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Philosophy

Wittgenstein: The Only Genius of the Century?

by Tom Nagel

Ludwig Wittgenstein is probably the only philosophical genius to have emerged during this century, yet his work remains obscure both inside and outside the profession. Its influence on the work of other philosophers has been largely in directions which Wittgenstein found distasteful, the schools of logical positivism and linguistic analysis. He did not think of himself as writing for any existing audience. There is a type of genius which creates its own audience over the course of time, by confronting people with the sheer power and authority of works inaccessible to pre-existing forms of understanding, which require that the audience transform itself in some way to assimilate them. This phenomenon is familiar in the arts. But Wittgenstein may not have had even these long-term communicative ambitions; he wrote an enormous amount and published almost none of it.

His work is contrary to the tendencies that give most of Western philosophy its drive. He sought to inhibit and suppress the desire to push the demand for justifications and explanations beyond the point at which they had to come to an end. He tried to display the limits of human understanding, and the limitations on any ultimate foundation of human knowledge, without himself transcending those limits in the process. His aim, never achieved, was to cure himself of the inclination to ask ultimate questions which try to break out of these limits, and to rest content with the answers to ordinary questions which remain within them.

Wittgenstein led an unusual and philosophically expressive life. He went to Cambridge in 1910 to study with Bertrand Russell, seventeen years his senior. "He used to come to my rooms at midnight," relates Russell, "and for hours he would walk backward and forward like a caged tiger. On arrival, he would announce that when he left my rooms he would commit suicide. So, in spite of getting sleepy, I did not like to turn him out."

Although he initially worked on logic and the philosophy of mathematics, his interests expanded to an investigation of the general character and conditions of representation, which he took to be the essence of language, thought, and pictures. What represents a state of affairs in the world must itself be a state of affairs in the world (a thought or a sentence, for example), and can represent only because it shares a certain structure with what is represented. Nothing can be represented which does not permit this sharing of structure. This proved to be a very restrictive condition. Wittgenstein concluded that the only sentences that said anything were those which tried to describe what was the case. Any attempts to use language to say any more than how things stand—any attempt to make statements of ethics or aesthetics or philosophy or mysticism—would lead to a violation of the conditions of significant speech. (The propositions of logic said nothing for a different reason: they excluded nothing, being tautologies.)

These thoughts are explained in a 75-page work called the "Tractatus Logoci-Philosophicus," written during his service with an Austrian Artillery unit during World War I. (Wittgenstein seems to have believed in patriotic duty: he was decorated for bravery on numerous occasions and regarded Russell's pacifism as a mistake.) He completed the "Tractatus"

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in 1918, at the age of 29. It was the only book he ever published, and it appeared a few years later with an English translation and an introduction by Russell which Wittgenstein told him was full of "superficiality and misunderstanding."

The "Tractatus" is an argument for silence. Some of the logical positivists mistook its intent, for they thought it consigned to insignificance those areas about which significant statement was impossible. Wittgenstein, on the contrary, believed that the areas in which nothing can be said (though some things can be shown) are precisely the most important, but are beyond the reach of language. It is what *can* be said that is insignificant. He wrote to a friend that the "Tractatus" consisted of two books, one containing everything he had said, and the other containing everything he had not said, and that the latter was by far the more important. The book's point, he said, was ethical.

Like Rimbaud, he then proceeded to abandon the area of his great early creativity: for the next 10 years he did not think about philosophy. Much of that time he taught grade school in rural Austrian villages, having given away his considerable fortune (most of it to his sisters, who, he said, had so much money that more wouldn't hurt them.) It seems to have been a period of severe mental torment, judging from the recently published letters to Paul Engelmann. But the isolation came to an end: unlike Rimbaud, who returned from Abyssinia only to die, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge and to philosophy in 1929, and thereafter wrote at a furious pace—at least the equivalent of a book a year—until his death. The "Philosophical Investigations," the only book from this period he planned to publish, appeared posthumously in an unfinished form, but numerous other works have been and are being printed.

