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Why Is Wittgenstein Important?

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Abstract

Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy has been hugely influential but can be difficult to understand. He has a radical approach to philosophy. Most philosophers think that questions such as 'How can I know there is an external world?' or 'How is my private inner world of thought and experience related to my body?' raise genuine puzzles requiring solutions. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, takes such questions to result from linguistic confusion and a scientistic approach to philosophy. Such questions require, not answers, but conceptual elucidation. This article introduces Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Brains Don't Think

Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the most important philosophers of all time. This is because he questioned and debunked our deeply engrained assumptions about the mind, language, meaning, memory, knowledge; and, in doing so, he has elucidated these concepts.

Discovering Wittgenstein was a turning point for me. It caused a 'conversion' in my basic understanding of what it is to think, to remember, to use language, to mean something. The shift was gradual and difficult – so engrained were my assumptions that the mind is in the brain; that thought is something that happens before it is put in words; that it, along with the will, feelings, consciousness, knowledge, self-knowledge, memory etc. is stored and processed *in the brain, by the brain*. Discovering Wittgenstein enabled me to veer away from this *brain-centred* view of thought, intelligence, behaviour, language, knowledge and memory to a *person-centred* view, focused on ways of acting embedded in our human forms of life.

Thanks to Wittgenstein, I came to understand that our thoughts, intelligence, will, memory, self-knowledge, etc. are not ghostly brain processes that materialize, through some kind of decoding, into action or words. Rather, thinking about my sister, wanting to catch a bus, remembering my dental appointment, telling someone that my name is Danièle, are simply ways of acting. Of course, I could not do these things without a brain, but only in the same sense that I could not walk or digest food without a brain. The brain, I came to see, is only a *mechanical* enabler; it is unable to create, store, grasp meaning, or think. Only a person can do that; and she does it through living in the world and interacting with others.

Wittgenstein does not deny that we need brain activity for thinking and other mental activities, just as we do for walking. In that limited sense, our thoughts etc. *are* causally dependent on the brain – on brain structures in different brain areas and on synaptic modifications in these areas. What he denies is that

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these structures are *representations* of particular thoughts, memories, feelings or emotions, generated by the brain and stored and encoded in the brain. Where then – we might ask – are our thoughts, memories, feelings and emotions, and what is their source? Our thoughts, memories, feelings and emotions exist only in their occurrences – that is, in our thinking, speaking, remembering, desiring, loving, giving, caressing, suffering, hurting, writing, painting, playing the piano, etc. – and they have their source in the stream of our lives. This is their physical manifestation; and it is not – nor can it be – a *physicalist* manifestation (that is: something totally explainable in terms of physics; e.g. electrons and neurons).

What Wittgenstein helped me understand is that we are misled by a *physicalist or scientistic presumption*: the presumption that everything must have a physical cause and can be reduced to it. I came to see that the notion of a person's mind – which Wittgenstein realized amounts to that of a person having and exercising certain dispositions, capacities or abilities, such as thinking, loving, remembering, being afraid, feeling pain, which are enabled by, but not reducible to, the brain – has been subjected to this physicalist presumption.

'The Disease of Philosophy'

For Wittgenstein, the disease of philosophy is caused by this physicalist tendency to *explain* rather than *describe*. In wanting to look 'deeply', philosophy overlooks the surface, what is in plain sight; and in its desire to explain, it emulates explanation as practised by science:

> Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. (BB 18)

To counter this temptation to explain everything, Wittgenstein recommends that philosophers adopt a method focused on *description* – one that consists of looking and describing rather than speculating or *explaining*: 'don't

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think, but look!' (PI 66). It is the task of the scientist to explain; the philosopher must only describe: 'Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden … is of no interest to us' (PI 126). The temptation to treat philosophical problems as if they were empirical problems misleads philosophers into trying to get under the surface to uncover the supposedly 'hidden' depth.

'For Wittgenstein, the disease of philosophy is caused by this physicalist tendency to *explain* rather than *describe*.'

