

Wittgenstein's Paperwork. An Example from the "Big Typescript"

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1. Understanding requires two Languages

Can we detect patterns governing those arrangements? The table of contents lists 19 chapters and 140 sub-chapters, to be sure, but those are extremely abstract and, conversely, highly specific terms ranging from "philosophy" and "grammar" to "the cardinals" and "proof by induction". This listing clearly serves as a first attempt to collect the available material under a manageable number of headings. It is not intended to express a continuous philosophical argument, even though its opening trias "Understanding" -- "Meaning" -- "Sentence. The Meaning of a Sentence" can be read this way. It is virtually impossible to extract just a few lines of thought from Wittgenstein's free-wheeling, dense and occasionally cryptic remarks.

Subsection I,3 is entitled "Das Verstehen als Korrelat einer *Erklärung*". The crucial intuition is that "meanings" are not there to be discovered, they are constructed in an observer-language, imposed upon a web of supposedly meaningful activities of a linguistic community. Meaning arises at the interface of two languages.

If one looks closer at the typescript one notices a variety of discursive strategies governing the arrangement of the various pieces derived from copies of previous typescripts. I have, in an earlier paper, demonstrated how Wittgenstein constructs his initial argument against "private language" by means of a careful *grouping* of snippets extracted from antecedent work (Hrachovec 2001). Here, I will pick one sub-chapter and delineate the internal shape of what turns out to be a complex and coherent -- albeit small-scale -- exposition.

"Verstehen" damit meine ich eine Korrelation der Erklärung, *nicht* einer - etwa medizinischen - Beeinflussung.

Mit dem Worte "Missverständnis" meine ich also wesentlich etwas, was sich durch Erklärung beseitigen läßt. Eine andere Nichtübereinstimmung nenne ich nicht "Missverständnis".

No mention of interpretation or language diversity here. But look at the context of Ms 109 (Nov. 29th and 30th, 1930; WA 3.140 ff) from which this piece is taken. Wittgenstein is discussing rule-following and in particular how we can grasp a rule exemplified in some semiotic system, e.g. a piece of musical notation:

Wenn wir z.B. ein Musikstück von Noten lesen so beurteilen wir das Ergebnis nach der Intention die Noten in bestimmter Weise zu übersetzen. (WA 3.142.1)

Translation is the key to separating rule-following from mechanisms. Punch cards may well determine the output of a loom, yet it is not the actual result that can serve as a criterion of rule governed activities. What if the machine breaks and its *de facto* output is completely at odds with the intended one? The rules embodied in a punch card have to be taken as *meaning projections*, bridging the gap between, for instance, a carpet and our understanding of its anterior design. Wittgenstein's remark about understanding and explanation from MS 109 directly links to his discussion of a piece of music and a loom. His

main point is that this is not achieved by intuition, but by a special kind of discursive elaboration of the given data: they are treated as instances of rule-governed behavior. Wittgenstein's next paragraph elaborates on this. Unarticulated understanding is not his topic. It would not fulfill the requirement of possible translation.

Verständnis entspricht der Erklärung, soweit es aber der Erklärung nicht entspricht, ist es unartikuliert und geht uns deswegen nichts an; oder es ist artikuliert und entspricht dem Satz selbst, dessen Verständnis wir beschreiben wollen. (WA 11.21.2)

Wittgenstein -- this is the present claim -- does carefully compose the sequence of paragraphs. Consider his entries from February 9th and 10th, 1930 which are the *locus originarius* of the preceding quote (WA 3.192.7). They are mainly concerned with coming to terms with a common sense objection to his linguistic theory of meaning. It seems that no discursive articulation can capture the actual accomplishment of "catching the rule" or knowing the meaning of an expression since this is an *event* (within the mind or within communicative practice). Two pages of the manuscript are spent in discussing the merit of those intuitions an answer to which is given by the preceding quote in February 1930. It's reappearance in the BT does not carry over this context but treats it as an initial thesis.

