves to become thoughtful about these remarks, and others I shall cite shortly, we shall understand why Wittgenstein may have felt the need to deflect attention away from what he saw, and why philosophers need to blind themselves to his insights. Anyone who follows Wittgenstein's deeper thoughts about philosophy runs the risk of seeing the ground on which so many philosophical edifices have been erected sink before his eyes, and with it the entire philosophical metropolis that has been more than two thousand years in the building.

Before reading to you other of his remarks and drawing several conclusions from them it is important to call attention to his change of attitude to psychoanalysis. For the insights he had into the workings of technical, academic philosophy are like the perceptions a psychoanalyst has into the forces which produce a neurosis, a dream, a reverie, a surrealist painting, and a fairy tale. The central motive of the period when he dictated to a small number of students the *Blue* and *Brown Books* was the linguistic unmasking of philosophical utterances, utterances which parade as statements about the inner nature of things, about space and that which lies beyond the bounds of space, about time, causation, and so on. In a Socratic metaphor, the implication of some of Wittgenstein's later insights is that philosophical statements are semantic wind-eggs wich are represented as having ideational substance.

When Wittgenstein first learned about psychoanalysis and read Freud he was filled with admiration and respect. He remarked about Freud, "Here is someone who has something to say".[4] Later he turned against psychoanalysis, rejected it as a harmful mythology, and

[4] Rush Rhees, "Conversations on Freud", in *L. Wittgenstein, Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett.

even turned a number of his students against it. A remarkable thing, however, took place, which might be described as the hidden, displaced return of the rejected. He imbued his philosophical talk with a kind of psychoanalytical atmosphere. It is as if, for him, philosophy had become a linguistic illness from the burden of which people needed to be relieved, and this could only be done by laying bare the illusion-creating tricks that were being unconsciously played with language. The impression that reading the later Wittgenstein makes on one is that he had, without being aware of it, become the psychoanalyst of philosophy, the background formula perhaps being: I don't need analysis, philosophers need it; I am the psychoanalyst, philosophy is the illness from which philosophers need to be cured by analyzing what they are doing with language. It is perhaps within the bounds of reasonable speculation to think that Wittgenstein would never have had his remarkable insights into philosophy, if the need for analysis had not been deflected away from himself and projected onto philosophy. A number of philosophers seem to have divined his role with respect to philosophy when they described him as a *therapeutic* positivist. And indeed he explicitly stated that his "treatment of a philosophical question is like the treatment of an illness".[5] One of his ideas was that "the sickness of philosophical problems can get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life".[6]

It is clear from these and other remarks which Wittgenstein imbedded in his later writings that he thought of philosophy as a neurotic aberration which called for treatment. It would seem that he reacted to his own

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[6] *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 56.

insights into the workings of philosophy in the way in which philosophers have frequently reacted to the account I have given of the nature of philosophy, an account which is merely a development of Wittgenstein's thought. At a symposium meeting organized by Sidney Hook some years ago in New York, Raphael Demos of Harvard protested that I implied that philosophers were sick (his word). D.A. Drennen, in a book of readings which included his own commentaries, stated that according to my view the difference between lunatics and philosophers was that philosophers were not institutionalized. Another philosopher, Raphael Daiches, reacted with less emotion and more sobriety to the view: he observed that it represented metaphysics as "the mescaline of the elite". Unlike other philosophers, he came somewhat close to a distinction psychoanalysis makes between therapeutic or medical analysis and so-called "applied" analysis. The purpose of the first is to cure a person of a neurotic illness or to lessen its severity. The purpose of the second is to add to our knowledge of a phenomenon, for example, a work of art or a primitive tribal practice like totemism, by laying bare the hidden meaning it has for us. These two aims of psychoanalysis are of course not mutually exclusive but neither are they identical, and confusing the two leads to the idea that a normal activity, like dreaming or writing a novel, is a manifestation of a psychological illness. It is this confusion which made Wittgenstein, according to reports, speak of "dissolving" philosophical problems, after the analogy of removing a sympton. Nevertheless, he in some way recognized the difference when he spoke of eliminating the problem aspect of a philosophical question, or to put it differently, of removing its puzzlement. The suggestion here is not that a philosophical problem is a kind of aberration, but rather that it is something

to understand. The equation which emerges is: understanding a philosophical problem rightly = solving the problem. No one is cured, but our understanding is enlarged. The important thing to be grasped about the nature of a philosophical problem, which makes it utterly unlike a mathematical or a scientific problem, is not that understanding it is a prerequisite for its solution but *is* its solution.

The following remarks about philosophy throw it into a new light. They represent an extraordinary intellectual break-through[7] in a discipline which has endured with only superficial changes for an astonishing length of time.

