



Ludwig Wittgenstein

1889-1951

Plan:

- Wittgenstein's life
- The distinction between his early philosophy and his later philosophy
- Something about his early philosophy
- Something about his later philosophy

One theme that runs throughout Wittgenstein's philosophy, early and late, that there is something misguided about philosophy itself.

The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood.

(Wittgenstein, Preface, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921)

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question.—Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off.—Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.

There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies. (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953)

The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of the sound human understanding. (Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*)

Hence, in studying Wittgenstein we are faced with such issues as

What is philosophy supposed to be?

How, for Wittgenstein, is philosophy misguided?

What is the nature of his critique of philosophy?

How does his critique differ in his early philosophy and in his later philosophy?

“Wittgenstein has made our generation of philosophers self-conscious about philosophy itself.” Gilbert Ryle

Wittgenstein's life

- Born in 1889, in Vienna
- His father, Karl Wittgenstein, a steel tycoon, was one of the richest men in Europe



- As late as 1938, after his wealth had diminished to some extent, he owned 13 mansions in Vienna alone

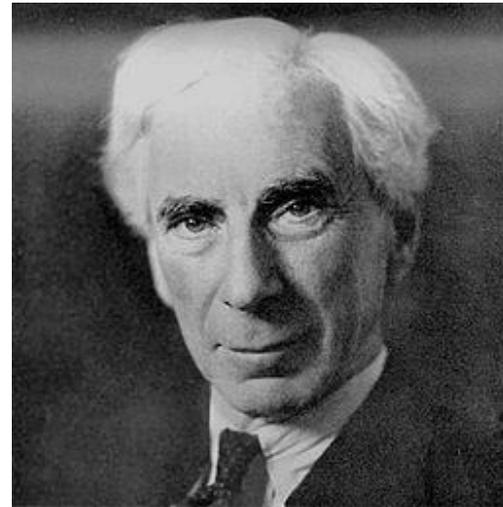
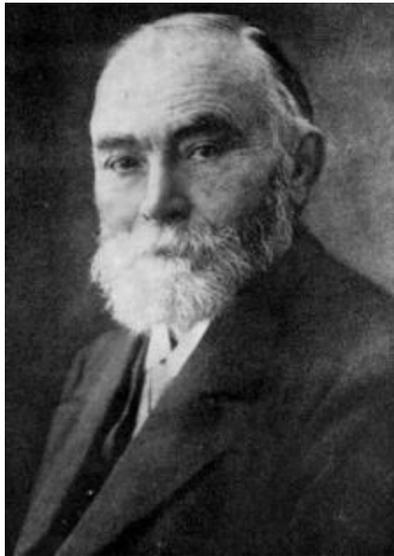
- There were nine children, four girls and five boys
- Three of his brothers committed suicide
- One of his brothers, Paul, a concert pianist, lost his arm during World War I, and continued his career as a left-handed pianist



- One of his sisters, Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein, was the subject of a famous portrait, painted for her wedding by Gustav Klimt



- Wittgenstein studied mechanical engineering in Berlin, 1906-8
- In 1908, he went to Manchester to study aeronautics, where he planned to earn a doctorate
- However, at some point he became interested in the foundations of mathematics
- In 1911, he visited Gottlob Frege who recommended that Wittgenstein study with Bertrand Russell in Cambridge



Wittgenstein worked closely with Russell from October 1911-1914 (the outbreak of WWI)

- “[A]n unknown German appeared, speaking very little English but refusing to speak German. He turned out to be a man who had learnt engineering at Charlottenburg, but during his course had acquired, by himself, a passion for the philosophy of mathematics, and has now come to Cambridge on purpose to hear me.” (18/10/11)
- “My German friend threatens to be an infliction—he came back with me after my lecture and argued till dinner-time—obstinate and perverse, but I think not stupid.” (19/10/11)
- “My German engineer, I think, is a fool. He thinks nothing empirical is knowable—I asked him to admit there was not a rhinoceros in the room, but he wouldn’t.” (2/11/11)
- “My ferocious German [Wittgenstein] (who is an Austrian I find) came and argued at me after my lecture. He is armour-plated against all assaults of reasoning—it is really rather a waste of time talking with him.” (16/11/11)
- “Then I came home and prepared my last lecture and gave it—it led to a very lively discussion, continued afterwards by Wittgenstein in my rooms. He is certainly very good. I forget if I told you that he says his father has been disappointed in all his other sons, and is very anxious this one should do something respectable like engineering and not waste his time over such nonsense as philosophy. So he is going to finish his engineering course. But I don't believe he will give up his philosophy—it has too great a hold on him. A little engineering would do no harm.” (7/3/12)