Wittgenstein viewed philosophy not as explanation but as conceptual or grammatical (he uses these two words interchangeably) elucidation: 'The philosophical problem is an awareness of disorder in our concepts, and can be solved by ordering them' (BT 309). What we, in our scientistic attitudes, have traditionally taken to be metaphysical problems are linguistic confusions: 'The characteristic of a metaphysical question being that we express an unclarity about the grammar of words in the *form* of a scientific question' (BB 35). This is why, in keeping with Wittgenstein's 'modern' way of philosophizing (MWL 113), the philosopher should rid herself of the urge to approach problems scientifically, and engage in the task of conceptual elucidation and rearrangement which alone can 'bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (PI 116):

> The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (PI 109)

The Importance of Conceptual Elucidation

In alerting us to the damage caused by the physicalist/explanatory stance in philosophy, Wittgenstein reveals the damage caused by metaphysics. He is unequalled not only in fleshing out the ways and consequences of the damage, but also in making conceptual elucidation the sole task of philosophy: 'Philosophy. The clarification of the use of language. Traps of language' (P 183/BT 311). To say that conceptual philosophy is the sole task of philosophy is not to say that philosophy is not concerned with the world, for language is necessarily embedded in the stream of life. It is to say that 'philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*' (PI 38; original emphasis), and this includes the temptation, as philosophers, to misinterpret and misuse our forms of language:

> Philosophical troubles are caused by not using language practically but by extending it on looking at it. We form sentences and then wonder what they can mean. Once conscious of 'time' as a substantive, we ask then about the creation of time. (AWL 15)

Because of language (e.g. 'time' being a noun), we are confused into thinking that time is a thing and therefore ask about its creation. Because they are nouns, we are mystified into taking 'time', but also 'mind', 'memory' or 'consciousness', to be entities or faculties having discrete existence and location. Because 'consciousness' is a noun, we think it must stand for a nominatum – a thing it names. Also, it is all too tempting a step to infer, from the fact that we are sometimes conscious – that is: awake and alert; not sleeping, knocked out or comatose – the existence of an entity called 'consciousness'. This outdated residue of the Platonic reification of states and qualities has been blown out of all proportion: the 'problem of consciousness' being considered today as the most central issue in current philosophy of mind in that consciousness is viewed by many philosophers as a physical entity that can only be understood by investigating the brain. But consciousness is

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not a physical entity at all; it is a state a person can be in; such as when they're not sleeping or when they are intently aware of something: for example 'I am conscious of my duty'.

It is crucial that we not underestimate, as is often done by Wittgenstein's detractors, the damage produced by conceptual confusion and the related importance of conceptual elucidation. When philosophers like Tim Crane object that reification – being nothing but an innocuous, figurative way of speaking – does not mystify us, they are profoundly wrong: reification often impacts and reflects our understanding of some mental concepts as *physical* entities or places in the brain. Of course, this is not dismissive of reification; it only flags our vulnerability to it. Wittgenstein was well aware that such confusions would 'seem trivial' (AWL 98) to philosophers. But they are far from trivial. Like all our unquestioned assumptions and many of our powerful pictures, conceptual confusions by default inform empirical research. Taking the mind and the brain as synonyms or as co-extensive has repercussions on how we conduct research and treat mental illness; for example, by privileging – through acknowledgement, reward and funding – the physiological approach that de-contextualizes psychiatric disorders and treats them as discrete, drug-treatable, brain conditions rather than as products of nurture which deserve increased attention and funding. John Searle's suggestion that human beings are 'embodied brains' does not smack of the innocuously figurative. Such figurative expressions can mislead us into thinking that a problem is a scientific one when in fact it is not. Scientism can mystify us in different ways, mostly through the uncritical adoption of scientific ways of thinking and their systematic transfer and application to realms outside science.

As an antidote to *explanatory* or scientistic philosophy, Wittgenstein's *descriptive* philosophy enables us to see clearly – thanks to the philosopher's conceptual elucidations or 'perspicuous presentations' (PI 122) – what is always before our eyes but is made invisible by familiarity or blurred by misconception or preconception (PI 89; 122). Rather than presume the existence of entities such as consciousness (which will then give rise to the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness'), the descriptive philosopher will start by 'reminding' us that there are no such 'entities', and that presuming their 'existence' only obstructs rather than clarifies our understanding of ourselves.