> The man who says "only my pain is real", doesn't mean to say that he has found out by the common criteria... that the others who said they had pains were cheating. But what he rebels against is the use of *this* expression in connection with *these* criteria. That is, he objects to using this word in the particular way in which it is commonly used. On the other hand, he is not aware that he is objecting to a convention. (*The Blue Book*, p. 57.)

> The fallacy we want to avoid is this: when we reject some form of symbolism, we're inclined to look at it as though we'd rejected a proposition as false... This confusion pervades all of philosophy. It's the same confusion that considers a philosophical problem as though such a problem concerns a fact of the world instead of a matter of expression. (*Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932–1935*, from the

[7] The analogy which comes to mind is Freud's break-through to the hidden meanings of dreams. It is interesting that when Freud told his colleague Breuer that he had discovered how to interpret dreams he won as little response from him as Wittgenstein's own remarks about philosophy win nowadays from philosophers.

notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald, p. 69.)

> The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work. (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 51.)

The implication of these remarks is that a philosopher changes language in one way or another under the illusion that he is expressing a proposition about what there is (or is not) and about the nature of what there is. The further implication is that the revised piece of language is *semantically idle*. That is, it has no actual use to communicate information, yet creates the illusion of expressing a speculation about the world.

An example taken from classical philosophy will make Wittgenstein's point clear. Heraclitus maintained that everything constantly changes, that nothing remains the same. You cannot step into the same river twice nor sit on the same bench twice, because there is no such thing as the same river or the same bench —or even the *same you*. There is the apochryphal tale that a debtor of Heraclitus refused to make repayment on the grounds that the present Heraclitus was not the Heraclitus from whom he had borrowed the money and that he was not the original borrower. In linguistic terms, this "view" amounts to withholding from things the application of the phrase "remains the same", while retaining in the language the antithetical term "changes". A philosopher who declares that nothing remains the same for any lenght of time, however short, that everything flows or is in a state of continuous change, gives the impression of putting forward a factual claim about things encountered in everyday experience. To all appearances he is rejecting a common belief about things like iron anvils and granite mountains, and is replacing it with a

proposition about their real state. And there can be no doubt that the philosopher fancies himself to be a kind of scientist who upsets a superstition and puts in its place a reasoned truth about things. But Wittgenstein tells us that the philosopher is confused about his own activity: he thinks himself to be an investigator of reality and to have made a revolutionary discovery, while all that he is doing is rejecting an ordinary expression, banishing it from the language. Instead of investigating the nature of what there is, Heraclitus plays a game with words: he rules "remains unchanged" out of usage, while artificially retaining "is undergoing change"; but he does this in a mode of speech which creates the spurious idea that he is making a pronouncement about things, rather than presenting a piece of gerrymandered terminology.

Heraclitus and Parmenides do opposite things: the one rejects the term "remains the same", the other the terms "motion" and "change". Each can be described as suppressing one of a pair of antithetical terms while artificially keeping in the language its antithesis. Doing this, however, has the semantic effect of robbing the antithesis with which it is linked of the use it has in the language. The phrase "undergoes change", without its antithesis, "remains the same", no longer serves to distinguish between things and, to use Wittgenstein's word, becomes linguistically "idle". The meaning of the phrase "thing which undergoes change" vanishes into the meaning of the word "thing", so that in the sentence "all things are things that undergo change", the term "undergo change" loses its use and becomes semantically functionless. The meaning of the sentence contracts into that of the empty sentence "everything is a thing". It is not difficult to see that the point of banishing "remains the same" while artificially retain-

ing "undergoes change" is to create the deceptive illusion that the sentence "everything changes, nothing remains the same" expresses a theory about the nature of things. Parmenides plays a like game with the word "change" to arrive at the opposite position. And both he and Heraclitus are dupes to their legerdemain. To quote Wittgenstein: "...it is particularly difficult to discover that an assertion which a metaphysician makes expresses discontentment with our grammar when the words of this assertion can be used to state a fact of experience".[8]

The illusion the Heraclitean pronouncement creates has a certain vivacity, but nevertheless does not have sufficient strength of its own to continue to survive scrutiny without collapsing. In my opinion the correct conclusion to come to is that it receives unconscious support from a fantasy to which the pronouncement gives subterranean expression. Kant said that we discover in nature what we ourselves have put there, and Freud, the great explorer of the unconscious, tells us that we project inner processes into the outer world, our projections sometimes taking the form of scientific speculations. Without stretching the imagination, Heraclitus' theory that the univers is a conflict of opposites under the control of justice can be recognized as reading an inner state of affairs into the outer world. His view that everything flows also, undoubtedly, derives the major part of its charge from a cluster of unconscious fantasies that are given expression by the utterance. What one of these fantasies is may be guessed by considering the Greek from which the word "diarrhea" derives. It would seem that the view that everything is in flux or that everyting constantly changes is the concealed

[8] *The Blue Book*, pp. 56–7.

expression of an anal-sadistic fantasy. In the fairy tale, whatever Midas touched turned to gold, and what gold is unconsciously equated with comes through in the fact that the bread the hungry king raised to his mouth he could not eat. In his unconscious a Heraclitean philosopher turns everything into the primitive equivalent of gold: he projects an anal-sadistic fantasy onto things.

