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**‘What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said’: Wittgenstein’s Conception of
Philosophy in the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations***

Ph.D. Chapter 1: Introduction

1 Introduction

In this chapter I outline my argument, discuss my exegetical strategy and set my thesis in the context of current philosophical debates.

My project is motivated by two related concerns. I believe that Wittgenstein challenged traditional conceptions of philosophy and proposed an important alternative. I also believe that philosophers have not fully understood the role and significance of the say-show distinction. In this work I aim to demonstrate that the distinction is of central importance to Wittgenstein’s thought, not only in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but also in the *Philosophical Investigations*. My thesis is that the say-show distinction is the basis of Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy in both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*.

A brief outline of my argument is as follows: Wittgenstein’s main aim throughout his career was to replace traditional philosophy with an alternative conception of philosophy. In the *Tractatus*, the say-show distinction is the basis for this new conception. The failure of the *Tractatus* was not a flaw in the conception of philosophy, nor a flaw in the say-show distinction. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein failed to properly implement his proposed conception of philosophy, as he remained in the grip of traditional philosophical presuppositions. The *Investigations* presents the same conception of philosophy, but freed from the presuppositions of the *Tractatus*. The say-show distinction remains the basis of the conception of philosophy in the *Investigations*.

My thesis is important for the following reasons: it challenges and corrects prevalent misinterpretations of Wittgenstein’s thought. It provides a fruitful way of understanding the relationship between the two main stages of his career – the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* – and accounts for both continuity and

discontinuity in the development of his thought. In addition to its significance as a work of exposition, this thesis presents a conception of philosophy which may subsequently be judged on its own merits. I plan to employ and defend this conception of philosophy in future research projects by applying the aims and methods to contemporary philosophical problems.

2 Exegetical Strategy

My project is primarily exegetical, insofar as my task is an exposition of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, rather than an evaluation or a defence. As exegesis it is supported textually and aims for internal coherence, but, like any interpretation, it cannot claim unconditional superiority over alternative interpretations. Here I make explicit my exegetical strategy so that it will be clear whether the difference between my interpretation and those of other commentators is due to our different hermeneutic commitments or whether we agree on our interpretative strategy but have a substantial disagreement about the text.

I have chosen to concentrate on the *Tractatus* and *Investigations*, rather than consider the entire corpus of Wittgenstein's writing. This is appropriate due to constraints of space, but also for good exegetical reasons. Wittgenstein laboured over the presentation of his ideas and was on the whole reluctant to make his notes public. Of his unpublished material we can only be confident that he wished the *Investigations* to be published posthumously and, even so, he considered part one to be more satisfactory than part two. He published only two works of his own philosophy during his lifetime – the *Tractatus* and “Some Remarks on Logical Form”. There are significant differences in his attitude towards these two works. The *Tractatus* was the only book that he approved for publication during his lifetime and he assisted with the editing process. At the time of publication he believed it was successful. In the case of the article he withdrew his endorsement of the views even before it was published. His view of the article was that it was totally worthless,¹ but the *Tractatus* was not a failure in

¹ In a letter to the Editor of *Mind* dated 12th April 1933 he called it a weak article. (*Philosophical Occasions* p.156) and told his friends that it was worthless (Op. Cit. p.28).

the same way.² When the *Investigations* was published Wittgenstein wrote in the preface that it should be read in conjunction with the *Tractatus*:

It seemed to me that I should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking. (PI Preface p.viii)

I believe that a correct interpretation of the *Investigations* is one that can account for the relationship between the *Tractatus* and *Investigations*. Wittgenstein's ideas can be properly understood using these two texts, without the need for additional material; however I include references to his published notes, personal correspondence and reports of conversations where they illuminate a point that already has textual basis in the *Tractatus* or *Investigations*.