Wittgenstein's emphasis on language and conceptual elucidation does not mean that he is oblivious to reality, for he understood that 'words have meaning only in the stream of life' (LW I, 913). There is, for Wittgenstein, no Platonic or metaphysical Third Realm of meaning; meaning can only be embedded in use, in context, in life. He expressed this in one of his most brilliant and best-known aphorisms: 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (PI 43), usually abbreviated as 'meaning is use'. Indeed, his insistence that mind, thought, meaning, emotion can only be manifest in the stream of life, and attributed to persons (and, to a lesser extent, animals), makes Wittgenstein a realist, not an idealist, but his realism is of a soft kind; it is a realism without empiricism: 'Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing' (RFM VI, 23, p. 325).

The Primacy of Action: *Enactivism*

In contrast to the philosophical tendency to attribute and reduce our mental lives to physical processes in the brain, Wittgenstein sees the basis of our human form of life in action or behaviour: 'In the beginning was the deed' (OC 402). Action, in Wittgenstein, gains its rightful place in the description of our human mindedness; a place usurped by an inflated intellect and brain, in the form of content, propositions, representations, or intelligent neurons. Action – and not any of these – is, for Wittgenstein, at the logical foundation of thought.

In fact, Wittgenstein's work has inspired the important contemporary philosophical movement called *Enactivism*. Enactivism, broadly understood, is the view that thinking, remembering, knowing, hoping, etc. are not activities engaged in by the brain, but activities of the person: 'we can see from their actions that [people] believe certain things' (OC 284).

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On this Wittgenstein-inspired view, to say that living beings have minds is not to say that they have brains that process representational states and their contents but rather that these beings have and exercise certain dispositions, capacities and abilities such as thinking, understanding, remembering, recognizing, hoping, fearing, hurting, etc.; and that these are not abilities and activities of the *brain*, but embodied and situated abilities and activities, causally, but not contentfully, enabled by the brain. Wittgenstein brings us to see that our mental activity is not rooted or represented in propositions, theories of mind, or ghostly processes but is primitively embodied or enacted. This may sound like behaviourism, but it isn't. Wittgenstein does not do away with the inner; he merely revises its importance and its nature.

'It is crucial that we keep Wittgenstein's philosophy alive and influential, for who better can save us from the still prevalent view that human life, thought and spirit are reducible to neurobiological processes?'

In fact, if I had to say what the single, most important contribution Wittgenstein made to philosophy is, it would be: to have revived the 'animal' in us: that is, the instinctive, non-reflective, enactive aspect of our being human, and therefore also of our thinking and reasoning. Wittgenstein's evocation of the 'animal' in us is strewn, more or less implicitly, throughout his philosophy, but it is most clearly articulated in *On Certainty*, where he says he wants to conceive of our basic certainty 'as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal' (OC 359). By this he means: as something instinctive, thought-free, reflex-like. So that, in grasping the world's 'furniture',

> [c]hildren do not learn that books exist, that armchairs, exist, etc., etc., – they learn to *fetch* books, *sit* in armchairs, etc., etc. (OC 476)

A child's first 'grasp' of a chair is not intellectual, but enactive. She deals with the chair's existence *in action*, not in thought; thinking about its existence comes later, if at all. One does not learn a method of figuring out whether something exists or not until a question presents itself; and a question does not *normally* present itself as to whether I or the chair I am sitting in exist. It *does* normally present itself about unicorns, or about whether there are chairs in the *next* room. What Wittgenstein is doing here is deproblematizing or de-intellectualizing what we have problematized and intellectualized: 'Does a child believe that milk exists? Or does it know that milk exists? Does a cat know that a mouse exists?' (OC 478). A cat doesn't need to *know* that a mouse exists before chasing it, nor does a child need to *know* that milk exists before drinking it. And nor does an adult need to *know* that a house exists before entering it. For Wittgenstein, grasping and navigating the world is *by default* done primitively – not epistemically, or indeed propositionally. Here, cognition – be it of the milk, the mouse or the house – is not epistemic or propositional or something that has been transformed for neural processing. Rather than think of cognition as rooted in knowing, Wittgenstein sees it as rooted in a certainty that is unreflective, animal: 'For why should the language-game rest on some kind of knowledge? (OC 477). He takes not knowledge, but hinge certainty – a basic, non-intellectual or *animal*, certainty – to underpin all that we say and do.

