

A History of Philosophy

75 Ludwig Wittgenstein

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

He studied in England in 1912 and essentially spent his philosophical career in England, although for a space of some 20 years, he went back to Austria and stayed there. I want to turn to Wittgenstein at this stage; however, in going back to what we were saying about Bertrand Russell. Russell, in continuity with the 19th century empiricists, particularly John Stuart Mill, those empiricists and their attention to the 19th century empiricists, particularly to objective empirical scientific knowledge, as expressed in the hypothetico-deductive method, that is to say, scientific explanations, have the structure of a deductive system based on, for their premises, broad general hypotheses.

And so the hypothetico-deductive method, which in Russell comes through in his logical atomism, his attempts to analyze what we purportedly know into its logical constituents and to organize those logical constituents into a deductive system, adducing whatever would be the necessary premises as the hypotheses for that. So the hypothetico-deductive method and, of course, the universal extension of this scientific method. And we saw the way that was the case in Russell, since he wants this method to be the method of all philosophy, of all human knowledge, of all science.

Now, in other words, this movement of 19th-century philosophy into the Russell of the early 20th century represents the kind of scientism, as it's called, which counts the scientific method as the only acceptable method for giving us reliable knowledge. That sort of scientism. And it is this which then comes through in Wittgenstein, and I have to add the early Wittgenstein, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

The later Wittgenstein, represented by his book *Philosophical Investigations*, is different, and we'll be looking at him next week. But the early Wittgenstein follows Russell in this regard, as does the logical positivism of the 1930s and 1940s. The sort of position represented by A. J. Ayer, though he moderates the appeal to science and the hypothetico-deductive method in some ways.

Okay, so keep that framework in mind. And let me give you an outline of the framework of Wittgenstein that I want to make some comments on, of some stuff in his *Tractatus*. One of the interesting things, and I'll refer you to it in a few moments, is that Russell wrote the introduction to the *Tractatus*.

And whether or not this was Wittgenstein's intention, Russell's introduction seems to say that what Wittgenstein is doing is what Russell himself had held out for in his

Logical Atoms. What Russell actually says in the preface is that the book starts with the relationship between words and things. And it's a relationship showing how traditional philosophy arises out of ignorance and the misuse of language.

Now that's a theme that runs through the positivists, runs through Wittgenstein both early and late, you see, and one which Russell certainly agrees with. Remember the title of that work of his was *Mysticism and Logic*, in which he was criticizing the idealists. Russell goes on to say that what we need, because of the misuse of language, what we need, says Russell, is an ideal language.

Not an actual language, not any ordinary language, but an ideal language, one in which every name, every noun, refers to just one fact, so that no word ever can be used to refer to two different things. Eliminate ambiguity. Eliminate double reference.

Eliminate connotations that would be misleading. A strictly logical language, in which the atomic facts are described similarly by atomic propositions. You remember Russell's line in that regard.

Now Russell says that this is what Wittgenstein is doing. Well, let's see. Wittgenstein says that the book, in his own preface to the book, is what Wittgenstein says.

The book deals with the problems of philosophy. You might have difficulty identifying what they are as you read it, but he says it deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The logic of our language.

Now, what does he mean by logic in the sense of the logic of language? Obviously, he's not referring to deductive syllogisms. That's not the logic of language. He's not referring to inductive reasoning.

That's not the logic of language. He's referring to the logical structure of language. The logical form that it has.

The subject-predicate form, particularly. Such that subject predicate form of propositions asserts facts. Okay? Asserts facts.

Words, which are signs, names, don't necessarily assert anything. So that if I were to come into the room and simply say, brown, house, few other isolated words, you would think I was wacky, because I'm just not asserting anything. I'm not stating facts.

All I'm doing is just asserting facts. I'm not stating facts. But certainly not in this.

So he says, the reason why the problems of philosophy are misunderstood, opposed at all, is that the logic of language, the logical use of language, is misunderstood. And so the whole sense of this book can be summed up in the following words, and he comes back to them on the last page of the book. What can be said at all can be said clearly.

What we cannot talk about clearly, we must pass over in silence. In other words, put up or shut up. Well, the aim of the book then is to stake out the limitations of what language can say and show us how it says it.