2. Dialogue Dependence

There is a second set of assertoric statements that opens the sub-section under discussion. The remarks WA 11.21.3 - 11.21.6 deal with an aspect of the linguistic approach to meaning that might be called "dialogue dependence". Like the initial remark (WA 11.21.1) WA 11.21.3 - 11.21.5 are taken from a discussion of rule-following (January 29th, 1931. MS 110; WA 3.168.4-6). In both instances Wittgenstein picks remarks that generalize the issue, referring to understanding *in toto* rather than to particular cases of rule-following. In order to perceive the subtle difference between those two sets of remarks it is, again, helpful to cast a glance at their provenance. The first set was triggered by musical scores and machines, the second one arises in a discussion of an inter-personal event, namely the understanding and obeying of an order. Since scores and machines cannot talk back there is a shift of emphasis from translation to interpretational dialogue.

Wissen, was der Satz besagt, kann nur heißen: die Frage beantworten können "was sagt er?"

Den Sinn eines Satzes verstehen/kennen/, kann nur heißen: die Frage "was ist sein Sinn" beantworten können. (WA 11.21.3)

We are given two independent, if closely connected theses on understanding. Firstly, it is articulated like an explanation and secondly it comes as an answer to a question demanding explanations. This might not seem a remarkable distinction and Wittgenstein in fact continues by treating WA 11.21.1 - 11.21.6 as *one* part of his argument. There is an interesting subtext, though. Erased by the technique of collage the background to the thesis of

dialogue dependence is a discussion of the singularity of philosophical method.

To pick up this thread one has to take the hint of WA 11.21.6. This is a single sentence inserted from a sequence written between February 19th - 21st, 1931 (Ms 110, WA 3.216.7).

Das Triviale, was ich zu sagen habe, ist, daß auf den Satz "ich sage das nicht nur, ich meine etwas damit" und die Frage "was?", ein weiterer Satz, in irgend welchen Zeichen, zur Antwort kommt.

To analyze this quote one has to be aware of the two respective contexts. In 1931 the issue is philosophical vis a vis everyday explanation, whereas the 1933 occurrence of the assertion follows a series of remarks lacking this distinction. Wittgenstein is considering a difference in explanation. Explanations of how to sew or to smoke *add* information to surface appearances, whereas rule-following *does not* enrich the content of the rule. "Translating" a command into an action stays within the scope determined by this command and this fits well into Wittgenstein's notion of non-revisionary philosophy. Explaining thought is not supposed to teach us more than we already know (WA 3.215.9). The dialogue dependence of meaning that manifests itself in the need to produce a sentence in response to the challenge "What do you mean by that?" is (imperceptibly) determined by Wittgenstein's refusal to countenance anything but ordinary language in philosophy.

To sum up: the third sub-section of "Verstehen" in BT starts out with two sets of related claims concerning understanding: (i) it is a translational activity that (ii) does not assume a stance outside a given language. We can somehow understand the working of a loom, but it is more to the point to consider inter-personal conversation. And here, in order to explain one's meaning, as far as philosophy is concerned we are simply invoking statements of a familiar nature.

3. Resolution

My working hypothesis is that Wittgenstein follows a particular dramaturgy in assembling his cut-outs into the BT. After having put forward several theses on understanding, culminating in the claim that they amount, in fact, to a trivial statement, Wittgenstein switches sides and inserts four paragraphs questioning what has just been proposed. "Aber man kann fragen ...", "Man will sagen ..." and "Man möchte sagen ..." are the phrases he uses to raise doubts against the preceding remarks.

Wittgenstein has set the stage. He has built up a thesis and its anti-thesis. His next *Zettel* is a continuous segment that first appears as two handwritten pages on November 15th, 1931 (Ms 112, 91v-92v, WA 4.193.181-183) and is carried over into Ts 211, Ts 212 and Ts 213 in its entirety with very little changes. It seems that Wittgenstein was comparatively satisfied with this exposition and that it is positioned as a resolution to the foregoing conflict. The issues touched upon in the first part of the sub-section are taken up and put into perspective. Wittgenstein reminds himself that he is dealing with the grammar of "meaning" and he comes up with an explicit statement about the use of two languages:

Die Antwort auf die Frage 'wie ist das gemeint' stellt die Verbindung zwischen zwei sprachlichen Ausdrücken/zwischen zwei Sprachen/ her. (WA 11.22.2)

After thus reaffirming his initial maxim he proceeds to explain how we might be misled into thinking that such expressions conveying meaning are somehow incomplete and in need of additional consideration.

