

## Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy

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**[Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to try to understand the exact nature of the roles (positive or negative) of philosophy and its relationship with the sciences as conceived by Wittgenstein. I critically consider the current main alternative views in this regard and also present my own opinion. The main conclusion that I draw is that, for Wittgenstein, the main role of philosophy is negative (or therapeutic) and the positive role that philosophy can play is interdisciplinary. I also argue that Wittgenstein's main source of his convictions regarding the roles of philosophy is not rational but rather mystical. For this reason, only those who have this same mystical ground would become convinced fully by Wittgenstein. Otherwise, his ideas could only be used to criticize existing theories and build new theories which Wittgenstein himself did not wish to do.]

Although Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is well-known for its difficulty, it is more or less unquestionable that his conception of philosophy in this book is quite negative or destructive. It is because there are some metaphilosophical remarks in the *Investigations* which are clearly negative. Some of those remarks are the following:

We don't want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of-ways.

For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.

The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing 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, a method is now demonstrated by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off. - Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem. (*PI* 133)

Although the negativity of the above remarks is clear enough, it is not fully clear how it fits Wittgenstein's overall conception of philosophy. It

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raises some questions: Is the role of philosophy purely negative? Can philosophy play a positive role as well? If so, what is the exact nature of this positive role? Can philosophy produce knowledge? How is philosophy connected to science?

After the publication of the *Investigations* in 1953, the book has gone through different stages of interpretation. With regard to the above-mentioned quote and the questions, it is possible to identify three major types of interpretation or views, namely (1) ‘Conceptual Analysis Only’ view, (2) ‘Therapeutic only’ view, and (3) ‘Substantial philosophy’ view (the first two names are taken from Stokhof 2011). In what follows, I first try to explain these established views in relation to the questions above, and then I attempt to formulate my opinion as a fourth view which I call (4) the ‘Other Ground’ view.

Peter Hacker and early Baker (Gordon Baker supported a different view from the late 1980s onward) are the main proponents of the ‘conceptual analysis only’ view. On this view, the role of philosophy that Wittgenstein conceived is not purely negative. Philosophy has a certain positive role to play. And that positive role is just conceptual analysis and nothing else. That means the result of philosophical investigations is not knowledge. Unlike sciences, philosophy has no separate domain of investigations. Scientists always employ some conceptual apparatus in their scientific investigations and philosophers' task is to help science by working on their concepts. However, that does *not* mean philosophy has nothing to do with the concepts in everyday epistemological practices. For Wittgenstein, philosophy is a “quest for a perspicuous representation of segments of our language” (Hacker, 1997, p. 10). Now, what does a perspicuous representation provides us with? “A perspicuous representation provides us with a map of the conceptual terrain.” (Hacker, 1997, p. 11) Concepts usually possess certain connections among themselves. Philosophers analyse concepts in order to remove misunderstanding concerning various concepts and the network of concepts. One example of such conceptual analysis might be John Searle's article titled “Minds, Brains and Programs” (1980) in which he analysed the concept of “mind” and “understanding” as it has been used in Artificial Intelligence (AI). Researchers in theoretical AI used to conceive mind to be essentially a programmed computer and based on this conception they were trying to solve problems such as making a robot that can understand human language (for instance, one that understands a story in English and answer questions about that story). By using his famous Chinese Room thought experiment, Searle shows that it is possible to imagine a scenario where Searle himself acts perfectly like a computer program manipulating some Chinese symbols

and giving correct answers regarding some questions on a Chinese story, and yet he does not understand Chinese at all. Now, his conclusion is that as long as a computer essentially works on the syntactic structures of a language, it would never be able to understand that language in the sense in which a human understands it. This very influential argument showed a misunderstanding of the concepts of *mind* and *understanding* on the part of a group of AI researchers (in Searle's term: the supporters of strong AI). This kind of conceptual analysis opened the possibility of new concepts of mind, for instance, the concept of *embodied-embedded mind* that makes possible new development in AI. However, although Searle referred to ordinary use of "understanding" in order to show the falsity of strong AI, he did not consider it as nonsensical; rather he proposes (or at least hints at) an alternative thesis. Thus, his way of philosophizing is not completely Wittgensteinian because Wittgenstein denies the possibility of philosophical thesis. I draw Searle's example just to illustrate how a conceptual analysis could be done by referring to ordinary use of words.

