

Wittgenstein

by Bart Nooteboom

105. Wittgenstein

published 4-8-2013

I largely disagree with Wittgenstein's early work (of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*), while I largely agree with his later work (of the *Philosophical investigations*) that on some points constitutes a 180 degree turn from his early philosophy, and which for me has formed a great source of inspiration.

I agree with the early Wittgenstein that we fool ourselves with language. This is the case not only in philosophy, but more widely, in talk of abstract entities such as knowledge, happiness, meaning, etc. In particular, as I argued in item 29 of this blog, we suffer from an *object bias*, treating abstract notions as if they were objects in time and space. The properties of such objects are used for metaphors to deal with abstractions, and thereby they mislead us. Here I make use of the work of Lakoff and Johnson. This cognitive bias, embodied in language, is inherited from our evolution, so I argue.

I disagree with the early Wittgenstein's famous dictum that 'Of which we cannot speak one must remain silent'. As I argued in item 103, it is the job of philosophy to speak of things that go beyond scientific and everyday understanding, notions and meanings, which by definition are difficult to talk about but nevertheless insistently knock on the door of our thought.

In line with my pragmatist philosophy, set out in this blog, I agree with the later Wittgenstein's notion of words as 'tools', where meaning is pragmatic, depending on the use to which they are put, in *meaning as use*. Words may develop new meanings in the way that a screwdriver might be used as a hammer. I discussed this in the items on meaning (nrs. 32-37).

I try to connect Wittgenstein's views on meaning with established theory of meaning, derived from Frege, with the distinction between what words refer to (*extension, reference*) and how this reference is established (*intension, sense*). We determine reference and truth on the basis of associations in thought, connected to words, that constitute sense, which we develop as we put words to practice, along the line of our life. This private sense may yield a shift of public reference, and hence 'truth', along a *hermeneutic circle*. Universals are to be seen as imperfect and temporary, in *imperfection on the move*. This has important ethical implications, in lifting the suppressive, regimenting weight of universals and giving more room for individuality.

Related to this I like Wittgenstein's notion of *language games* with rules for using words, established in conversations and embedded in culture, in tacit habit.

I also like Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblance*, where entities can resemble each other without having some shared essence. I think this also has ethical implications. People can have affinity or similarity without some shared cultural, ethnic or national essence. Identities can be plural. This may yield an antidote to nationalistic intolerance.

While in his earlier thought Wittgenstein used logic to show up the delusions of language, in his later thought he appreciated words as *forms of life* that are richer than logic. Language constitutes a category on its own.

170. Wittgenstein and Heidegger as ethical opposites published 3-11-2014

Wittgenstein and Heidegger had strikingly similar ideas concerning knowledge and meaning, as based on habit and practice, discussed in preceding items in this blog. David Hume had similar ideas. So did Aristotle, with his notion of practical wisdom. Here also, the meaning of a concept varies across contexts, in practical conduct, is not fixed, exact and universal. Knowledge is mainly unreflected know-how, acquired in learning-by-doing.

The criterion of adequacy of action and speech lies in legitimacy in established language games. Meanings arise within games and are diffuse, varying across different games for different practices.

In ethics, on the other hand, Wittgenstein and Heidegger are opposites.¹ Wittgenstein took the path of Schopenhauer, and Buddhism, in wanting to subdue the will and lose the self, in *ataraxia*. Heidegger, by contrast, similarly to Kierkegaard, and to Nietzsche, celebrated the will, commitment to existence, and thriving of the self, taking ownership of life, choosing to choose. They gave rise to *existentialism*.

Braver (2012, p. 50) put it as follows: 'What Heidegger seeks to ignite, Wittgenstein stamps out'. I side with Heidegger on this.

But how can Heidegger reconcile this individual, voluntaristic choice with his earlier recognition of submission to community judgement ('Das Man') of adequacy and legitimacy? How to move from 'das Man' to individual authenticity?

The source of this problem lies in the view that social practice precedes meaning and knowledge, and that therefore the human being is 'thrown' into the collective of 'das Man'.

¹ Here, as before, I employ Lee Braver, 2012, *Groundless grounds; A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, MIT Press.

I propose the following. People indeed develop thought from action in the world, in interaction with other people. But they do so along individual life paths, and as a result the cognition they develop varies, yielding what earlier I called *cognitive distance*.

How, then, can people get away with differences of view and cognition, given the discipline of social practice? Because meanings are diffuse. They may vary not only between language games but also between people.

More precisely, the logic of this derives from the analysis of meaning that I gave, at several places in this blog, as having two faces: *reference* and *sense*. Social practice is viable as long as people categorise, identify things as something, with the same result, in a given context or language game. But underlying that common reference is a variety of sense between people, a variety of connotations attached to a shared concept, on the basis of different experience along different life paths. They identify the same things differently.