There is a conspicuous difference of style between the "Tractatus" and the later writings. The former is full of general statements of a theoretical nature. The latter are filled with the minute description of particular examples, real and imaginary, and general statements ap-

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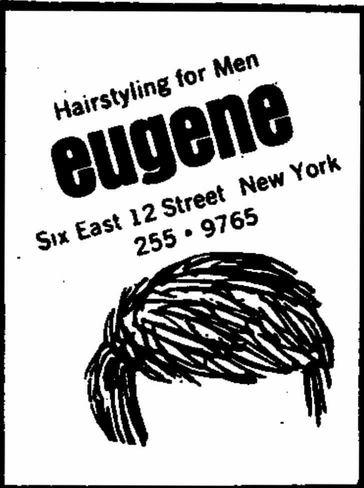

Wittgenstein

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pear only to be refuted. Wittgenstein seemed to have taken to heart Frank Ramsey's quip about the "Tractatus": "What can't be said can't be said, and it can't be whistled either." That was a comment on Wittgenstein's declaration at the end of the book: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)" This statement could not be appended to the "Philosophical Investigations," which is preoccupied with the need to stay within the limits of a natural language.

The conception of language has become much broader, however, representation being no longer its essence but only one of its functions. Wittgenstein ceased to believe that any single function of language was primary. Language plays a central role in countless and varied human activities, and its operation can be understood only to the extent that those activities can be understood. Some of them are conventional and proceed according to statable rules. Wittgenstein's use of the term "language game" to describe a network of language and activity may suggest that all of them are governed by convention, but this is not so. Many are natural—inescapable, in fact—and are woven into forms of life which are so clearly at the bottom of our nature that we lack the means to get beneath them. The attempt to reach understanding and justification at a deeper level merely creates an abyss. Thus to the old epistemological question whether we are justified in accepting the evidence of our senses for the existence of a world beyond them, the reply is that our language of the physical world and of perception is part of a form of life in which we take the world for granted, and naturally form beliefs about it on the basis of our senses. The justification of particular beliefs proceeds in a language which already hangs in this context. Justification cannot be extended to the form of life as a whole, nor is this a defect. If anyone did not, prior to reflection, naturally take the external world for granted and perceive it roughly as we do, he would lack the form of life in which a major portion of our language is embedded, and he could not be a member of the community of speakers of a language in which justifications can be offered for the statement that there is a turkey in the oven. If a justification of the total belief in the external world appears to be possible, that is only because it is not needed by the person for whom it appears possible. If it is genuinely needed, then it is impossible.

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In the recently published "On Certainty" occurs the following remark, written in 1951, three weeks before his death, which could serve as a motto for Wittgenstein's later work: "It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back." The beginning, the point at which we run out of justifications for dividing up or organizing the world or experience as we do, is typically a form of life. Justification comes to an end within it, not by an appeal to it. This is as true of the language of experience as it is of the language of physical objects or mathematics. Experience cannot be regarded as the absolute given on which the structure of the world is based, for the categories of experience itself—what constitutes sameness, difference, and structure in that domain—are as much dependent on the interpersonal responses of a communal form of life as any other conceptual or linguistic domain.

To some extent we can change, and certainly the species can change over generations, but for the most part we cannot help seeing and regarding the world as we do. Still, it is not the only possible way. Wittgenstein showed this in case after case by imagining beings different from ourselves in their natural responses, beings who measured in a way inconsistent with ours, for example, or counted differently, or related to one another differently. They were meant to be cases which we literally could not understand, though the alien responses appeared in some way systematic. In a similar vein he says that if a lion could speak, we could not understand him. Translation between languages requires translation between lives. If the forms of life of two beings are different enough, they live in different worlds and cannot be brought into the same linguistic community.

All this may have the following strange application. If there are intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe, there is no reason to suppose that we will be able to communicate with them, even if we make contact with whatever they regard as signals. Their concepts, not to mention their grammar, may simply not mesh with ours by any system of translation or correspondence that either of us can understand. This is what one would expect with totally different life forms having totally different responses. Each might be able to understand the other as a *mechanism*, in the terms of his own conceptual system. But true comradeship is probably a utopian dream.

And to the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer. For the answer would have to be given in a language, and a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and every particular form of life could be other than it is.

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