Wittgenstein

WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Some aspects of its development

James Bogen

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Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language

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ABBREVIATIONS

TITLES OF WITTGENSTEIN'S WORKS

B R. Rhees (ed.), *Philosophische Bermerkungen,* Blackwell, 1965.

BB and *BRB* R. Rhees (ed.), *The Blue and Brown Books,* Blackwell, 1958.

NS G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), *Notebooks 1914–16,* trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1961.

OC G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), *On Certainty,* trans. by D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1969.

PI G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees (eds.), *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1953.

RFM G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe (eds.), *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics,* trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1956.

RLF 'Remarks on Logical Form', in C.

TS D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (trans.), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.

UPN Unpublished notebooks.

Z G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), *Zettel,* trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1967.

Citations of *B, BRB, PI, RFM, TS,* and *Z* give section numbers unless otherwise indicated. I am deeply indebted to Miss G. E. M. Anscombe for allowing me to read the unpublished notebooks she keeps as an executrix of Wittgenstein's literary estate, and to G. H. von Wright who did me a great kindness in letting me read the galleys of *Z* before its publication.

OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

A	*Analysis*
APQ	*American Philosophical Quarterly*
C	Irving Copi and Robert Beard (eds.), *Essays on Wittgenstein's Tractatus,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
I	*Inquiry*
M	*Mind*
P	George Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations,* Macmillan, 1968.
PAS	*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*
PASS	*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (Supplementary Volume)*
PM	B. Russell and A. N. Whitehead, *Principia Mathematica,* Volume I, Cambridge University Press, 1910.
PR	*Philosophical Review*
R	*Review of Metaphysics*

This book is for Amy and Aubrey,
Edith and David

It is dedicated to the memory of
Emil Bogen

The 'Codex' (first so-called by Bassett in his monumental *De Selby Compendium*) is a collection of some two thousand sheets of foolscap closely hand-written on both sides. The signal distinction of the manuscript is that not one word of the writing is legible. Attempts made by different commentators to decipher certain passages which look less formidable than others have been characterized by fantastic divergencies. . . . One passage described by Bassett as being 'a penetrating treatise on old age' is referred to by Henderson (biographer of Bassett) as a 'not unbeautiful description of lambing operations on an unspecified farm'. (Flann O'Brien)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What little gets done in this book would have been impossible without the generosity of David Shwayder and Elizabeth Anscombe. Professor Shwayder introduced me to the *Tractatus* and allowed me to consult his unpublished dissertation, which is and will remain the definitive work on that subject. My book began as a dissertation written under his supervision. I am indebted to him for exhaustive comments and invaluable suggestions on a number of drafts of it. Miss Anscombe allowed me to consult the unpublished Wittgenstein material she holds as Wittgenstein's literary executrix, and gave generously of her time to talk to me about Wittgenstein's philosophy. I am sorry not to have a better book in which to thank them.

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J.B.

INTRODUCTION

(1) After completing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* Ludwig Wittgenstein retired from philosophical work for a period of ten or eleven years during which he taught in a school, designed a dwelling in the style of the *Bauhaus* for his sister, worked as a gardener, contemplated joining a monastery, and spoke only occasionally to philosophers. In the meantime the *Tractatus* came to be considered a classic or near-classic text. In 1929 he returned to Cambridge. Wittgenstein had begun to believe some changes had to be made in the doctrines of the *Tractatus.*[1] He was dissatisfied with his account of colour imcompatibilities, and seems to have believed his work on this topic could not be patched up without a relatively drastic revision of the *Tractatus* account of elementary propositions. Nevertheless, one would have expected his work to proceed along lines more or less congenial to the *Tractatus.* It did not. By 1930 he was devoting serious attention to topics he had seldom considered before and whose connection with philosophy could even seem problematic from the standpoint of the *Tractatus.* The *Brown Book* (1934–5) involves new topics, a new jargon, and doctrines which seem to exclude positions which were central to the *Tractatus.* More surprisingly, there appears to be a lack of concern with what had gone on in the *Tractatus,* whose doctrines seem to have been not so much rejected or argued against, as simply ignored. By 1945 when Wittgenstein wrote the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* he appeared to be so far from his early thought that his

suggestion that the *Investigations* should be published together with the *Tractatus* because it can be 'seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old ways of thinking' can be cause for legitimate puzzlement (*PI* p.x). One can feel that Wittgenstein's inquiries into language had become redirected in such a way as to make it impossible to set the considerations of the later work up against the *Tractatus* for comparison (*PI* 108).