I knew Wittgenstein first at Cambridge before the War. He was an Austrian, and his father was enormously rich. Wittgenstein had intended to become an engineer, and for that purpose had gone to Manchester. Through reading mathematics he became interested in the principles of mathematics, and asked at Manchester who there was who worked at this subject. Somebody mentioned my name, and he took up his residence at Trinity. He was perhaps the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense, and dominating. He had a kind of purity which I have never known equalled except by G. E. Moore. ... He used to come to see me every evening at midnight, and pace up and down my room like a wild beast for three hours in agitated silence. Once I said to him: "Are you thinking about logic or about your sins?" "Both," he replied, and continued his pacing. (Russell, *Autobiography*)

“Do you remember that at the time [1913] when you were seeing Wittgenstein I wrote a lot of stuff about Theory of Knowledge, which Wittgenstein criticized with the greatest severity? His criticism, tho' I don't think you realized it at the time, was an event of first-rate importance in my life, and affected everything I have done since. I saw he was right, and I saw that I could not hope ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy. My impulse was shattered, like a wave dashed to pieces against a breakwater. I became filled with utter despair, and tried to turn to you for consolation. But you were occupied with Wittgenstein and could not give me time. So I took to casual philandering, and that increased my despair. I had to produce lectures for America, but I took a metaphysical subject although I was and am convinced that all fundamental work in philosophy is logical. My reason was that Wittgenstein persuaded me that what wanted doing in logic was too difficult for me. So there was no really vital satisfaction of my philosophical impulse in that work, and philosophy lost its hold on me. That was due to Wittgenstein more than to the war.” (Russell, 4/3/1916)

- Wittgenstein fights with Austria during WWI, still working on his *Tractatus*
- Announces to Russell after the war that he has completed his work, which is eventually published in 1921
- Worked as a gardener in a monastery, a school-teacher in rural Austria (1920-1926), designed a house in Vienna (1926-29)
- Gradually, moved back into philosophy, engaging with the Vienna Circle and moving back to Cambridge, where he taught from 1930-47

Wittgenstein's critiques of philosophy

Two (among many) different views of philosophy:

- Philosophy as possessing a special method and capable of arriving at insights as to the nature of reality, of our relation to reality, and of how we can best live our lives (Spinoza, Kant, Hegel)
- Philosophy as puncturing the aspirations of the first sort of philosophy (ancient sceptics, Hume, Nietzsche)

Wittgenstein was concerned, in both his early and later philosophy, to undermine the aspirations of the first sort of philosophy

However, his early philosophy has some elements of the first sort of philosophy—it presents itself as arriving at a special insight from which we can recognize that we cannot obtain the sort of insights into the nature of reality to which traditional philosophy aspires.

In contrast, his later philosophy, has elements of the second sort of philosophy, of bringing our inquiries back to "the rough ground", and to presenting philosophies—including his own early work—as failing to do so.

Preface of the *Tractatus*

Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts.—So it is not a textbook.—Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it.

The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.

Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.

If this work has any value, it consists in two things: the first is that thoughts are expressed in it, and on this score the better the thoughts are expressed—the more the nail has been hit on the head—the greater will be its value.—Here I am conscious of having fallen a long way short of what is possible. Simply because my powers are too slight for the accomplishment of the task.—May others come and do it better.

On the other hand the truth of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe myself to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems. And if I am not mistaken in this belief, then the second thing in which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.

In broad outline, the book seems to move (in the 1's to the 3's) from

the world (“all that is the case, the totality of facts”)

to

thought (“we picture facts to ourselves”)

to

language (“In a proposition (*Satz*) a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses”)

Then in the rest of the book, Wittgenstein discusses ways in which language does not function to “picture” facts:

logic consists of tautologies, which are not pictures: senseless [sinnlos]

ethics (aesthetics, metaphysics): nonsensical [unsinnig]

Sentences with sense

Pictures of reality

Say how things are; show something (e.g. logical form)

Sentences of natural science

Can conceive as true; can conceive as false

Sentences that are senseless (sinnlos)

Not pictures of reality

Say nothing; but do show something (e.g. 6.127)

Tautologies and contradiction; logic

Can't conceive tautologies as false; can't conceive contradictions as true

Apparent (pseudo-) sentences that are nonsensical (unsinnig)

Not sentences at all

Neither say nor show anything; are failed attempts to say what can only be shown.