Wittgenstein's discussions of a range of philosophical issues have become highly influential contributions to philosophy of logic and language, philosophy of mind, epistemology and even metaphysics. Although studies of his treatment of these issues are very important, I believe that it is necessary to understand his work on particular problems via an overview of his conception of philosophy. I use the phrase 'conception of philosophy' to encompass several related ideas including views about the nature of philosophical problems, the appropriate methods of philosophy, the end result of a philosophical task and the overall aim of philosophy. Although his discussions of particular philosophical concerns are valuable and indicate issues that he felt deserved treatment, these discussions are best seen as illustrations of his conception of philosophy, rather than his primary concern. Instead I believe that Wittgenstein's main aim throughout his career was to offer a replacement for traditional conceptions of philosophy and it is the task of my interpretation to present a clear account of his new conception of philosophy, rather than interpret his treatment of particular problems. Furthermore I believe that Wittgenstein's work on particular problems cannot be paraphrased without loss, but his overall conception of philosophy can be described. It should be possible to describe what Wittgenstein was attempting to do without treating

² According to Elizabeth Anscombe, "Wittgenstein used to say that the *Tractatus* was not *all* wrong: it was not like a bag of junk professing to be a clock, but like a clock that did not tell you

this description as a substitute for working through each philosophical problem in its own right. A major challenge for any commentator is to give an account of Wittgenstein's ideas without distortion from oversimplification or systematisation.

In both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* the presentation of Wittgenstein's ideas is inextricably connected to his conception of philosophy – I take very seriously the idea that the text is more than a mere container for philosophical content. However, although the texts offer great potential to explore different stylistic and hermeneutic issues, I do not want fascination with the texts to overshadow the important issue – namely Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. Wittgenstein wanted the presentation of his ideas to reinforce his view of philosophy, but unlike some recent commentators of his work, I do not believe that he presented his ideas in a way that requires an ingenious mode of interpretation. When a reader understands his conception of philosophy, it will be a straightforward matter to appreciate why the ideas are presented as they are in the texts. My proposal is that a proper appreciation of the role of the say-show distinction in the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* will make it easier to read the texts and help us to gain a better understanding of his ideas through the style in which they are written.

One of the reasons why Wittgenstein's philosophy is so difficult to understand is because it differs from traditional philosophy. This has been a major cause of misinterpretations. Problems arise if the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* are interpreted from the standpoint of traditional philosophy. In particular it is easy for interpreters to beg the question against his challenge to traditional philosophy when their rejection of his challenge is based on the very presuppositions that he attempts to criticise. Although the texts do not require an ingenious hermeneutic strategy, effort is required to understand the books on their own terms, from an internal standpoint. This involves a simple hermeneutic circle, insofar as we must understand how the texts are to be read by reading the instructions in the text. In other words we must pay attention to what Wittgenstein says in the texts about his own philosophy and his own style of presentation and appreciate the comparisons

the right time”(Anscombe 1959, 78).

he makes between his philosophy and traditional philosophy.³ When I discuss available literature I concentrate on commentators who have used these considerations to understand the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* and I omit or criticise commentators who read the texts without taking account of Wittgenstein's instructions. In effect I use this hermeneutic strategy as a benchmark for deciding which commentators to discuss in my thesis. I do not omit commentators simply because they are unsympathetic to Wittgenstein's views, but I do omit them if their lack of sympathy for his project means that they systematically misinterpret his views.

I believe that Wittgenstein needed to present his ideas in a way that would distinguish them from the traditional format of philosophical writing. His texts do not present ordinary ideas through an unusual mode of presentation. Instead the revolutionary character of his ideas demands an appropriately unusual presentation. His intention was to give his text a physiognomy that matched his ideas. However, he was not entirely satisfied with any of his attempts to publish his work. The prefaces to both books contain remarks indicating that he felt the expression of his ideas was unsatisfactory but he did not have the resources to improve this. The task of interpretation is in part to understand what Wittgenstein felt that he had conveyed successfully and what he felt that he had not.