It is worth noting that, on our first view, the conceptual analysis of a philosopher is a priori which can provide scientists some conceptual apparatus to help them in their empirical investigations. One might criticize this view saying that it demolishes philosophy's identity as a domain of investigation. But, that traditionally philosophy has been thought to have a separate domain does not mean that it always should be thought like this. That many people held a certain view does not prove that the view cannot be mistaken. In criticizing the first view, Kuusela noted that Hacker and early Baker attributed dogmatism to later Wittgenstein which he actually wanted to overcome. For Hacker and early Baker, whereas the early Wittgenstein wanted to dissolve philosophical problems by truth-functional analysis of propositions, the later Wittgenstein depends on the standard of ordinary language for this dissolution. Thus, later Wittgenstein still believes in a standard of correctness of rules that can settle philosophical disputes once-for-all. In contrast, Kuusela interprets Wittgenstein as trying to establish that our tendency to find such a standard is something that should be overcome in order for us to really get rid of philosophical problems. Philosophical problems are rooted in our habit of thinking especially our urge to overgeneralize, our desires, and so on. There is no identifiable criterion of correctness connected to everyday language use that we need to depend on. For Wittgenstein, everyday language itself is very often corrupted with philosophical ideas and concepts.

Let's turn now to the second view. According to this view, upheld by Stanley Cavell, John McDowell, Cora Diamond, James Conant, later Backer and others, for Wittgenstein, philosophy has only a negative role to

play which they termed as “therapeutic”. The job of a philosopher is like the job of a therapist. Philosophical problems attack us like diseases and instead of trying to give solutions to those problems what a philosopher can and should do is to show how they arise and why they are not solvable. In this way, philosophers can help people to get rid of the suffering caused by being entrapped in those problems. Apart from this negative role, there is no room for any kind of positive contribution in philosophy. Thus, with regard to the possibility of a positive contribution, the second view sharply opposes the first one. Clearly, the second view is inspired by Wittgenstein's remark: “There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were.” (*PI* 133). This view emphasizes on Wittgenstein's remark on the status of the propositions of the *Tractatus* formulated in 6.54:

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 up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

According to the therapeutic only view, Wittgenstein considered the propositions of the *Tractatus* (except the preface and the concluding sections which form the frame of the text) to be literally nonsensical, i.e. they are not logically distinct from gibberish. Thus, there is no scope to derive any substantial philosophical claim from the *Tractatus*. Even the author of the *Tractatus* did not intend to make any such claim. Realizing the nonsensicality of the *Tractatus* is the step that leads to the realization of the ultimate point of Wittgenstein, namely the impossibility of philosophical theses. In criticizing the ‘Therapeutic only’ view, Proops (2001) claims that Wittgenstein considered his early conception of logical analysis (“a process that brings to light something hidden in a proposition”) as mistaken philosophical doctrine. While writing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein might have considered his other doctrines as nonsensical but at least not the one about logical analysis just mentioned. Proops cites many quotes from Waismann, Moore’s lecture notes and Wittgenstein’s own writings to support his claim. Now even if Proops is right in saying that Wittgenstein really put some philosophical doctrines in the *Tractatus* (and thought them to be correct) that does not mean that he [Wittgenstein] did not want to do something more with those doctrines. In addition to making those philosophical claims, he must have wanted them to serve (by means of some paradoxical way that failed) his main goal, viz showing the nonsensicality of philosophical doctrines. If the extra function was not done in the way the therapeutic readers imagined, then it must have been envisaged (by Wittgenstein) to be done in some other manner. More

importantly, that project of Wittgenstein has been considered as a failure by himself which motivated him to engage in his later works. Thus, Proops' criticism does not prove that Wittgenstein's main goal was not therapeutic (in fact, Proops claims something very moderate in his 2001 paper; see footnote 20).

The proponents of the second view claim significant continuity in early and later Wittgenstein. They think that the two stages of Wittgenstein's career are unified in their fundamental aim, characteristic modes of criticism, and, even to some degree, in their methods (Carry & Read, 2000, p. 13). They put special emphasis on Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Investigation* that explicitly limit the role of philosophy:

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 perhaps hidden is of no interest to us... (PI 126)

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. (PI 127)

If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them. (PI 128)

They think Wittgenstein's method is basically non-argumentative. The remarks in his writings are aimed at persuading us to change our attitude so that we may get rid of certain philosophical pictures and become free from the disquietude and puzzlement caused by those pictures. Stokhof (2011) noted several problems in this view. One problem is that, like logical positivism, it falls in the trap of scientism; it considers science as the only valid enterprise for knowledge. Whether scientism is a strict consequence of the therapeutic only view depends on how we understand Wittgenstein's use of the word "philosophy"; i.e. whether all or some problems of philosophy should disappear by means of philosophical therapy. I will come back to this point later. Another criticism by Stokhof is that the therapeutic view ignores the possibility of making substantial theses in a non-argumentative way. But here if "thesis" means traditional philosophical thesis, then Wittgenstein clearly denies the possibility of such theses (see PI 126-128 mentioned above). But if "thesis" means "a kind of positive philosophical contribution" then the question arises: what is the exact nature of this positive philosophical contribution. An answer to this by Stokhof will come in the discussion of the third view. A third problem of the therapeutic view is that it is self-defeating in the sense that the proponents of this view present Wittgenstein's ideas in an argumentative way, yet they claim that Wittgenstein uses only therapeutic devices and does not use any

