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“Reading literature and doing philosophy”

Abstract

In this paper I make a comparison between the imaginative activity of reading literature and the elucidatory activity of doing philosophy. My aim is to highlight significant features of a non-traditional view of philosophical method – inspired by Wittgenstein.

I begin with a textual passage and discuss the difference between reading it as though it is a scientific journal and as though it is a novel. I argue that in the former case we assume a single, limited context of application for the words and in the latter we imaginatively consider various, unlimited contexts of application. I argue that a traditional view of reading philosophy also assumes a limited context of application for the text, whereas reading Wittgenstein’s philosophy requires an imaginative approach that is similar to reading literature.

I use this comparison as the basis for explaining how Wittgenstein’s philosophy is radically different to traditional philosophy. Contrary, perhaps, to expectations my point is not to suggest that we should present philosophical truths in the form of literature; nor to suggest that the truths of philosophy are more similar to literature than science. Rather than claiming that we should read philosophy as we read literature, my claim is that the activity of *reading* literature is equivalent to the activity of *doing* philosophy.

The implications of this view include the idea that philosophy is an elucidatory activity that is an end in itself, not a means to a further end – such as producing philosophical theories. The aim of philosophy is to dissolve philosophical confusions by seeing clearly what can be meaningfully said. Seeing clearly is a personal achievement, it is not something that can be conveyed to another person, each person must undertake the activity for themselves.

“Using your imagination: Reading literature and doing philosophy”

Wittgenstein aimed to challenge traditional views of philosophy and to teach an alternative conception. He offers an account of the nature of philosophical problems, the methods appropriate for dealing with these problems and a vision of the overall aim of philosophical activity that is radically different to traditional expectations. In this paper I highlight some significant features of his conception of philosophy by drawing a comparison between how we read literature and how Wittgenstein believes we should do philosophy.

Consider how we are to read and understand the following piece of text:

The seismic moment of an earthquake is measured by multiplying its area (the length of the fault times the width), the amount of slip and the stiffness of the local rock. The strength of an earthquake is usually characterized by using the logarithm of moment – known as the *magnitude* – rather than the moment itself. Therefore all earthquakes, small and large, are ranked from one to nine, each unit of magnitude representing a tenfold increase in strength.

If we know that this text is from *The Journal of Structural Geology*, then we know how to understand the paragraph. We assume that the text says something and that what it says are factual claims that are probably true, although it is possible for them to be false. If we know that this text is from Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, then we may read and understand the paragraph in different ways.¹ We might still understand it as a literal, factual description which provides some realistic context for the story. It still says something and what it says is true, even if the function is to provide context, not to report a scientific theory. However, the narrative takes place in a parallel universe, one where J.F.K. survived the Dallas assassination attempt and Lou Reed is a woman. This universe undergoes a collision with our own world, resulting in rifts and quakes in the fabric of both worlds – of varying degrees of magnitude – until one world (ours) is destroyed. Given

¹ (Salman Rushdie *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Picador 1999 p.470).

this context we may understand the passage quite differently – we may treat the words as figurative, ironic, fictitious, poetical, metaphorical, nonsensical. More radically, it is open to think that the words are not really language at all, but are marks or sounds that are to be contemplated for the shapes or patterns.

This comparison does not imply that when language is used in scientific texts we should read it as saying true claims and when language is used in literature we should read it as though it is not saying true claims. This would be to assume that there is one way of reading science and one way of reading literature. Instead my point is that when we read science we treat the language as though it has one type of application and when we read literature the language has multiple types of application available. We keep open the possibility that the passage is literal, metaphorical, factual, non-factual and so on. Indeed our view of the correct type of application may change during the course of reading the literature, in the light of comparisons with other passages from the book, other works of literature, facts about the author and the author's intentions. Wittgenstein makes this point in the following remark:

“He measured him with a hostile glance and said” The reader of the narrative understands this; he has no doubt in his mind. Now you say: “Very well, he supplies the meaning, he guesses it.” – Generally speaking he supplies nothing, guesses nothing. – But it is also possible that the hostile glance and the words later prove to have been a pretence, or that the reader is kept in the dark as to whether they are so or not, and so that he really does guess at a possible interpretation. – But then the main thing he guesses at is a context. He says to himself for example: The two men who are here so hostile to one another are in reality friends, etc. etc. (*Philosophical Investigations* §652)

The reader is initially certain about how to interpret the narrative, later he revises his interpretation in the light of further reading. Significantly this is achieved by imagining different possible *contexts* in which the original sentence could have application.

The idea that we have a monistic way of reading science and a pluralistic way of reading literature does not entail that, whereas science has a single correct interpretation, in literature “anything goes” as though all the possible applications are equally valid. Although every possible context of application is open to our imagination, some will work better than others and a decision to endorse a particular interpretation requires justification. In the following remark Wittgenstein discusses the process of comparing different contexts of application and the corresponding need for different types of justification:

Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? One would like to say “Because I know what it’s all about.” But what is it all about? I should not be able to say. In order to ‘explain’ I could only compare it with something else which has the same rhythm (I mean the same pattern). (One says “Don’t you see, this is as if a conclusion were being drawn” or “This is as it were a parenthesis”, etc. How does one justify such comparisons? – There are very different kinds of justification here.) (*Philosophical Investigations* §527)

For example, to justify an application we might show how reading a passage as metaphorical rather than literal will cohere better with the rest of the text, or serve to better illuminate a crucial theme or truth that is central to the book.