It's a book about the logic of language. Now, with that in mind, I think you can make some sense of this outline that I've given you. The numbers in the left column come from the numbering of paragraphs in the text.

So his first statement is 1. The next is 1.1. The typist put 1-1 rather than 1.1. Misunderstanding, not surprising, since it's an unusual format. Now, sometimes you get a whole paragraph by such a number, sometimes just a sentence. It seems to be a reflection of the way the man not only wrote but also taught.

It's said that he would thin out the people who were registered for his courses so he'd have half a dozen people that he wanted. And they would meet in his rooms there at Cambridge, where the professors have their own living accommodations. Meet there in his rooms.

And he would habitually sit in a hardback chair astride with his arms on the front of the chair, deep in thought, and would utter some sentence and expect people in the seminar to further the discussion, often with long pauses waiting for people like David to speak up. All sorts of tales are told about this mysterious character and the way he handled it. But notice what he's saying.

All that is the case. The way that the world is the totality of facts, not of things. Now there's a distinction that's new.

Between facts and things, what does he mean? A fact is the existence of a state of affairs. Okay? So a fact is likely to be complex. There can be molecular facts.

There can be atomic facts. There's Russell. Okay? There can be molecular facts.

There can be atomic facts. A fact is the existence of states of affairs. States of affairs are combinations of objects or things.

So things are simply constituents of states of affairs. Now notice what's happening. His point is that words name things.

Okay? Words name things. Those words name things. Words are constituents of, take it back, things are constituents of states of affairs.

It's facts that are states of affairs. Now, the thing pertinent to the confusion of language is that one word can be used to name many different things. One of his examples is green is green.

And he points out that the first green is a man. Call him William Green. The second green is a property.

He's envious. Okay? Now, alternatively, he might have said, I suppose, that green is the name, the green is the name of a quadrangle on the university campus. Or of the green meadows along the River Cam at Cambridge.

The green. And maybe in spring somebody's saying green is green. Name of a place.

And a sense of quality. But this is simply his illustration of the fact that words can name different things. The same word for different things.

Ambiguity. Confusion arises. Philosophical problems arise from the confused use of language in that way.

Now he goes on, however, we pick up on the picture facts for ourselves. Yeah. We picture green as green with envy.

Or we picture the green at Cambridge as green. I remember walking along it. It's green.

Very green. Lush. Right beside a river.

Right after the end of World War II, I was stationed at a base just outside Cambridge. We used to go in there on our days off and wander through the university. So, all right.

We picture facts to ourselves. We do in our minds. We picture facts.

A picture, that is to say, a mental state, the picture. The picture, that mental state, is a model of reality. It's a mental model.

Okay. But in the picture, there are elements that represent objects, things. So then, what happens in the picture? Well, the picture that we have is things or objects represented by the elements in the picture, by which we represent to ourselves the facts.

Okay. The mental picture of a fact, which is a state of affairs, is made up of elements in the mental picture that are referred to by words corresponding to the things that are the constituents of the states of affairs. So you have to get these correlations.

You see Russell's atomic statements, atomic propositions corresponding to atomic states of affairs, and the one-to-one correspondence between the elements of one and the elements of the other, all the way through. But in addition to the picture being a mental model, two, one, four, one, the picture itself is a state of affairs, a fact. Yes, it's a present state of affairs that I have that picture in my mind.

The picture itself is a fact. And there must then be something identical in the picture and what it depicts. In the picture and what it depicts, yes, there must be some correspondence between the two.

Okay. The mental picture may be made up of words, but the state of affairs to which it refers is not made up of words. What sort of identity is there between the mental picture and the objective state of affairs? You see? It's not that they're both made up of words.

Oh, it's the logical form. We need a logical form of language that can be identical to the logical form of the objective states of affairs. Okay? So then number three, a logical picture of facts, you see, is a thought.

And the logical picture is like a proposition. A proposition expresses a thought that can be perceived by the senses. Yes, because the proposition can be heard, can be read, be it a simple or a complex proposition referring to atomic or molecular facts, as the case may be.

So, two things about that first segment. You see how he is making use of Russell's logical analysis, logical atomism. That's the first.

The second, this is known as Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning. Mental representations, thoughts, are pictures corresponding to states of affairs. Now, if we reflect for a moment on the nature of meaning, okay, the nature of thought, the nature of meaning, okay, meaning can be simply denotational, what in logic we call the extension, the logical extension of a noun.