Ethics (aesthetics)
Metaphysics

13 August 1919

Dear Wittgenstein,

I have read your book twice carefully.—There are still points I don't understand—some of them important ones—I send you some queries on separate sheets. I am convinced you are right in your main contention, that logical prop[osition]s are tautologies, which are not true in the sense that substantial prop[osition]s are true.

19. 8. 19

Dear Russell,

Thanks so much for your letter dated 13 August. ... Now I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[osition]s—i.e. by language—(and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.

What about the status of the remarks of the *Tractatus* themselves?

6.53 The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever some-one else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning [Bedeutung] to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one.

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical [unsinnig], when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

What are we to make of this? What is to be gained from a book all of whose apparent sentences are ultimately to be regarded as nonsensical?

Debate concerning this issue is closely tied up with the interpretation of the show/say distinction.

Does Wittgenstein hold that what can be shown are metaphysical truths that cannot be stated in language?

Does he hold that the show/say distinction (as well as other apparent doctrines of the book, as for example, that “objects make up the substance of the word” or that “sentences with sense are pictures of reality”) is itself to be “thrown away” when we “kick away the ladder”?

Or is there some other way to read the book, so that the show/say distinction (along with other apparent doctrines such as the view of sentences with sense as pictures of reality) remains central to the book but in such a way that Wittgenstein genuinely renounces metaphysics?

Philonous... I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for ... any sensible object whatever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.

Hylas If it comes to that the point will soon be decided. What more easy than to conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independent of, and unperceived by, any mind whatsoever? I do at present time conceive them existing after that manner.

Philonous How say you, Hylas, can you see a thing which is at the same time unseen?

Hylas No, that were a contradiction.

Philonous Is it not as great a contradiction to talk of *conceiving* a thing which is *unconceived*?

Hylas It is.

Philonous The tree or house therefore which you think of is conceived by you?

Hylas How should it be otherwise?

Philonous And what is conceived is surely in the mind?

Hylas Without question, that which is conceived is in the mind.

Philonous How then came you to say, you conceived a house or tree existing independent and out of all minds whatsoever?

Hylas That was I own an oversight; but stay, let me consider what led me into it.—It is a pleasant mistake enough. As I was thinking of a tree in solitary place, where no one was present to see it, methought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of; not considering that I myself conceived it all the while. But now I plainly see that all I can do is frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving that I can conceive them *existing out of the minds of all Spirits*. (DHP 1)

Different issues:

- 1) Is it self-refuting for someone to think “ a is unthought-of”? Can s think truly that a is un-thought of?
- 2) Is it self-refuting for someone to think “There are things that are unthought-of”? Can s think truly that something is unthought-of?
- 3) If it self-refuting to think “There are things that are unthought-of”, does it following that nothing is unthought-of?

The limits of my language mean [bedeuten] the limits of my world. Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. So we cannot say in logic, 'The world has this in it, and this, but not that.'

For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either. (5.6–5.61)

This remark provides the key to the question, to what extent is solipsism a truth.

[W]hat solipsism *means* [meint] is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but shows itself.

That the world is *my* world shows itself in that the limits of language (the only language which I understand) mean [bedeuten] the limits of *my* world. (5.62)

So what is Wittgenstein's view?

Does he hold that solipsism is a metaphysical truth that can only be shown but not said?

Or is there another interpretation of his show/say distinction that does not commit him to unsayable metaphysical truths (including solipsism)?

Suggestion:

Read the show/say distinction as presented in the *Tractatus* so that it is *not* meant to afford us a way to access metaphysical truths or to “see beyond the limits of thought”.

Understood in this way, it plays a central role in the early Wittgenstein’s critique of metaphysics.

What a picture must have in common with reality, in order to depict it—correctly or incorrectly—in the way it does is its pictorial form. ...

A picture cannot, however, depict its pictorial form: it displays it.

A picture represents its subject from a position outside it. (Its standpoint is its representational form.) That is why a picture represents its subject correctly or incorrectly.

A picture cannot, however, place itself outside of its representational form.
(2.17–2.174)

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—logical form.

In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world.

4.121 Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them. What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language. Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.

4.1212 What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said.

The sentence *expresses* what I do not know; but what I must know in order to be able to say it at all, *I show in it*. (*Notebooks*, 1914)

3.221 Objects can only be *named*. Signs are their representatives. I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *assert them*. Propositions can only say *how* things are, not what they are.