Although I aim to be sympathetic to Wittgenstein's intentions my primary concern is to extract a robust account of his philosophy. I endeavour to make a contribution to current and future philosophical understanding, rather than a contribution to literary criticism, history of ideas or biography. My interpretation highlights connections and ideas that Wittgenstein himself may not have explicitly considered, so it may not be appropriate to claim that it was his *intention* to express these views, but nonetheless it is appropriate to attribute these views to him. The task of exegesis is compounded as it involves not simply an interpretation of a text, but interpretation of the changes in Wittgenstein's thought over time. For this reason it is not a simple matter of prioritising what Wittgenstein thought or intended, because his views about the *Tractatus* changed. I hope to make sense of what Wittgenstein thought he had achieved when he

³ I discuss these considerations in more detail in chapter 2.

wrote the *Tractatus*, and what he subsequently believed was the problem with the *Tractatus*. This is unashamedly an interpretation from a contemporary perspective – it takes into account the assumption that the *Tractatus* is flawed and looks back at the *Tractatus* from a post-*Investigations* vantage point. Many aspects of Wittgenstein's thought change over the course of his career, including certain aspects of his conception of philosophy, however I argue that his central ambition and fundamental ideas were constant. It makes sense to emphasise this in order to convince philosophers who have no interest in Wittgenstein exegesis that they should appreciate the force of his central ideas and not be distracted by other less significant debates.

The most obvious obstacle for my thesis is the fact that the say-show distinction is not explicitly mentioned in the *Investigations*. My exegetical strategy to deal with this is as follows: we know that the *Tractatus* is crucial for understanding the *Investigations*, so if I can demonstrate that the say-show distinction is crucial for understanding the *Tractatus* it follows that the say-show distinction is also crucial for understanding the *Investigations*. The task then remains to establish whether the say-show distinction is important for the *Investigations* because it is rejected or because it is retained, but either way the significance of the say-show distinction for the *Investigations* is still not appreciated by most commentators. My thesis corrects this neglect and in doing so provides a valuable new interpretation of the *Investigations*.

3 Context

There have already been many attempts to offer groundbreaking interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy, including several recent publications that have not yet reached wide circulation, and are in the early stages of critical review.⁴ Nonetheless my interpretation fulfils a need that is significant and insufficiently explored. With only a few exceptions, all of which are discussed in this thesis, recent interpretations have dealt either with the *Tractatus* or with the *Investigations*, rather than both.⁵ In what follows I demonstrate that interpretations

⁴ E.g. Eli Friedlander (2001), Matthew Ostrow (2002).

⁵ E.g. Oswald Hanfling (1989), Michael Hodges (1990). Interpretations which do deal with both include Alice Crary & Rupert Read (eds.) (2000).

which do give an account of the relationship between the two texts have not provided an adequate interpretation of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy – one which includes the role of the say-show distinction properly understood.⁶ In particular, my interpretation combats the common view that the failure of the *Tractatus* is the result of the incoherence of the say-show distinction.

My view is that the common inclination to treat the say-show distinction as a substantive doctrine is the main reason that philosophers assume it to be incoherent. It has also led to speculation that Wittgenstein was committed to numerous unworkable metaphysical doctrines. I see this as one instance of a more general problem, which is that many interpretations assume the importance of Wittgenstein's work to be his contribution to specific philosophical disputes. Widespread misunderstanding of his central aims has led philosophers to attribute doctrines and theories to Wittgenstein – such as realism, anti-realism, linguistic idealism, solipsism, logical atomism, behaviourism and a host of other substantive positions, (see Hacker 2002, 4). Such misunderstanding is symptomatic of the fact that, although Wittgenstein's aim was to introduce a revolutionary conception of philosophy, the revolution has still not occurred. It is assumed that Wittgenstein's contribution to philosophical debates is in the form of doctrines and theories because his work is still read from the standpoint of traditional philosophy. A new interpretation is needed which will indicate why Wittgenstein's philosophy needs to be read from an entirely different standpoint if it is to have the revolutionary effect that is long overdue.