What does it denote? What are the particulars, one or many, to which it refers, to which it extends? So what he is doing is emphasizing almost completely the denotational meaning, the extensional meaning of language. And inasmuch as the states of affairs seem to be empirical objects, this becomes an empiricist, an empiricist theory of meaning, an empiricist theory of meaning. The antecedent of which is, of course, in John Stuart Mill, what does the word matter refer to empirically? Permanent possibility of sensations.

What does the word mind refer to empirically? Permanent possibility of reflections, empiricist theory of meaning. The theory that was stated by David Hume about all matters of fact, statements, interesting, same word, fact, fact. What is a fact, a matter of fact, a state of affairs? Well, if you cannot, then, according to Hume, translate this philosophical language into the language of empirical facts, matter-of-fact statements, it's meaningless.

Do you remember at the end of his inquiry, committing it to the flames? Let's have that big book burning of meaningless metaphysical twaddle. So what you get in Wittgenstein then is the empiricist theory of meaning, same as in Hume, but it's the empiricist theory, same as in Mill, translated into Russell's language of logical atomism and reasserted in the early Wittgenstein. And it's precisely this empiricist theory of meaning which, in the logical positivism of Enger, comes out as the verifiability principle.

That I wrote down there, the verifiability principle of meaning. You ought to be reading Ayer now; some of you may have started. The first chapter of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* is entitled *The Elimination of Metaphysics*.

On what basis? The empiricist theory of meaning. Thanks to Russell and some continental equivalents, Wittgenstein, you see, and the tradition of Mill and David Hume, the elimination of metaphysics. The anti-metaphysical strain of 19th-century empiricism recurring in 20th-century positivism.

Does that much come through clearly? The picture theory of meaning? All right, run through the second half with me. Signs and symbols. Now, maybe you've been accustomed to using the two interchangeably.

He doesn't. And many semanticists do not. A word is a sign.

Okay, a word is a sign. One and the same sign can be common to two different symbols. Yes, you see the word can symbolize, the word can be used to symbolize different things.

The word green, that sound could be used to symbolize Bill Green, and I didn't make up the name Bill Green. There happens to be a Bill Green I know, you see. It can symbolize the green.

It can be used to symbolize that state of affairs called envy. And of course, it can be used to symbolize color. So one and the same sign can be common to various symbols.

In this way, the most fundamental confusions are easily produced. Philosophy, he says in parentheses, is full of them. Yeah.

When we get a little bit further, we'll be coming to the mind-body problem. And his book on the concept of mind, in which he suggests that it's simply by means of misunderstanding about the logic of language that the word mind has come to be used to refer to an entity, an immaterial part of a human being. Whereas the logic of language properly understood is such that the mind refers simply to certain brain functions.

You see. So in this way, then confusion is easily produced. Now, to avoid such errors, we mustn't use the same sign for different symbols.

That's obvious. What we need is a sign language that is governed by logical syntax. Russell's ideal language.

Yes. What we need to do philosophy with precision is symbolic logic. You see, and it was this sort of thing which stirred the symbolic logic industry as it has become.

And then 403, most propositions and questions found in philosophical works are not false; they're just nonsensical. They have no sense, no meaning. You see.

What he means by sense is the referent of a word. The word green can refer to various things. So, a nonsensical use of language is the use of language that has no empirical referent.

So, when in logical positivism you find it stated that metaphysics, metaphysical language is nonsensical, okay, or anything which doesn't pass the approval but the verifiability criterion of meaning is nonsensical, you're saying it has no referent. It has no empirical referent. Nothing that it refers to is of an empirical nature.

So then, if most of the propositions and questions found in philosophy are nonsensical, what job is left for philosophy other than shutting up? And the response is 4031. Philosophy is this critique of language. Analyzing uses of language in order to determine whether or not they have empirical meaning, whether or not they have any sense.

If they do not, then you label them as such. Forget them. If they do, then whether they are true or false can be decided by the appropriate empirical sciences.

Philosophy is not in the business of deciding the truth of anything. If all meaning is empirical, then the truth of propositions is a scientific matter, not philosophical. So philosophy becomes, as it were, the logic of language switchboard, which accepts

calls asking, can you help me with this confusing sort of topic? And shuttles the calls, plugs them into the different sciences.