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Certainty before Knowledge: Scepticism Undone

I conclude this brief summary of Wittgenstein's major achievements with his solution to the infinite regress of knowledge, which brings with it his dissolution of radical scepticism. Inasmuch as the claim to know requires justification, and justification itself requires justification, there occurs an infinite regress of justification. And so, knowledge cannot be the indubitable basis of our beliefs. In his final notebooks, edited and published as *On Certainty* after his death, Wittgenstein puts knowledge in its right conceptual place, and shows that our ultimate certainties are not epistemic – not knowledge-based. Knowledge, he realized, is necessarily based on the non-intellectual or animal certainty mentioned at the end of the previous section. This non-epistemic certainty – 'hinge certainty', as I call it – is an *enactive* certainty, a *certainty in action*, which lies at the basis of all our thinking and acting.

Whereas the philosophical use of 'I know' must always result from some investigative or ratiocinative process (and can therefore be subject to doubt), Wittgenstein understood that underpinning knowledge are non-epistemic certainties that do not result from reasoning: they are 'exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which [our questions and our doubts can] turn' (OC 341):

> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted. (OC 342)

The hinge metaphor is meant to illustrate that the acquisition of knowledge is hinged on certainties that are *logically* not open to doubt and manifested in our ways of acting (*in deed*).

Whereas our claims to know can always be defeated, we *cannot* be wrong about our certainty that other people exist; that human beings need nutrition to survive; that babies cannot feed themselves. Outside pathological circumstances, there is no room for doubt in our assurance of such things, and they are therefore not 'justified' objects of knowledge. Nor are they propositions. Rather, these non-propositional certainties show themselves non-reflectively in what we say and do:

> I want to say: it's not that on some points men *know* the truth with perfect certainty. No: perfect certainty is only a matter of their *attitude*. (OC 404; my emphasis)

And we must keep in mind that putting these hinge certainties into sentences for philosophical inquiry does not make them into propositions; it simply formulates them.

In realizing that our basic certainty is not propositional, Wittgenstein puts an end to the problem of infinite regress in epistemology – and therefore to radical scepticism. There is no such problem because the basis of our certainty is not yet another proposition (which would itself demand justification), but a way of acting: we act in the certainty that the world exists, that other people exist and have minds. So that the so-called 'problem of other minds' – the problem of knowing that others have minds, and are capable of thinking or feeling, just as we do – is a non-problem. Wittgenstein's response to it is that we don't *know* that others have minds. Just as we don't *know* that the world exists or that other people exist, and just as I don't *know* that I am sitting here typing these words or that I speak French or that I am in pain or that I have two hands. As Wittgenstein has made clear, we don't *know* these things, not because we can always doubt them, but because doubt about them is, in default circumstances, *logically* impossible:

> If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented. (OC 155)

In thus *logically* closing the door to doubt and mistake as regards some things, Wittgenstein closes the door to universal or radical scepticism. It is our acting in the world that is basic to what we know and not the other way around.

And so we find ourselves back full circle to the very beginning of our discussion. *We*, not

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our brain, apprehend the world. And we do so without our brain encoding and decoding the objects of our perception and thought. It is not our brain that makes sense of the world, but we do. That we need to have a brain in order to do that is obvious, but *it is not our brain that does it*.

It is crucial that we keep Wittgenstein's philosophy alive and influential, for who better can save us from the still prevalent view that human life, thought and spirit are reducible to neurobiological processes? That, as Francis Crick believes: '"You", your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are, in fact, no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules' (1994: 3). It is the task of Wittgensteinian philosophers to make perspicuous the nonsense that this view perpetuates. They are doing so, I am pleased to say, not only through the increasingly 'radical' perspectives of Enactivism, but also through the flourishing new branch of philosophy called 'Hinge Epistemology'.

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BB *The Brown Book in The Blue and Brown Books,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

BT *The Big Typescript: TS 213,* ed. and trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

LW I *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology,* vol. I, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

MWL 'Moore's Wittgenstein Lectures in 1930–1933', in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, ed. J. C. Klagge and A. Nordman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 46–114.

OC *On Certainty,* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, rev. 1st edn (Oxford: Blackwell 1997).

P 'Philosophy' (sections 86–93 of the *Big Typescript),* in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951,* ed. J. C. Klagge and A. Nordman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 160–99.

PI *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell 1997).

RFM *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics,* ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe; trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

Numbers usually refer to sections, not pages.

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