One can deviate in thought, interpretation, intention and skill while sufficiently conforming to the rules of a game. A game can be played in different styles.

Tapping from different individual repertoires of connotations, people take part in different language games, and this difference in patterns of practice develops, confirms, and consolidates their differences in sense.

If this were not the case, if there were not this variety between people, how could new practices and language games arise or spin off from existing ones?

172. What do you have in mind?

Published 17-11-2014

In thought and language, we treat abstractions as if they were objects in time and space. That is what in this blog I called the *object bias* (in item 29). One major instance is the *container metaphor*: people are 'in love', 'in the mood', 'in error', 'in panic', and so on. Also, we have things 'in mind'.

As if thoughts were entities contained in our brain, as stowed away in a drawer, which we can 'look at' from within that brain. In fact, ideas are as much outside the brain, in practices, habits and institutions, as in it. There is no private language, as argued by Wittgenstein. To make sense we need corrections from others. Making sense is playing a 'language game'. One cannot have an idea and 'look' at it from outside the idea. Some things are not selected but happen to us. There are things we do not believe but 'have'. It is odd to say 'I believe I have a pain'.

So what, if anything, do we have 'in mind'? As I discussed earlier in this blog, I propose that we do have 'representations' in the mind, of a sort, in the form of neural pathways that are constructed from our interaction with things and people in the world. But one

cannot step out of a representation and ‘look at it’ ‘from outside’. One dwells in it. One cannot have the cognitive cake and eat it too.

Also, I proposed that much of our thought is based on *scripts*, structures of connected *nodes*, which represent structures of logic, causality and action. The classic example is a restaurant script of entering, seating, food selection, eating, paying and leaving. The order and precise content of nodes was upset with the invention of the self-service restaurant. There, selection of food is not from a menu but from a display. If you do not play the game and sit to be served, you get no food.

Scripts are triggered in the mind by circumstance, and perception is unconscious assimilation into scripts, attempting to find a fit into a node of a script.

I imagine that in the brain such scripts are embodied in patterns of connection between neurons. That, I propose, is the embodiment of Wittgenstein’s language games. The scripts emerge as a function of perceived success or failure, with corresponding emotions, with neural connections strengthening or weakening (in adaptation of synaptic thresholds) or arising anew. Neural networks that occur simultaneously, or under similar conditions, more or less often, are tentatively connected. This is the embodiment of *association*.

The triggering of a script by circumstance embodies what in social psychology is known as *framing*. Scripts entail prejudice, stereotyping. If observations cannot be fitted into scripts they are ignored, not even registered. If something does fit into a node or several nodes of some script, the rest of the script is attributed to it, in ‘pattern recognition’. People ‘see’ things that are not there.

This prejudice limits substantive rationality, but in evolution it probably was adaptive, in speedy recognition and action, conducive to survival and procreation.

All this, I propose, is how the formation of ideas and meanings from practice, discussed in foregoing items in this blog, is embodied. In terms of the theory of meaning: a script represents what is identified in *reference*, or *denotation*, and the ‘slots’ of nodes and features fitted into them constitute the *sense* or *connotation* that produces reference.

174. Moral realism?

published 28-11-2014

Moral realism claims that there are foundations for morality beyond subjective opinion and social convention.ⁱ In a strong form it proposes that moral precepts are *independent* from our thought, beliefs or opinions. In a weaker form, it proposes that they are *not ‘up to us’*.

Where do I stand in this, with the ‘debatable ethics’ proposed and discussed in this blog? My stand is realist in the weak but not the strong sense. I believe that morality is not independent from our thought but that it is not (entirely) ‘up to us’ either. The possibility

remains that its source lies partly in our thought and social convention and partly in some 'outside', more objective conditions.

A key question concerning claims of 'good' or 'bad', is 'good or bad for what or whom?' That in itself already entails that they are not 'independent from us'.

Morality is constructed in interaction between people. In Wittgenstein's terminology: they are part of *language games*. In that they are not purely subjective and are largely social. The self needs debate with others, with different views, to test its own moral views. But realism requires that morality is not up to us even 'if we all agree'. What, then, lies beyond language games, beyond tacit or explicit social consensus? Is there any more 'objective' warrant?

I think morality is also subject to an evolutionary selection mechanism as an external cause. I am confident, but cannot be sure and cannot prove, that moral systems that go against the flourishing of life and society will sooner or later fail to survive, and will succumb in revolution or disintegration.

But what, then, does flourishing of life and society entail, and how 'given' or 'objective' is that? Much more than in nature, in society the conditions that constitute the evolutionary *selection environment* that determines the survival or failure of morality are not fixed or given and are to a greater or lesser extent affected by the morality they select. In other words, to some extent there is *co-evolution* between society and its selection conditions. To some extent societies create the survival conditions conducive to them.