However, I believe that in certain respects, the *Tracatus* and the later work are mutually illuminating, and have undertaken a study of points of contact between them. This topic recommends itself on the following grounds. Firstly and most obviously, the *Tractatus* is an important as well as an influential and historically interesting treatise on language. If it really contains grave errors exposed by Wittgenstein in his later works, one would like to know what they are and how they were corrected. Secondly, one would like to know how 'the axis of our examination' was rotated, and to be able to appreciate the differences between its old and its new orientation (*PI* 108).

Thirdly, I think that it is difficult to begin reading works like the *Brown Book* or the *Investigations* without experiencing doubts about their relevance to traditional philosophical problems. Readers experiencing this kind of doubt have vacillated between feeling that the later Wittgenstein's work was seriously wrong-headed, and offering suspiciously exaggerated praise of it at the expense of previous philosophy. An extreme reaction was the suspicion voiced by Russell and Broad that Wittgenstein was practising a kind of intellectual seduction and fraud in his later period.[2] Russell and Broad are not stupid men, and their reactions should be considered seriously. I believe this kind of qualm can be allayed by comparing aspects of the *Tractatus* to the later work.

(2) Commentators tell us the chief errors Wittgenstein uncovered in his own and other previous theories of language were, for example, that they sought to discover the essence of language, and were guided by 'a basic human tendency ... to seek unity in diversity'.[3] If this is so, little would be gained in the way of understanding Wittgenstein's later thought by a close comparison of the details of the early and later work. Since that is what I am about to attempt, I must oppose this view. It

is hard to believe that a man who promised us a perspicuous representation of our grammar (*PI* 122) did not crave order and unity as much as the rest of us. And it demeans Wittgenstein's later work to think that when he seemed to be responding (even if in an odd way) to traditional problems, he was really just telling us elaborately and at great length to stop seeking unity in diversity. If Wittgenstein wanted us to stop looking for the essence of language, it is hard to explain why he urged us to realize that his later investigations were directed towards what is essential in language (*PI* 92) and that our need to find the essence stems from disquietudes whose significance 'is as great as the importance of our language' (*PI* 92, 111).

Wittgenstein said 'the axis of our examination must be rotated ... about the fixed point of our real need' (*PI* 108). We who have the need are philosophers, and our need is not to stop looking for, but to 'understand the essence of language—its function, its structure' (*PI* 92). Our mistake is to look for this in the wrong way. Wittgenstein thinks we could understand the essence, etc., of language if we could give a perspicuous representation of what lies open to our view—features of language with which we are already acquainted as native speakers (*PI* 122, 92). But something makes us think the essence is hidden from us and, therefore, that we cannot appeal to what is open to view. To understand the essence and function of language would be to understand 'how propositions really work'. But we are unable 'simply to look and see how propositions really work' because 'the forms that we use in expressing ourselves about propositions and thought stand in [our] way' (*PI* 93).[4] The 'enormous importance attaching to the proposition and .... a misunderstanding of the logic of language' lead us to think the proposition must be 'something remarkable' able to achieve 'something extraordinary, something unique' in virtue of hidden mechanisms and powers which an examination of the familiar facts of language with which we are already acquainted will not reveal to us (ibid). Against the popular view which interprets these remarks as saying that traditional philosophy of language is mistaken in general because it seeks unity and essence, I suggest that Wittgenstein had in mind *specific* mistaken doctrines (some of which are to be found in

the *Tractatus*) stemming from *specific* and independently criticizable misinterpretations of *specific* facts about language.

In particular, Wittgenstein holds that some of the mistaken doctrines he criticizes are responses to problems generated by an apparent paradox which can be expressed by saying, '*Thought* can be of what is *not* the case' (*PI* 95). The special source of the illusion that the proposition must be something queer is a misunderstanding which makes us think this is paradoxical when in fact it is merely truistic (*PI* 95–6). The problems arise because of misunderstandings of the logic or grammar of 'thought can be of what is not the case' and of other statements which Wittgenstein offers as alternative formulations of the same seeming paradox (for example, 'when we say that *such and such* is the case . . . we mean *this is so*' (*PI* 95)). It is these misunderstandings (whose explanation will take up a good bit of the discussion which follows) and not a craving for order, generality, essence, etc. which Wittgenstein thought misled traditional theorists. Crucial doctrines he criticizes were supposed by him to be attempts to solve problems arising from these misunderstandings.

