Ludwig Wittgenstein:
The Great Communicative Philosopher

A paper by Frances C. Geerlings
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Professor A. Izrailevsky
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PART I: BIOGRAPHY

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1889, Ludwig Wittgenstein was a truly modern philosopher, and is noted in most contemporary commentaries[1] on his work for his unique absence of critique on moral questions of good or evil; right or wrong. The great hallmarks of his philosophy lie in his analysis of language. He understood that language was the way that humans communicate ideas to one another, but he pondered to the point of obsession language's significance and role in our lives, and what causes it to go sour and lead to conflict[2].

It is somewhat surprising, then, that a revelation concerning communication and language would come from someone who, during his lifetime, seemed to struggle so much with it. It is somewhat apparent from his writing; statements are a bit disjointed in *Tractatus,* timid, and carefully worded. Wittgenstein was reclusive, he had a stutter, and in conversation he was known for taking long pauses in the middle of sentences, and would leave the room if the conversation didn't sit well with him.[3]
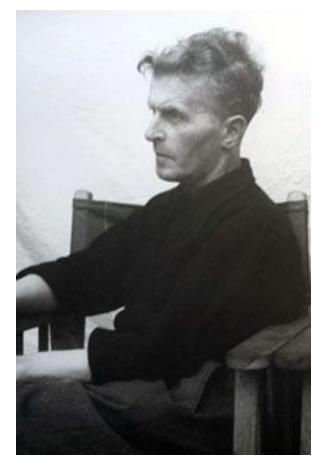
From his time as a boy in his prolific Austrian family at their estate, Die Hochreith, he developed a quiet, timid, and contemplative personality, and had an early gift for understanding the inner workings of technology, and an intuitive understanding of the principles of engineering[4]. In a personal account from his beloved sister, Hermine, she detailed his ability from the age of ten to commit each nuance of the inner workings of a sewing

machine to memory and produce a crude sewing machine from wire and wood scraps that even sewed stitches[5]. All the Wittgenstein children were bound to their home for schooling by an overbearing and authoritarian father, and this possibly contributed to Ludwig's and his four brothers immense emotional suffering that may have led to three of his four brothers' suicides.[6] He became intensely interested in the philosophy of mathematics after studying aerospace engineering at the university in Berlin.[7] His path led him to the premier mathematician at the University of Cambridge, Bertrand Russell, to whom he became contemporary and friend.

Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein shared numerous letters and long discussions long into the night during his time at Cambridge. Russell expected Wittgenstein to be the next rising star in Cambridge philosophy. Bertrand Russell recounted his experiences with the young philosopher as he had experienced him; " He was queer. His notions seemed to be odd, so that for a whole term, I could not make up my mind whether he was a man of genius or merely an eccentric."[8] One day, Wittgenstein came to Russell while he was sitting outdoors shortly after the publishing of Russell's *Principia Mathematica*, and asked him, insisting on speaking in English although he struggled, and asked Russell to tell him whether or not he was a complete idiot. If he was, then he would leave Cambridge and become an aeronaut. Russell instructed him to produce an essay that would help him determine his intelligence. When the essay was given, Russell needed only to read the first sentence before he exclaimed that Wittgenstein was a complete genius and must not leave to become an aeronaut[9].

He ventured to Norway in 1913, two years after his arrival in Cambridge, and lived a solitary life of writing and contemplation in a hut in the countryside of Skjolden, a fjord town north of Oslo[10]. Russell wrote of his decision, "I told him it would be lonely, and he said he

prostituted his mind talking to intelligent people[11]". His friend, David Hume Pinsent, detailed in personal writings of his concern, voicing how the young man had confided in him concerning crippling feelings of despair; "…[he] told me lots about himself, and how for the last nine years, until last Christmas, he suffered from terrific loneliness. That he continually thought of suicide and felt ashamed at never daring to kill himself."[12] His sabbatical ended in 1914, and yielded his first and most famous book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* Cloistered away in the Norwegian winter, he produced the slim yet elegant volume in all its simplicity, after fleeing England to "solve all the problems of logic"[13].

[14]Wittgenstein in his later years, at the home of von Wright in Cambridge. This is the last photograph of him before his death in 1951.

Springing from hiding to the theatre of war, Wittgenstein was lured from hiding by the conflict of WWI and enlisted himself in the Austrian Army immediately upon returning. "The war saved my life. I don't know what I would have done without it.[15]" On the other hand, Wittgenstein later learned in 1918 of the death of his "first and only friend", David Hume Pinsent, in the Great War flying research missions in the Royal Aircraft Establishment[16].

Wittgenstein discussed and carried his book *Tractatus* as a prisoner of war in Italy during 1919, and most of his writings in its concern to Russell were mostly mulling over whether anyone would understand its short remarks and simple language[17].