The function of philosophy is simply logic, the logic of language. And then 4.11, it follows that the totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science. Now, remember that I used the term scientism in introducing this.

What's scientism? The view that only scientific knowledge is worthy. Only that which comes by scientific method can be verified by scientific method and is worthy and acceptable. A scientific exclusivism, which is obviously being touted in the 19th-century empiricists, here again in the early Wittgenstein, and in the logical positivists.

Okay? But 4.11, philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. It aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. It aims at logical clarification; it's not a body of doctrine, but an activity.

In that last sentence, you can underscore and so forth. So you should no longer, according to Wittgenstein, talk of somebody's philosophy as if it's a body of doctrine. Don't talk of Hegel's philosophy, a body of doctrine.

You see? You talk rather of people who are doing philosophy. Now that phrase is something Wittgenstein introduced, but it's caught on outside of those who agree with Wittgenstein, so that you probably hear us around in this department telling you, come on, do some philosophy. Don't just talk about it in second-hand fashion.

Get inside the guy's thinking and do some philosophy for yourself, you see. Philosophy is an activity of analysis, whatever else it may be. It's at least that.

Well, his point is then that philosophical propositions do not picture reality. Science does that. Science can only tell us about what can be understood through and spoken in empirically verifiable ways.

So science cannot tell you metaphysical matters, religious matters, unless it be by purely empirical means. And he says that then everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. And what cannot be thought clearly, on that we must keep silence.

Okay. Let me add just a couple of things to show how he applies this. Inasmuch as he's advocating scientific empiricism, he's also advocating the problem; he's obviously going to run into the problem of induction.

The uniformity of nature is the problem. It's on the assertion of the uniformity of nature that all inductive reasoning hinges. Well, here's what he says about this.

The so-called law of induction cannot possibly be a law of logic, since it's obviously a proposition with sense. A proposition with sense is one that refers to empirical data. The law of induction, the uniformity of nature, refers to the uniformity of empirical data.

So it's not a law of logic. Okay. Well, what about the law of causation, which underlies the law of induction in traditional philosophy? The law of causation is not a law, but only the form of a law.

The law of causation is a general name. In mechanics, there are minimal principles and causal laws. In physics, there are causal laws.

There is no law of causation in general. It is simply the empty form of which particular causal laws participate. So it's stressing the logical structure of those laws.

Let's see. A little bit further on. The procedure of induction has no logical justification.

Now, that's David Hume all over again. But only a psychological justification. David Hume all over again.

You see? Yeah, the psychological justification is in that psychologically grounded belief in causation by virtue of the constant conjunctions that condition our expectations. And then there is no compulsion making one thing happen because another thing happened. There's no causal necessity.

The only necessity that exists is logical necessity. That A cannot be non-A, for instance. No such thing as causal necessity.

So the whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are explanations of natural phenomena. The laws of nature are not explanations of natural phenomena. The laws of nature are not laws.

There's no necessity for them at all. What about values? Moral values? Okay. Here's what he says about moral values.

In the world, that is to say, the world of facts, empirical facts, in the world, everything is as it is. Everything happens as it happens. In it, no value exists.

In the world, everything is as it happens because value is not an empirical fact. It's not empirically observable. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens in the world.

Okay? Value would have to be something extraneous. It must lie outside the world. So it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

What is a proposition? Statement about states of affairs. Facts. Empirical facts.

So there are no propositions of ethics, no ethical propositions. Propositions can express nothing that is higher than facts. So it's clear that ethics cannot be put into words.

What is an ethical law of the form thou shalt? When such a law is laid down, one's first thought is this. And what if I do not? Thou shalt, and what if I do not? It's clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the usual sense of the terms. So our question is about the consequences of an action, and it's unimportant.

Those consequences shouldn't be events. For there must be something about the question we pose. There must be some kind of ethical reward and punishment that reside in the action itself.

Now, what then is the function of ethical language? Well, Wittgenstein doesn't come out and tell us. The logical positivist will say that ethical language is purely emotive. To say thou shalt not steal is simply emoting about some people's behaviour, venting, feeling, not stating facts.