I take *PI* 95–6 to be serious attempts on Wittgenstein's part to locate the source of important philosophical difficulties because their topic figures so importantly in the works which precede the *Investigations*. When Wittgenstein first hit on the idea of treating propositions on the model of pictures, he wrote, 'This must yield the nature of truth straight away (if I were not blind).' If a proposition is a picture, it 'can be true and false. It has a sense independent of its truth or falsehood.' The importance he attached to explaining this is indicated by his saying, 'It must be possible to demonstrate everything essential' from the case of a proposition set out in picture writing (*Notebooks 1914–1916*, p. 7). The picture theory is, of course, central to the *Tractatus,* and many of its details are supported on the grounds that they allow us to see how the sense of a proposition can be independent of its truth value. The same topic was taken up again and again in the *Bemerkungen* (section III), the unpublished notebooks of 1929–32, and the Cambridge lectures reported by G. E. Moore.[5] In these works and in the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein developed arguments in which the Tractarian picture theory and related theories were rejected because

they do not explain how we can believe or assert what is not the case (*BB* p. 31 f.).

The chief contention of this study is that the picture theory of the *Tractatus* and the ontological doctrines which frame it were largely shaped by Wittgenstein's strategy for trying to explain how contingently false assertion is possible, and that some of the more striking disparities between his earlier and later work can be explained by considering how he came to abandon his early account of false belief. Accordingly, I deal mainly with the development of Wittgenstein's views concerning contingent assertions. Other aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language will be discussed only as they arise in connection with the picture theory, its demise, and the discussions of language use which finally replaced it. Those which receive the most attention are the theory of simple objects and facts, the topic of intentionality, the thesis that the sense of an assertion must be perfectly determinate, and aspects of the later account of logical necessity, rules, and rule-following. This, of course, does not even begin to exhaust the subject-matter of the early or the later works. For example, I have very little to say about the notion of 'criteria', and almost nothing concerning private languages. An excuse for these omissions is that more than enough has already been written on these topics. But more importantly, I believe that despite its narrowness, the subject-matter I have selected is central enough to Wittgenstein's development to shed considerable light upon it. I think an emphasis upon his treatment of false assertion places his interests and the changes in his thought in a much less distorting perspective than accounts which treat the later Wittgenstein as a reformed solipsist obsessed with the notion of a private language, or a Zen-masterly figure who wallowed about in familiar details of language use without sullying them by looking for order.

A cautionary note—the discussion which follows is not to be taken as an essay in intellectual biography.[6] I have often found it necessary simply to ask whether arguments can be extracted from Wittgenstein's texts which would have provided good grounds for the abandonment or modification of a given doctrine because there seemed to be no chance of finding a text which shows clearly what *the* argument was that *actually*

led Wittgenstein to change a given view. In such cases I can only claim that the argument is justifiably extractable from a Wittgensteinian text and that it *could* have been used to do the job I present it as doing.

(3) Why should the truisms

(1) When we say and mean that such and such is the case, we mean that this is so, and

(2) Thought can be of what is not the case

appear to be paradoxical?

Here is an argument suggested by Buridan's discussions of the sophisms 'every spoken proposition is true', 'a man is an ass', and 'you are an ass'.[7] I will refer to it as 'Buridan's argument', BA for short.

(I) If a man thinks or asserts, he must think or assert something; hence there must be something which he thinks or asserts.

(II) Suppose he thinks or asserts that such and such is the case. If it were not the case, no existing thing (fact, state of affairs, etc.) would be the such and such he thinks or asserts. If so, there is nothing which is what he thinks or asserts. Therefore, he could not be said to have thought or asserted something.

(III) But it is impossible to assert or think without asserting or thinking something and hence, if such and such were not the case, no man could assert or think it. Therefore, no man can think or assert what is not the case, and whatever is asserted or thought must be the case. Hence whatever a man thinks or asserts must be true and nothing a man thinks or asserts is false.