His point is that we tend to treat nouns like "sense" and "meaning" as terms referring to some thing called SENSE. A name requires something to refer to and by analogy we are tempted to search for "the meaning" of an expression as if we could find it in some objective realm. But consider how we deal with e.g. an arrow. It is meant to direct us into *this* direction, that is: it is employed this way. We understand it by conforming to this prompt. If someone picks out the symbol and treats it as one of the more common nouns she might ask: "What is the meaning of this sign?" and feel like supplementing its "raw" notational appearance with some interior state "... als wäre der Pfeil gleichsam nur das Musikinstrument, die Meinung aber die Musik, oder besser: der Pfeil, das Zeichen - das heißt in diesem Falle - die Ursache des inneren, seelischen Vorgangs." Even though Wittgenstein does not spell it out (he rarely does) these remarks are not just a rejection of the anti-thesis indicated above, they include an account of how their plausibility can be comprehended -- and dissolved. If I am right Wittgenstein's three-step composition is a micro-cosmos containing the essence of his philosophical message: We are deceived by inappropriate grammatical analogies; we can sort things out by paying close attention to how our language actually works; philosophy is words that remind us of insights at the surface of our linguistic practice.

4. Bonus Track

This leaves a final remark that does not seem to serve a particular purpose. It comes from MS 110 (August 4th, 1931; WA 3.324.6) and might have been appended to this sequence simply because of its reference to an arrow.

Was die Erklärung des Pfeils betrifft, so ist klar, daß man sagen kann: "Dieser Pfeil bedeutet/sagt/ nicht, daß Du dorthin (mit der Hand zeigend) gehen sollst, sondern dahin." - Und ich würde diese Erklärung natürlich verstehen.-

"Das müßte man aber dazuschreiben."

If I have been right in my reconstruction of Wittgenstein's purpose one would hesitate to dismiss the remark as a simple appendix. And it does, indeed, play a more important role within Wittgenstein's textual arrangement.

Looked upon in isolation Wittgenstein's observation seem harmless, even a platitude. If meanings are given by sentences explaining symbols such sentences will contain phrases like "this arrow means ...", accompanied by appropriate verbal and physical prompts. "This arrow means *right*, accompanied by a movement of one's arm is not incomprehensible. Wittgenstein might extend his concession: "Of course I would understand this explanation." There is an approved rendering of the meaning of an arrow: "that you should go *there*" and a deprecated account: "right"- yet, there seems to be no big difference in actual use. Both forms of explanation will ordinarily succeed. If this is correct Wittgenstein is undercutting his own grammatical regime in admitting that "to got there" or "to the right" or "right" can all be conceived of as valid explanations of a given arrow. His aim is not to revise language but to avoid philosophical puzzlement arising from improper analogies.

Not quite. One final sentence, easily overlooked, remains to be accounted for. At a first glance it does not seem to carry much philosophical weight. Yet, this is a very suggestive remark which can be enhanced to contain a splendid summary of the preceding discussion. It shows Wittgenstein at his best: finding an uncontroversial, temporary resolution to an irritating philosophical dispute. Remember that the problem at hand is the relation between (linguistically) articulated accounts of meaning and meaningful pursuits that seem to add something to the mere symbols. Sentences put forward as contentful articulations and sentences as moves in language games are different. One might compare them to a physical coin and a coin within some system of monetary exchange. How should we respond to this incongruence?

Wittgenstein does not deny the problem. He offers an everyday remark that shows how we can easily reconcile the opposite sides. The Austrian colloquial meaning of the present sentence can be illustrated by the following episode. A child is given a slip of paper with a sketch of three red apples and sent to the grocery to buy such apples. The shopkeeper looks at the note and does not recognize the fruits. He asks what this sketch is supposed to show. The child answers "apples", to which the grocer replies "Das müßte man aber dazuschreiben." The main purpose of symbols is to support interaction. If signs are ambivalent, more signs can help. They have, of course, in turn to be understood, i.e. employed in language games. But there is no dogmatic divide between the undisturbed working of language and its ruptures. Meaning requires both elements, understanding signs and understanding the need to supplement signs with further notes.

It is a pity that this humble remark did not survive Wittgenstein's editorial revisions and drops out from later versions of his "Philosophical Grammar". A small detail, to be sure, but it serves to illustrate an important point. Wittgenstein's remarks are highly sensible to their local discursive context. When it dissolves, the remarks lose a considerable amount of their force.

References

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