Another view may be considered briefly. Bertrand Russell has said that solipsism can neither be shown to be false nor yet be adopted as a proposition on which one can act. Taken at face value, the words "I do not know that anyone else exists" or the words "I alone exist" express propositions which no one in his right mind would dream of acting on. Even an avowed solipsist behaves like anyone else; he does not act like a somnambulist nor like someone who rejects what his eyes and ears tell him about the reality of other people. He greets others and responds to their greetings like anyone else. The solipsist, in his philosophical moments, may talk like a man who is out of his senses, but he never behaves like one. The difference between him and a lunatic is not that he is not institutionalized. The difference is that he does not need to be. Only some of his talk is strange, although it has to be said immediately that not even his solipsistic talk is considered strange or in any way odd in philosophy. Philosophy seems to be a sanctuary in which apparently aberrated talk is accepted as reasoned, scientific discourse. Wittgenstein has shown us the way to the window through which we may get a clear view of the nature of the sanctuary. Mrs. Ladd-Franklin, a distinguished psychologist and logician, wrote Bertrand Russell that she was a solipsist, a position she found so satisfying as to recommend it to others. Apart from its comical side, her letter would seem to show a remarkable blindness to

an inconsistency: the inconsistency in a sentence like "Dear Mr. Russell, I am writing to tell you that I alone am real". The blindness is too much to be accepted, although not to accept it is not to impute sham blindness. And if there is no blindness, neither is there an inconsistency. The following passage from *The Blue Book* helps us understand why there is no inconsistency and no blindness, although removing the apparent blindness requires our recognizing something else that is an actual blindness —a blindness imposed on us by an illusion.

> Now the man whom we call a solipsist and who says that only his own experiences are real, does not thereby disagree with us about any practical question of fact, he does not say that we are simulating when we complain of pains, he pities us as much as anyone else, and at the same time he wishes to restrict the use of the epithet "real" to what we should call his experiences; and perhaps he doesn't want to call our experiences "experiences" at all (again without disagreeing with us about any question of fact). For he would say that it was *inconceivable* that experiences other than his own were real... I needn't say that in order to avoid confusion he had in this case better not use the word "real" as opposed to "simulated" at all; which just means that we shall have to provide for the distinction "real"/"simulated" in some other way. The solipsist who says "only I feel real pain", "only I really see (or hear)" is not stating an opinion; and that's why he is so sure of what he says. He is irresistibly tempted to use a certain form of expression; but we must yet find *why* he is.[9]

The strange talk of the solipsist, whether he declares that he does not really know that anyone else exists or

[9] *The Blue Book*, pp.59–60.

that he alone is real, on Wittgenstein's understanding of it is not the talk it seems on the surface to be; it is not about what is known or about who exists and who does not exist. In a supposed imaginary conversation Wittgenstein has with a philosopher he turns to a third person and explains, "He is not mad. We are just philosophizing."[10] We may say a like thing of the solipsist: he is *only* philosophizing. Without embarrassment either to himself or to us, he can philosophically say to our very faces: "Only I really perceive, feel anger, have thoughts; I alone am real". This is because his words are not used to make a declaration regarding the existence or nonexistence of anyone. Wittgenstein represents the solipsist as giving expression to a linguistic wish, the wish to "restrict the use of the epithet 'real' to what we should call his experiences". This understanding of what he is doing with terminology brings a bright light to one of the darkest corners of philosophy. It helps us get clear on how it is that, without intellectual dishonesty, he can hold his view while sympathizing with us when we complain of pain and why we do not think his view to be the sympton of a psychological malady. If, for whatever reason, the solipsist uses the sentence "I alone am real", or "Only my experiences are real", to introduce a re-editing of the word "real" which confines its application to the solipsist, we can understand both why he "does not disagree with us about any practical question of fact" and also why his "view" can be the subject of intractable and endless disagreement. He is so sure of what he says because he is not "stating an opinion"; instead he is presenting a terminological change which he favors. And his philosophical opponent can be equally sure because he is not stating a

[10] Last notes, *On Knowledge and Certainty*, 1.51.

counter-opinion about a matter of fact but is merely rejecting a terminological change.