If BA were cogent, (1) and (2) would clearly be paradoxical. According to (2) thought can be of what is not the case, but BA purports to show that to think what is not the case is to think nothing at all. (1) becomes paradoxical if we consider that normally (excluding, for example, what Austin called 'verdictive' uses of language in which saying something makes it so) there is a distinction between making and confirming an assertion.[8] If saying is not confirming, we must be able to say and mean that such and such is the case when it is not. But according to BA this is impossible; when such and such is not the case there is no such and such to say or mean and a man who tried

to say it would say nothing.[9] Thus when we say and mean that such and such is the case, we say and mean just that—that such and such is the case—only if saying is confirming.

The considerations which underlie BA can be traced back far beyond the time of Buridan to the *Sophist* and *Theaetetus* of Plato.[10] Wittgenstein knew the passages on false belief from the *Theaetetus* and considered them important enough to quote in the *Zettel* (Z69) and the *Investigations* (*PI* 518).

(4) The questionable steps in BA occur in stages (i) and (ii). First there is the move in (i) from (ia) 'if a man thinks or asserts he must think or assert something' to (ib) 'there must be something which is what he thinks or asserts.' Some instances of this kind of inference are clearly outrageous. If Andrew wants something, it does not follow that there is a thing which is what he wants. Suppose he wants a wife. But there are other instances which are correct. If Aubrey kicks something, there must be a thing which she kicks. The following passage (*BB* p.31) has led commentators to say that Wittgenstein thought that the move from (ia) to (ib) depends upon a false analogy between 'thinking' or 'asserting' and such words as 'kicking'.

> 'If I think that King's College is on fire when it is not on fire, the fact of its being on fire does not exist. Then how can I think it? How can we hang a thief who doesn't exist?' Our answer could be put in the form : 'I can't hang him when he doesn't exist; but I can look for him when he doesn't exist.'
>
> We are here misled by the substantives 'object of thought', and 'fact' and by the different meanings of the word 'exist'.

The plausibility of the move from (ia) to (ib) depends upon an analogy which Wittgenstein does not reject: a man cannot hang unless there is a true answer to 'what does he hang?' and a man cannot think or assert unless there is a true answer to 'what does he think (assert)?' Wittgenstein's point is that it is harmless to say that a true answer gives the object of thought or assertion (and hence that if there is a true answer there is something thought or asserted) as long as we do not misunderstand these uses of 'there is' and 'object'—as long as we can give a correct account of the truth conditions for 'there is something which he thinks (asserts).' What Wittgenstein thinks *is* a mistake is to model an account of the truth conditions for

'there is something which he thinks (asserts)' after 'there is a thief which he hangs.' But the move from (Ia) to (Ib) does not offer or presuppose any account of 'there is something which he thinks (asserts)', and hence is not necessarily incorrect taken by itself. The confusion in BA must be located in the direction the argument pushes us if we grant stage (I) and then go on to try to give an account of 'there is something which he thinks.' We shall not diagnose this if we stop the argument at stage (I).

What looks more sinister is the manoeuvre accomplished in (BA II) by the claims (IIa) 'if such and such were not the case, no existing thing (fact, state of affairs, etc.) would be the such and such which the man (who asserts or thinks that such and such) asserts or thinks' and (IIb) 'if this were so, a man who asserted (thought) that such and such is the case could not be said to have asserted (thought) anything.'

(IIa) appears to be true, if we take 'no existing state of affairs' to mean no state of affairs which obtains and 'no existing fact' to mean nothing which happens to be the case. If it is not the case, for example, that King's College is on fire, then the state of affairs (or situation), King's College being on fire, does not obtain, and there is no fact that King's College is on fire, that is, whatever happens to be the case is not King's College being on fire. Someone might say 'King's College is on fire' signifies an existing thing, King's College. But a college is not a college on fire, at least when there is no fire.

Accordingly we should look to (IIb) to see where BA goes wrong. The import of (IIb) is that if no existing thing, no obtaining state of affairs, situation, etc., and no fact is the such and such which X asserts, then he cannot assert that such and such is the case because there is nothing for him to assert. There are two ways in which this suggestion might be resisted. Both attempt to show that the conditions for the truth of 'there is something which X thinks (asserts)' are not the same as the conditions for the truth of his assertion (thought).