argumentative method. Although this criticism partly undermines the therapeutic position, it does not fully demolish it. One might say: therapeutic aim can be achieved by means of both therapeutic and argumentative devices. Thus, even an argumentative reconstruction of Wittgenstein's text keeps open the possibility of ultimate therapeutic aim of Wittgenstein. Now, one might ask: what is the status of these arguments? The answer from Wittgenstein would be: as long as those arguments use obvious everyday facts (about language uses or whatever) as their premises, they are at least not philosophical arguments in the traditional sense. And Wittgenstein told in one of his Cambridge lectures (known from G. E. Moore's lecture notes) that what he was doing was so different from the traditional philosophy that it could even be regarded as a "new subject". (Glimore, 1999, p.2)

The *substantial philosophy view* agrees with the first two views recognizing the therapeutic and conceptual analytical functions of Wittgenstein's writings. It differs from each of them denying to confine philosophy only to those functions. It finds a more substantial positive role for philosophy in Wittgenstein's writings. Stokhof identifies two ways by which philosophy may have substantial contributions: a) ethical-aesthetical and b) empirical. First, the ethical-aesthetical way consists in focusing "on those aspects of phenomena, objects, and events, that display a particular kind of significance for us, one that resists any attempt at straightforward description and that hence do not lend themselves to being subject to argumentation, hypothesising and explanation, but that nevertheless are integral to the important role these phenomena play in our lives." (Stokhof, 2011, p. 285). Stokhof mentions the example of aesthetic experience that cannot be understood fully only by scientific descriptions. Wittgenstein, in part II of the *Investigations*, talks about seeing different aspects of the same phenomenon via his famous duck-rabbit example. Now the question is whether the recognition of alternative aspects is all that philosophy can provide with. Or are there more things to do? It is hard to imagine what more could be there in addition to that. The proponents of our current view would probably claim the possibility of more. Now the burden of proof is to showing that more can be done after recognition of the possibility of different aspects of the same phenomenon. Second, the empirical way consists in depending on empirical data in order to fully understand philosophical concepts such as meaning, consciousness, etc. Philosophers need empirical data from the scientists and the scientists need perspectives from the philosophers in order to make sense of those concepts. Thus, according to the substantial philosophy view, the main aim of Wittgenstein is not therapeutic. Rather he wants to show his readers different ways of

looking or alternative possibilities of perspectives. At this point, this view sharply goes against the second view we discussed above. One kind of philosophical content that this view recognizes is philosophical pictures. Wittgenstein himself tries to help his readers to be free from certain kind of philosophical pictures and adopt new pictures. This exemplifies how philosophy can be substantial. Now even if one agrees with the claims of the third view so far discussed, a genuine question would be: why Wittgenstein's tone is so clearly negative and destructive in PI 88-133 concerning the role of philosophy? Here, as an explanation, Stokhof mentioned the "quest for purity" of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's quest for purity is the quest for an attitude that occurred in the "tension between there being substance and a lack of means to express it" (Stokhof, 2011, p. 292). Stokhof also gives an explanation behind the therapeutic only view which is also a quest for purity. This quest is for autonomy of philosophy. The success of science creates this pressure to find an autonomous status for philosophy even in exchange of philosophy's losing its substance. It seems that Stokhof's explanation with the idea of Wittgenstein's "quest for purity" has some negative connotation in it because the same quest provoked Wittgenstein to adhere to the mistaken views of the *Tractatus*. I am inclined to think that a better explanation might be something that has no such negative connotation.

Having discussed these three views, I now turn to present my opinion regarding this issue. I would call this "the other ground view". I agree with the therapeutic view that the ultimate aim of Wittgenstein is therapeutic, i.e. to illustrate some methods by which it would be possible to dissolve (rather than solving) philosophical problems. I think this position is quite consistent with Wittgenstein's remarks in PI 88-133. It is noteworthy that, as Mulhall (2004) points out, Wittgenstein makes definitive pronouncements about the nature of philosophy with a dominant voice in 108(b) to 133 of the *Investigations*. And this style is at odd with more cautious voice of the other parts of the book where he frequently uses expressions such as "we might say", "I am inclined to say", "I want to say", and so on. I think the most plausible explanation of this stylistic variance is that Wittgenstein's conviction about the negative or therapeutic nature of philosophy has a very different source, other than the rational thought that we find in the *Investigations*. Although the discussion of the *Investigations* is not purely argumentative like traditional philosophical books, yet it mainly appeals to reason. It seems that Wittgenstein employs this method in order to convince his own and his readers' rational faculty. I am inclined to think that Wittgenstein's main source of his convictions concerning the nature of philosophy is mystical (I am not claiming that Wittgenstein

himself was an ideal mystic. My moderate claim is that: he held a mystic ideal which inspired his works in both early and later period). I would say what is most significantly continuous in the early and later Wittgenstein is this mystic ground.