Despite semantic appearances to the contrary, the word "real" is not, in the solipsistic way of speaking, opposed to "simulated"; and Wittgenstein's recommendation to the solipsist is that, to avoid confusion and thus being misunderstood, he should not, in the expression of his view, "use the word 'real' as opposed to 'simulated' at all". However, if the solipsist followed Wittgenstein's suggestion, and did not use the word "real", or its equivalents, in the expression of his theory, his theory would evaporate; and the same thing would happen if in some way he explicitly marked the fact that the word in his pronouncement did not have its ordinary use. It would seem that Wittgenstein had the idea that the solipsist wishes to introduce a terminological change in the *actual use* of everyday language, which differs from philosophical language in not being "like an engine idling". But philosophers are not language reformers, as their continued unresolves disputes show. As Wittgenstein himself points out, if the present distinction between "real" and "simulated" were obliterated by an adopted change in the use of "real", we should "have to provide for the distinction 'real'/'simulated' in some other way" —which implies that from a practical point of view the change is linguistically pointless.

We reach an understanding of the solipsist's *wish* to contract the application of "real" if we keep in mind the fact that his sentence "I alone am real" gives the appearance of making a factual claim, an appearance to which he is dupe and which holds him in bondage. What makes itself clear then is that the philosophical use of "real" is not introduced for the sake of a putative practical advantage but rather is introduced for the illusion it brings into existence. The sentence "I alone am

real", or the sentence "Only I really have experiences", creates the vivid and powerful, even though delusive, impression that it states an experiential proposition. And we have to think that *its special work is to produce this impression.* We may say that in the sentence, which presents in the ontological form of speech an academically gerrymandered word, the term "real" does not have a use to convey factual information. It has a metaphysical job, which is to help create the intellectual illusion of a theory being announced.

Wittgenstein represents the man who says "'Only I feel real pain', 'Only I really see (or hear)'" as being "irresistible tempted to use a certain form of expression", and urges us to search for the reason as to why he is. One reason for his being drawn to his contrived use of "real" undoubtedly is that it creates a wished for illusion. We can also discern the special egoistic gain the philosophical view has for him, if we realize that in its actual use the word "real" means not only *genuine* and *exists*, but also *important.* The solipsist unconsciously uses his sentence to bolster his ego. Bertrand Russell's story about the letter he received from Mrs. Ladd-Franklin in which she expressed surprise that others were not solipsists has its amusing side, but it makes plain that she found the doctrine personally gratifying, indeed so gratifying that she could recommend it to others for philosophical adoption. Each of us can have the consolation of solipsism without deprivation to anyone else. The solipsistic sentence "I alone am real" gives its philosophical user an "ego monopoly" which in no way is in conflict with the ego monopoly of any other user of the sentence.

The solipsistic view, at least the one discussed by Wittgenstein, is a structure in which three components can be discerned. One component is an academically

contracted use of the word "real" which dictates its application exclusively to whatever the first person pronoun "I" is used to refer to. A second component is the delusive appearance that the solipsistic sentence states a fact-claiming theory, an appearance which is brought about by the nonverbal mode of speech in which the sentence is formulated. And a third consists of an unconscious fantasy of narcissistic self-aggrandizement, which is given expression by the word "real" in the statement of the theory.

RESUMEN

Wittgenstein, con mayor profundidad que cualquier otro filósofo, comprendió la naturaleza de la filosofía. Sus observaciones acerca de ella se asemejan a los diagnósticos de un sicoanalista sobre su paciente. La filosofía era para él una aberración neurótica en espera de tratamiento. De ahí que, desde su perspectiva, comprender un problema filosófico sea de hecho solucionarlo. Lo que el filósofo pretende es alterar los modos establecidos de expresión, creyendo al mismo tiempo que dice algo profundo acerca de la naturaleza de las cosas. No se percata de que sus proposiciones son semánticamente ociosas. Ejemplos notables son las tesis de Heráclito de que todo fluye y la solipsista de que sólo mis experiencias son reales. Como en muchos otros casos de proposiciones filosóficas, en éstos se pretende retirar de la circulación una frase (*e.g.*, 'permanece el mismo') mientras que se mantiene fija su antítesis. Las tesis filosóficas se refuerzan por fantasías inconscientes a las que dan expresión intelectual. También el solipsismo es una propuesta de cambio de convenciones lingüísticas, sin consecuencias para la conducta. Afirmaciones como la de que sólo yo soy real tienen, empero, la apariencia de una aseveración factual, pero en el fondo sólo crean la ilusión de que se está diciendo algo profundo. Ésa es precisamente su función. Las oraciones solipsistas le confieren a sus usuarios un "monopolio del ego" altamente satisfactorio, presentando como una teoría lo que no es más que una modificación lingüística. La posición solipsista tiene tres componentes: 1) un uso académico de palabras como 'real' que hace que ésta se aplique únicamente a la referencia del pronombre 'yo'; 2) una apariencia engañosa de que la oración solipsista es parte de una teoría que sirve para enunciar hechos y 3) una fantasía inconsciente de auto-agrandamiento narcisista generado por las connotaciones del uso académico de 'real'.

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