There are no ethical facts to be recorded in propositions. So this leads then to the emotivist theory of ethics, which we're going to be meeting in Wittgenstein. You'll notice he has a chapter on ethics and aesthetics.

Then one or two final things. Death. Death, he says, is not an event in life.

We don't live to experience death. So there is no empirical knowledge of death. Our life has no end, just as our visual field has no limits.

There's no guarantee of the temporal immortality of the human soul or survival after death. It's always been intended, or is some riddle solved by my surviving. The solution of the riddle of life in that case would lie outside of life itself, outside of space and time, the incongruities.

No, but rather the solution of the problem of life and its meaning is seen in the vanishing of the problem, because with death it vanishes. No life, no problem. All right, then, finally this.

This is the final. The correct method in philosophy must really be the following. To say nothing except what can be said, that is, propositions of natural science, and

then whatever someone else wanted to say to demonstrate that someone had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his language.

What we cannot speak about in empirical propositions, we must pass over in science. End of book. Well, do you follow the line of thought? Okay.

It's very much the same as Russell at this stage, very much the same, except that it moves, I think, in the way it's stated, several steps closer to logical positivism itself. Several steps closer. Questions, comments? John? No.

Yeah. What he's really saying, I think, underneath all of this is that the problem of the meaning of life is an empirically meaningless problem. A meaningful problem is one which is asking factual questions.

This is not asking factual questions. What is the meaning of life? And if you say the meaning of life is the fact that there is a life hereafter in which it all comes clear or something of that sort, then you are saying that the meaning of life is outside of life. So how could that be answered in empirical ways? It's interesting to note what other empiricists have done with that question that he raised.

There was a debate between two individuals, both logical positivists, Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlich. And I think this was a debate in the British Journal of Philosophy of Science back in the 20s, as I recall, in which I think it was Schlich who argued that the discussion of immortality of a future state is empirically meaningless. Carnap argued, no, it might be the case that it's only empirically meaningful if it turns out that we have empirical data thereafter.

Hereafter, you see. And John Hick, the British philosopher of religion, at one stage in his thinking, and he's gone through various stages, he's now in a very different one, but at one stage, when he was discussing the meaning of religious language in empiricist terms, he talked of eschatological verification. You see, Carnap seemed to say that belief in immortality would be capable of eschatological verification, so it's empirically meaningful.

Well, Hick wanted to say that the Christian faith as such is capable of eschatological verification, so that on the last day, John, you can say to somebody, hey, I told you so. Yeah, so if you get an extended definition of the empirical, then future experience could, in principle, account. Okay.

Does he do anything with aesthetics? Does he say much about that? Yes. Do you imagine it will drive him to oppose it? He does, but I don't know what he does say about aesthetics. Is there anybody here who took the Wittgenstein seminar and got into aesthetics? You ventured into it, didn't you? What does he say about aesthetics?

Can you help me? There is a recent collection of fragments from him that includes comments on aesthetics.

I haven't read it. Neither have I. I don't think we discussed anything that he said in his earlier work. It would be in his later work when he's coming at ordinary language in less than scientific terms.

So, before, it's not really an issue. Okay. Yeah, let me say this then about his later work.

What he does in the earlier work, he has second thoughts about later on. The *Tractatus* was published in 1921. In 1929, he left Cambridge and dropped out of philosophy.

Not coming back until the 40s. And in 1945, he published *Philosophical Investigations*. In that book, he tells us that the picture theory of meaning has no clear meaning.

And that comment of his gave rise to the self-referentiality criticism of the verifiability theory. Namely, that if a proposition is to be verifiable, it has to be empirically accessible, while the verifiability theory of meaning is not empirically accessible. So it's not verifiable, you see.

And that was one of the things that led to the downfall of logical positivism. He also suggested that Russell's dream of atomic propositions, indivisible units of thought, is too vague. There is no clear criterion for an atomic proposition.

And the notion of an ideal language is too artificial. He says things like logical language and symbolic language are like parade ground foot drill for soldiers. Fine for teaching logical discipline, but you don't use them on the battlefield.

And it was with that that he abandoned this scientism, trying to narrow all meaningful discourse to scientific discourse, and started talking about language games. That is to say, the variety of different language functions of which scientific type language is only one. And I take it that Ryan is saying that aesthetic language might be understandable in those ways.