The flourishing of life and society may come to mean submission to some authoritarian regime. As I argued earlier in this blog, Fukuyama's claim that 'history has ended' in the definitive victory of the liberal capitalist democracy is not valid.

All this makes my moral stance realist only in a limited sense. It is not the strong realism that most moral realists like claim. My moral realism is also weaker than my realism of knowledge of the natural world. There, the evolutionary pressure of the laws of nature that constitute the selection environment of our thought is more rigorous and more independent from our thought than in morality.

214. Language games of power

published 31-8-2015

Here I make a connection between Foucault's notion of knowledge embedded in structures of power, and Wittgenstein's notion of language games. Perhaps the two notions are complementary, enriching each other.

According to Wittgenstein, if you want to know what the meaning of a word is, see how it is used. Then you see that it is connected with meanings of other words, in a *language game*. If you do not play by the rules, or are unfamiliar with them, you are out of the game. The meanings of the words you use are not those of the game, and you get

excluded or ignored. This connects, I propose, with Foucault's notion of 'savoir', knowing the system and how it works, needed to be seen and accepted as a legitimate participant. Knowing how to play the language game.

As suggested earlier in this blog (in item 206), this seems to be part of the Greek crisis: the Greeks were not 'in the know' and did not play by the rules of the dominant language game imposed by the officials and politicians of the EU.

According to Foucault, discourse is embedded in a non-discursive context. In the Greek case this included, among other things, the condition that EU politicians feel the electoral pressure from rightist, nationalist populist parties, which presses them to resist further financial aid, let alone any cancelling of Greek debt. The IMF, being less, or less directly, political, did plead for substantial cancelling of debt.

Apart from the more or less visible structures, of participants, discourse, interests, positions, resources, etc., Foucault recognized the importance of the 'deep structures', the unconscious, of thought. Those are embedded in language, I add.

In his *Archaeology of knowledge* Foucault assigned several types of rules to 'discursive formations', as followsⁱⁱ:

1. *Rules for the formation of objects*, i.e. what the discourse is about, including their source, in a selection from a social context, to be transferred to the discourse, those who have the authority to decide what objects are admitted. For example, in the Greek case the discourse is about financial viability, not about social justice.
2. *Rules for regulating discourse*, in determining who has the right to use a given mode of speech, the site where legitimate discourse takes place, the position of someone making a statement about the objects of discourse. In the Greek case: members of the established constellation of the EU (with the IMF more peripheral), Brussels as the site of discourse, and whether the participant in the discourse is a minister of finance, head of state in the EU, head of the central bank of the EU, or official from the IMF.
3. *Rules concerning who governs the formation of concepts*, i.e. the basic logic, methodology, range of accepted statements, statements admissible from other discursive formations, and relevant memories from history associated with accepted statements, and 'procedures for intervention' in the approximation and delimitation of statements and the generation of new ones. In the Greek case, I propose that this is largely a rhetoric of globalized markets, statements from (mainstream) economics and finance, the history of capitalism, and the management of meetings and reports.
4. *Rules for the formation of strategies*, i.e. specific doctrines, principles and guidance for the efforts of individual participants, the possible branching out of discourse into different, possibly mutually conflicting directions, and influences from non-discursive. Here, the Greeks tried to open up the discourse to issues of European solidarity, social justice, and historical antecedents. A branching occurred between the positions of the EU and of the IMF.

Is this analysis helpful to better understand the Greek case? Or, conversely, is it helpful for a further elucidation and specification of Wittgensteinian language games?

247. Language, nature and ethics

published 15-2-2016

What do Kant, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Wittgenstein have in common? A separation between reason/science, in descriptions of the world, and normative values/ethics. We can reason adequately about the *phenomena* in the exterior world, in theories or mathematical or logical models, but we cannot know the *noumena*: the world as it is in itself.ⁱⁱⁱ Values/ethics are of a different order. About them we can have subjective certainty. For Schopenhauer, that is the realm of our will.

However, while Kant formed ethics according to reason, the others thought that in values/ethics there is a lack of reason and logic. There, we are in a realm of paradox where ordinary language does not apply. There, rational speech becomes nonsensical. In that realm we need art (Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein), or a leap of faith (Kierkegaard).

ⁱ For a recent discussion, see Kevin DeLapp, *Moral realism*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

ⁱⁱ P. Gary Gutting, 1989, Michel Foucault's archaeology of scientific reason, Cambridge University Press, p. 234-239.

ⁱⁱⁱ In his earlier work (of the *Tractatus*), Wittgenstein still maintained a correspondence theory of truth, with the claim that logical or mathematical models can truly represent relations in the world. Later, he recognized that the *Tractatus* was a Platonic illusion.