Saying involves stationing, or positioning ourselves, outside of what is said; that is why, with regard to what is said, we can conceive it as true and can conceive it as false. What we cannot station or position ourselves outside of, but what we must know (kennen) in order to say anything at all, is what is *shown*.

Here, *showing* is not introduced as providing us with the illusion of being able to occupy “a perspective from which we can view the logical structure of language ‘from sideways on’”. On the contrary, it is introduced as the means by which we present that which we cannot stand outside of, *without* thereby taking an outside perspective on it.

Insofar as the metaphysical aspiration is to attain a perspective on the logical structure of language or thought “from sideways on”, showing is introduced not as a means by which we can attain metaphysical insight, but rather as a means of undercutting the metaphysical aspiration.

What can be said is what we can stand outside of. To attempt to say what cannot be said, but only shown, is to foster the illusion that “we can view the logical structure of language ‘from sideways on’”. To show what can be shown without attempting to say it is not to embrace ineffable metaphysical truths, but rather to cease to engage in metaphysics of any sort.

Time and again the attempt is made to use language to limit the world and set it in relief—but it can't be done. The self-evidence of the world expresses itself in the very fact that language can and does only refer to it.

For since language only derives the way in which it means from its meaning, from the world, no language is conceivable which does not represent this world. (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, 1930; *Big Typescript*, (1933))

[What is “itself a space” is] ... not something bordering on something else (from which it could therefore be limited off). And so, something language cannot legitimately set in relief. (Ibid.)

[Language] cannot express what cannot be otherwise. We never arrive at fundamental propositions in the course of our examinations; we get to the boundary of language which stops us from asking further questions. We don't get to the bottom of things, but reach a point where we can go no further, where we cannot ask further questions.... (Lectures 1930)

When I say: Here we are at the limits of language, that always sounds as if resignation were necessary at this point, whereas on the contrary, complete satisfaction comes about since no question remains. (*Big Typescript*)

Wittgenstein's later critique of philosophy

We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a *super-order* between—so to speak—*super-concepts*. Whereas, of course, if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door".

The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakable. You can never get outside it; you must always turn back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe.—Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.—We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (*Philosophical Investigations*)

Moore and Wittgenstein on the sense of “I Know”

Sitting in my garden two years ago, I pointed or nodded at the young walnut-tree and said “I know that is a tree.” You wanted then, and want now, to say that my use of that expression was a “misuse” and “incorrect”: but the only reason you give for saying so is that I used it *under circumstances* under which it would not normally be used, e.g., under the circumstances that there neither was at the moment nor *had been just previously* any doubt whether it was a tree or not. But that I used it under circumstances under which it would not ordinarily be used is no reason at all for saying I misused it or used it incorrectly, if, though, this was so, I was using it *in the sense* in which it is ordinarily used—was using it to make the assertion which it is ordinarily used to make; and the argument I’ve just given is an argument designed to show that I was using it in the ordinary sense, though not under any ordinary circumstances. It would, it seems to me, be used in exactly the sense in which I was using it, by anyone who said, on a sufficiently near approach to the stage in your example, “Now I know certain that this is a real tree;” the only difference being that in my case the use of the words was not preceded by a doubt, whereas in the other it was. (Moore, 1949)

"I know that that's a tree." Why does it strike me as if I did not understand the sentence? though it is after all an extremely simple sentence of the most ordinary kind? It is as if I could not focus my mind on any meaning. Simply because I don't look for the focus where the meaning is. As soon as I think of an everyday use of the sentence instead of a philosophical one, its meaning becomes clear and ordinary.

Just as the words "I am here" have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, - and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not determined by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination.

"I know that that's a tree" - this may mean all sorts of things: I look at a plant that I take for a young beech and that someone else thinks is a black-currant. He says "that's a shrub"; I say it is a tree. - We see something in the mist which one of us takes for a man, and the other says "I know that that's a tree". Someone wants to test my eyes etc.etc. - etc.etc. Each time the 'that' which I declare to be a tree is of a different kind.

(Wittgenstein, "On Certainty")

What I am aiming at is also found in the difference between the casual observation "I know that that's a...", as it might be used in ordinary life, and the same utterance when a philosopher makes it.

For when Moore says "I know that that's..." I want to reply "you don't know anything!" - and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention. That is, I feel (rightly?) that these two mean to say something different.

I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree", pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy." (Wittgenstein, "On Certainty")