These years, from his childhood to his time as a soldier are the most formative and pertinent to the formation of Wittgenstein's philosophy. An earnest effort on the part of the author of this paper is hereby extended to say that the rest of Wittgenstein's life was populated by oddities and concern for his livelihood, including the unfortunate Haidbauer incident in 1926, eventually ending with his death in 1951 from prostate cancer after serving as Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge from 1939[18].

His last book, *Philosophical Investigations* was published posthumously in 1953. Wittgenstein languished for 20 years prior to his death because he felt it impossible for him to discern a satisfying arrangement for the book[19].

PART II: EPISTEMOLOGY

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world." Such is a popular paraphrase from the *Tractatus* (5.62). The main idea one may extrapolate from the deep knowledge of the writings of Wittgenstein is that human beings manage their existence by communicating[20]. But how? How can they perform this action more effectively? Wittgenstein understood that a bulk

of human disagreements and a loss of a wealth of knowledge come from an inability to clearly communicate their ideas.[21]

Words are attached to unique pictures within every person's mind. The use of words is to culminate a specific image. The problem lies in that everyone has these distinctive pictures, and their is no unified language of ideas for communication like there is in mathematics. 0=0, 1=1, 1+2=3, and so on.

As humans perceive the words in a conversation, one could perceive any number of diverse meanings from a single word. For example, 'fish' may be attached to fond memories of childhood trips to the lake for one person, while dredging up foul memories of the odor of rotting fish in the market districts for another. Words allow humans to "make pictures of facts", and we're very good at making our own pictures in our minds, but we often fail at the ability to make these pictures in the minds of others[22]. A listener's perception is adulterated and undermined by their own mental images and their own thoughts, veering off dramatically from the intentions of the person communicating the idea.

To Wittgenstein, the first responsibility for effective communication falls on the communicator. Miscommunication starts when someone is unsure of what they are saying. The responsibility of the communicator is to have a clear and relevant standing and to be well equipped to detail and defend your own ideas. Speak carefully, and words are rendered meaningless by impetuous speaking[23].

"Whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent."[24]

Language is not only an ornate tool of artistry for painting tapestries of meaning in the mind of your audience, but also a tool for the gameplayer and the manipulator. By learning the

specific combinations of words to which there are attached universal meaning. By utilizing these platitudes and charged phrases, one can control other people. *It's going to be okay. I'm concerned for your well-being. Exploitation of the Environment. State of Emergency.*

Connotative meaning can be used not just to convey meaning, but also provoke an emotion, and control a person's behavior. This is what Wittgenstein called a game of language[25]. These communicative tactics can be observed being used by media outlets, loved ones, or governments to sway opinion, just to name a few.

Aside from affecting the day to day, from large scale interactions as a tool, language also has a deeply intrinsic introspective worth, because much of our self-understanding comes from the words of others[26].

Wittgenstein's belief in the use of language was that it should correspond very clearly with the words in the statement. For example, "I choose the red shirt" is a more meaningful statement than someone extrapolating endless discussion on an abstract question like "What is the soul?". Statements, to Wittgenstein, should be simple, clear, and without extra meaning or connotation. A linguistic *prima facie,* if one will. Any other pontificating was, to Wittgenstein, completely absurd, and conclusions from such discussions were wasteful and fallacious. By adhering to strict rules of universal meaningfulness, one could avoid paradoxes in logic[27].

PART III: UNIVERSAL MEANING

Wittgenstein's epistemology on linguistics and universal meaning was his great life's work. In his writings, Wittgenstein never resorts to dogmatic theories[28] or wild whims that string on and on in confusing tangles of logic; it is important to consider this fact while keeping in mind Wittgenstein was writing to be critical of language, explore the structure of meaning to

which humans are bound, and trace out the boundaries of thought. Immanuel Kant explores similar thoughts[29] surrounding universal meaning in his work *Critique of Pure Reason,* but not to the extent of Wittgenstein, and not through the lens of language as its primary medium.

Logical deduction also held no "obvious truisms"[30] for Wittgenstein. He challenged the sense of certainty assumed when a statement is accepted to be true simply because the logic is conclusive. In this way, the logician is setting themself up for paradoxical conclusion. But, still, there should also not be an overbearing lean towards radical skepticism, in which there would be no truths to be held, and therefore, no human knowledge[31].

The support put forth by Wittgenstein was the example of a student in a class who endlessly interrupts to question the meanings of words, to contest statements at every turn, and challenge the existence of accepted facts. This aversion towards the established and accepted curriculum makes the student unable to learn the topic in question. This was the parallel Wittgenstein drew to explain how radical skepticism undermines the progress of human knowledge[32].

Wittgenstein also had interesting thoughts on the role of philosophy in the lives of human beings; its role is not to seek answers so as to suspend all doubt. Philosophy's role was to take the minds of its students and "let the fly out of the fly bottle."[31] The particular fly bottle in this metaphor was language, and Wittgenstein succeeded in liberating many who enjoy or draw inspiration from his work from the struggles of poor communication.

References

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