I have claimed that Wittgenstein offers an alternative to the traditional conception of philosophy. Although he does not explicitly use this term, he did suggest: “one might say that the subject we are dealing with is one of the heirs of the subject that used to be called “philosophy” (*Blue and Brown Books* p.28). Used very loosely ‘traditional philosophy’ could simply mean any philosophy that differs from Wittgenstein's conception so further description is needed to make the claim informative. Rather than attempt to provide a strict definition which categorises the widely divergent features of various philosophical practices, I will illustrate my point with a live example. David Oderberg has recently called for a

⁶ E.g. K.T. Fann (1969), John Koethe (1996), Dale Jacquette (1998).

return to what he calls “philosophical traditionalism”, claiming that “philosophical traditionalism can be seen as both a state of mind and a set of doctrines” (Oderberg 2002, 42). A sample from his manifesto for philosophical traditionalism includes the following requirements for philosophy in general:

The possibility of arriving at distinctively philosophical truths; the possibility of using systematic *a priori* reasoning to arrive at those truths; the role of philosophy not simply to arrive at this or that truth, but at the correct system of philosophical truth. (Oderberg 2002, 42)

This is only one example of the type of philosophy targeted by Wittgenstein. Not all traditional philosophers would accept Oderberg’s faith in an *a priori* methodology, but although they may disagree with his methodological principles, many would subscribe to his aims. Traditional philosophy aims to solve problems by adding philosophical truths to a body of knowledge. Of those who do not agree that philosophy can aim at distinctively philosophical truths many would believe that the answers to philosophical problems are to come from scientific truths. Few would imagine that there can be a distinctively philosophical enterprise that is not in the business of discovering truths.

A particularly distinctive feature of traditional philosophy is the belief that philosophical problems can be solved when we come to know something that we do not presently know. Another way of describing this is the idea that problems are solved by explaining what we know in terms of something that we do not know, for example explaining personal identity in terms of quasi-memory, rather than ordinary memory. Although many philosophers may reject this type of explanation it is usually because they refuse to accept speculative metaphysical postulates – for example quasi-memory, possible worlds and qualia. However they do accept that philosophy needs to make true claims and offer new information that will solve the problems. Much of contemporary philosophy in anglo-american universities is marked by the demand that the explanations should be commensurate with the findings of natural science, hence although it is often not acceptable to postulate philosophical truths about non-empirical entities, it is perfectly acceptable to think that the solution to philosophical problems will be materialist or reductionist discoveries and in principle accessible to science. In

contrast to presuppositions such as these about the task of philosophy, Wittgenstein proposes a conception of philosophy which offers methods for treating philosophical problems which do not involve theories, doctrines and true claims, whether empirical or *a priori*.

In particular one of the most important features of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, properly understood, is that it establishes a distinction between philosophy and science. The debate surrounding the relationship between philosophy and science is not addressed in my thesis, but my conclusions have significance when considered in this wider context. Contemporary philosophy is dominated by approaches that do not accept a distinction between philosophy and science, such as Cognitivism and Quine's Naturalised Epistemology. A clear statement of such a view is made by Keith Lehrer:

We contend that the distinction between philosophy and theoretical science is a bogus distinction, whether viewed historically or systematically. (Lehrer 1990, 7)

A robust account of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy will strengthen resistance to the view that philosophical enquiry is ultimately reducible to scientific enquiry. It will show that philosophy has distinct aims and methods. There is also potential to pursue the idea that the methods of philosophy should be closer to the model of literature than science – although this also forms no part of my argument in this thesis.

Some critics of Wittgenstein have argued that he offers only a negative philosophy – a philosophy that is quietist and defeatist. If Wittgenstein's ideas are to gain wider influence it is important to counter such criticism by demonstrating that his is also a positive philosophy, although it involves no substantive doctrines, whether empirical or *a priori*. I do not offer an explicit defence against these criticisms in this thesis, but instead lay the groundwork for such a defence by providing a robust account of his positive conception of philosophy. My account of his work will establish that, in both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, the outcome of a philosophical task and the overall aim of philosophy are positive achievements, not merely negative and deflationary.

4 Chapter Summary

In Chapter 2, I give a neutral exegesis of the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. This is an exposition of the main ideas with minimal interpretation or commentary. I then identify the aspects that demand special consideration, particularly the internal guidelines for how the texts are to be understood. This lays the groundwork for my critical discussion of commentators' readings in chapters 3 and 4 and for my own interpretation in chapters 5 to 7.