(A) 'A thief' answers the question 'what is X looking for?', without committing the speaker to the claim that any thieves exist. By analogy, we could say that in answer to 'What does X assert (think)?', 'King's College is on fire' gives a description which *could* be true of a fact (or obtaining situation or state of affairs) but does not commit the speaker to the claim that there

actually is any fact, etc., to fit the description. On this view, if the assertion or thought is true there is an individual which fits the description, just as there is an individual fitting the description 'thief' if the search succeeds. If the assertion or thought is false, no individual fits the description 'King's College is on fire'. But even so, there is something to assert as long as King's College being on fire is a *possible* fact or a situation which *could* obtain—as long as it is possible for King's College to be on fire. X has something to assert as long as there is a true answer to 'what did he assert?' And there is, as long as there is a possible fact or situation for 'King's College is on fire' to signify.

But what is it for there to be a possible fact or for there to be a state of affairs which could obtain? The answer to this depends upon what account is to be given of 'fact' or 'state of affairs' or 'situation'. A very old account, whose adherents included some of Wittgenstein's contemporaries and teachers, treats facts or states of affairs as complexes whose constituents are referred to by the constituents of ordinary language assertions or analysed versions of them. To say that such and such is the case is to say that certain things, *a, b, c,* etc., stand in a certain relation.[11] When they do not so stand, there is a possible fact to assert as long as *a, b, c,* etc., exist or subsist and are capable of standing in the relation in question. Then it does not follow from the fact that no obtaining situation or fact is the such and such a man asserts that he asserts nothing, because what is asserted is a possible state of affairs or fact which is available for assertion as long as *a, b, c,* etc., exist and can stand in the asserted relation. Theories of type A seem intuitively to represent the most direct response which can be made to BA. In part I of this discussion, we shall see that the *Tractatus* picture theory is essentially a theory of this kind.

The most serious difficulty with A-theories arises from their treatment of facts as individual pieces of ontological furniture.[12] In sketching the problem which arises from this assumption, it will be convenient to introduce conventions for using single and double quotes to distinguish between assertions and signs. The same sign (mark or sound) can be used by the same or different speakers on different occasions to make different assertions. If Wittgenstein produced the signs 'I wrote the *Trac-*

tatus', he would have made an assertion which is true because Wittgenstein was the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In the mouth of Spinoza the same signs make a different assertion which is true because a different man wrote a different *Tractatus*. I will use double quotes in connection with signs and single quotes in connection with assertions. Thus 'p' is an assertion which can be made by producing or exhibiting the sign "p". I will sometimes use 'p*' as an abbreviation for 'the fact that p is the case' to signify the fact that the situation (state of affairs) which 'p' says obtains, obtains.

A-type theories treat 'p' (the assertion) and p* (the fact which makes it true) as individuals. If they are individuals, they are existentially independent. It can be the case that p whether or not anyone has ever asserted that p is the case, and we can make the assertion 'p' even though it is not the case that p. If two individuals are existentially independent, they must also be numerically different; and so an A-theorist must say that 'p' and p* are numerically different individuals. But it is a necessary truth that:

(T1) 'p' is true if and only if it is the case that p, and

(T2) 'p' is false if and only if it is not the case that p. From (T1) we can conclude that no fact which fails to verify 'p' is p* and that no assertion which is not verified by the existence of p* is 'p'. From (T2) we can conclude that no fact whose non-existence would fail to falsify 'p' is p* while no assertion which would not be falsified by the absence of p* is 'p'. It is an *essential* feature of 'p' that its truth depends upon p*, and of p*, that its presence or absence determines the truth value of 'p'. There must therefore be a necessary connection between the two.

The difficulty with (A) lies in the question how two existentially independent and numerically different individuals can be essentially connected in this way. In chapter II of this book I argue that Wittgenstein abandoned the *Tractatus* picture theory over this point.[13] B-type responses to BA recommend themselves as ways of avoiding the conclusion that false assertion is impossible without assuming that facts and assertions are individuals. The sketch which follows is suggested primarily by the later Wittgenstein. Related doctrines are to be found in Ramsey and Strawson.[14]