The first sentence of the *Tractatus* is an indication (in addition to some other sentences of the book):

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. (Preface, *Tractatus*)

Another piece of evidence from the *Culture and Value*:

Each sentence that I write is trying to say the whole thing, that is, the same thing over and over again & it is as though they were views of one object seen from different angles.

I might say: if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already.

Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me (*Culture and Value*, 9e-10e).

An even more clear indication comes from what Bertrand Russell wrote in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell when, after the World War two, he noticed a radical change in Wittgenstein:

I had found in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, he seriously contemplates becoming a monk (cited in: Schönbaumsfeld, 2013, p. 59)

Now, what could be the nature of this mysticism? Mysticism is minimally associated with inexpressibility of language and a conception of oneness or a unity between individual and the universe. So Wittgenstein's mystic ground is not a particular experience. That is, it cannot be reduced to some mental representation or philosophical statement. One Wittgensteinian way to elucidate it might be as follows: we may reach certain convictions by means of our way of living, our experience of getting touch with certain arts and certain aspects of religion, etc and these convictions themselves might be reflected again in our way of living and our aspirations. One might claim the relevance of Wittgenstein's own life at this point. He abandoned his father's wealth, attempted to live a simple life of a primary school teacher (in Austria) or a manual labourer (in Russia), tried hard to be morally perfect, and so on. It seems that he tried hard to harmonize himself with the world by his way of living and probably that constituted the source

of his conviction about the nature of philosophy. His way of living satisfied or nearly satisfied his "real need" which philosophy could not satisfy for him. He looks rational explanation of this failure of philosophy and his methods are attempts to show how some philosophical problems arise from the misunderstanding of our language.

Now, what is the difference between the third and the fourth view? I do not deny that Wittgenstein's philosophical writings gave birth to some new philosophical ideas, for instance "seeing new aspect" and the importance of subjective point of view. But I would say they are rather *by-products* of his main therapeutic goal. I am inclined to think that because of its deep mystic ground, Wittgenstein ideas could be used to criticize any existing philosophical theories and develop new theories. But it seems Wittgenstein himself did not intend that. He really wanted to end philosophy. But not all of philosophy. The part of philosophy that he wants to demolish is the traditional philosophy that deals with universal and essential problems. Here's one piece of evidence from *The Big Typescript*:

Roughly speaking, according to the old conception – for instance that of the (great) western philosophers – there have been two kinds of intellectual problems; the essential, great, universal ones, and the non-essential, quasi-accidental problems. We, on the other hand, hold that there is no such thing as a great, essential problem in the intellectual sense. (p.301e)

It seems that as essential, great, universal problems he has in mind problems like: What is consciousness? What is knowledge? What is the ultimate reality? and so on. Thus, the other-ground view claims that Wittgenstein's ultimate aim is therapeutic in the sense that his methods are ultimately aimed at dissolving all the big questions of philosophy. And this keeps room for philosophers to work with the non-essential and quasi-accidental problems which requires interdisciplinary approach. I think the positive role that our first and third views imagine is dealing with mainly this kind of problems. Hence, the implication of the fourth view is that philosophy has both a positive and negative role to play. The negative role is already a big one. As Wittgenstein points out, we very easily fall in the trap of language and start to philosophize. The root of the tendency to philosophize is very deep. And it requires great effort to get rid of this tendency. Moreover, there is no particular set of methods to do this. The methods that Wittgenstein himself used are just examples of some possible methods. There might be many more. Different contexts would require different methods. I think the point where the fourth view radically differs from the other views is that it recognizes an "other ground" as the main

source of Wittgenstein's convictions concerning the nature of philosophy and emphasizes Wittgenstein's recognition of our real needs and his identification of the root of philosophizing with big questions in those needs. It is also noteworthy that one consequence of the fourth view is that a large amount of philosophical works in history should be considered as nonsensical. Philosophers would mainly remain engaged in therapeutic work in a Wittgensteinian way. And the positive role of philosophy would be mainly interdisciplinary, i.e. philosophers would work with the researchers of other disciplines such as linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists in order to deal with non-essential, context-dependent problems.

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