In Chapter 3, I evaluate available interpretations of the say-show distinction in the *Tractatus*. I argue that the most common type of interpretation is incorrect because it treats the say-show distinction as a doctrine, albeit a special type of ineffable doctrine. I also criticise the opposing type of interpretation on the grounds that it treats the say-show distinction as a pseudo-doctrine. I argue that the most promising type of interpretation is one that attempts to treat the say-show distinction as an elucidation, rather than a doctrine or pseudo-doctrine.

In Chapter 4, I evaluate available interpretations of the say-show distinction in the *Investigations*. Using the interpretations from Chapter 3, I consider in each case whether commentators believe that the say-show distinction is retained or rejected in the *Investigations*. I argue that only an interpretation that treats the distinction as elucidatory can successfully claim that the distinction is retained in the *Investigations*. I concede that if one accepts the view that the say-show distinction is a doctrine or pseudo-doctrine, then there is a strong case to say that the distinction is rejected, or has no role, in the *Investigations*.

In Chapter 5, I present my own interpretation of the say-show distinction in the *Tractatus*. Against the idea that the distinction is a doctrine or pseudo-doctrine I argue that the distinction has an elucidatory role. I develop a more comprehensive account than the available elucidatory interpretation, by demonstrating that the distinction is the basis of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy.

In Chapter 6, I discuss why Wittgenstein claimed in the *Investigations* that the *Tractatus* contained "grave mistakes". I argue that the say-show distinction was not a grave mistake in the *Tractatus* and that Wittgenstein did not reject the Tractarian conception of philosophy. I argue that he considered the failure of the

Tractatus to be its reliance upon certain traditional presuppositions, and that these mistakes were exposed and dispelled in the *Investigations*.

In Chapter 7, I present my interpretation of the say-show distinction in the *Investigations*. I argue that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy in the *Investigations* is fundamentally the same as his conception in the *Tractatus*. In both cases the say-show distinction is the basis for this conception.

In Chapter 8, I sum up my argument and consider some implications for further study, either by myself or by others. These include the following projects: an application of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy to contemporary problems; a defence of his conception of philosophy against opposing conceptions, particularly the prevailing trend towards scientism; a clarification of the similarities and differences between philosophy and science and between philosophy and literature; a historical study of the influences that may have contributed to Wittgenstein's say-show distinction and a historical study of the influence that the distinction has subsequently had on other philosophers.

Ph.D. Table of Contents

Ch.1 Introduction

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Exegetical Strategy
- 3 Context
- 4 Chapter Summary

Ch.2 The *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
- 3 The *Philosophical Investigations*
- 4 *Desiderata*

Ch.3 Available readings of the say/show distinction in the *Tractatus*

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Available readings of the say-show distinction in the *Tractatus*
 - 2.1 Metaphysical Readings
 - 2.2 Therapeutic Readings
 - 2.3 An Elucidatory Reading
- 3 Summary and Comment

Ch.4 Available readings of the say/show distinction in the *Investigations*

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Available readings of the say-show distinction in the *Investigations*
 - 2.1 Metaphysical Readings
 - 2.2 Therapeutic Readings
 - 2.3 An Elucidatory Reading
- 3 Summary and Comment

Ch.5 The say/show distinction in the *Tractatus*

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy in the *Tractatus*
 - 2.1 The nature of philosophical problems
 - 2.2 The "correct method" of philosophy
 - 2.3 The outcome of a philosophical task
 - 2.4 The task of the *Tractatus*
 - 2.5 The overall aim of philosophical activity
- 3 The say-show distinction in the *Tractatus*
- 4 Summary

Ch.6 The failure of the *Tractatus* and its legacy

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The apparent failure of the *Tractatus*
- 3 The real failure of the *Tractatus*
- 4 The legacy of the *Tractatus*
- 5 Summary

Ch.7 The say/show distinction in the *Investigations*

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy in the *Investigations*
 - 2.1 Philosophical problems
 - 2.2 Philosophical methods
 - 2.3 The outcome of a philosophical task
 - 2.4 The overall aim of philosophical activity
 - 2.5 The task of the *Investigations*
- 3 The say-show distinction in the *Investigations*
- 4 Summary

Ch.8 Conclusion

- 1 Thesis overview
- 2 Fulfilling the *desiderata*
- 3 Avenues for future research