One implication of this view is that reading science is not fundamentally different to reading literature. It is perhaps better to see it as a limiting case. The range of possible applications for scientific language is restricted to one type of application. The only appropriate application is in a context where well-formed sentences have a specific truth-value; to use Wittgenstein’s words we might call this the language-game of giving information.² But, as the Rushdie example reveals, this limitation is not

² “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.” (*Zettel* §160)

determined by the words on the page, because these can be imagined in an unlimited number of contexts, instead the application is determined by the norms of interpretation shared and established through the practice of reading science texts.

The significant difference between reading science and reading literature is that, in science, the activity of the reader is constrained by assuming one context of application for the language. Whereas, in literature, the involvement of the reader is unconstrained as it entails active, creative, imaginative comparisons of numerous different possible contexts of application. This does not mean that there cannot be one interpretation that is better than others, but only that other interpretations are always possible. The question is simply to establish which context of application is appropriate. The important thing is that we pay attention to the application rather than simply look at the words. This is why, in the following remark, Wittgenstein reminds us about the difference between the language on the page and the language-game in which the words are applied:

Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.
(*Zettel* §160)

So what about reading philosophy? Risking an over-generalisation, I suggest that a traditional view of reading philosophy will put it closer to the standards used for reading science than literature. Despite important differences, such as the fact that philosophers deal with different subject matter, and in some cases non-empirical truths, nonetheless the point of reading philosophy is to understand what is being said, to ascertain whether the claims are true and whether they are justified by sound argument. It is assumed that a work of philosophy should contain theories, explanations and true claims; that it should solve problems by supplying information and increasing knowledge. As with science, the construction of the sentences are typically not essential to the information that is conveyed, as the 'meaning' –

the true claim – can be paraphrased in many forms. For example, it seems that even a non-standard philosophical text such as Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* could in principle be converted into an ordinary prose argument. Works of philosophy that fail to be constrained by this context of application and so cannot be paraphrased as true claims, for example works by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, are often on those grounds judged not to be philosophy and are instead are sometimes categorised as literature.

In response to this issue, some philosophers have argued that their philosophical ideas should be presented in a literary manner because the truths or insights cannot be presented in the direct manner available to science. Instead the reader must be brought to see the philosophical truths by indirect means. Plato is a good example, but many commentators have also made this claim about Wittgenstein. Although I claim that Wittgenstein's own remarks need to be read like literature rather than like science, it is not because I endorse such a view. I do not compare Wittgenstein's remarks with literature to illuminate the characteristic way that he *presents* his ideas, i.e. his style or form; nor would I do this to suggest that the philosophical *content* of his work is more like the truths of literature than the truths of science. Above all I wish to avoid the implication that he is conveying ineffable truths by indirect means. Instead the imaginative activity of reading literature is to be seen as a model for understanding Wittgenstein's philosophical *method*. My claim is that the way we *read* literature can help us to understand the way that Wittgenstein wants us to *do* philosophy.

Wittgenstein insists that philosophy is an activity. Most philosophers would agree, but Wittgenstein has an unusually radical view. Philosophy is not an activity that produces philosophical truths. It is an activity that is an end in itself, not a means to an end. The aim of philosophy for Wittgenstein is not to solve philosophical problems by stating theories, explanations and true claims (whether these be empirical, non-empirical, transcendental or ineffable). Instead the aim of philosophy is to remove philosophical confusions through the activity of seeing clearly our ordinary language –

seeing clearly whether an apparent sentence is being applied in a context that makes it meaningful, or whether it is divorced from that context. In the latter case the language has only appearance without application – it is nonsense that looks like sense. This is what Wittgenstein means by ‘disguised nonsense’ in the following remark: “My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense” (*Philosophical Investigations* §464). For Wittgenstein, all philosophical problems are confusions arising from a failure to see clearly whether sentences have sense. They are brought about because we look at sentences and assume that they say something. This is easily done because we confuse forms of expression that have a similar appearance and assume that the application is the same.

In Wittgenstein, we find the following idea: interpreting a sentence can be seen as drawing a comparison between that sentence and a particular model of discourse (a picture), the picture implies a context of application. In effect we draw an analogy between the original sentence and another imagined sentence – the imagined sentence (the picture) presents a context of application, it is this application or use which constitutes the meaning of the sentence.³ The application is the place that the expression occupies in our form of life, the role that it fulfils in our activities and practices. Wittgenstein calls such usage “Grammar” – grammar is language embedded in a form of life.⁴ Making a comparison in the manner described does not *determine* the meaning of the sentence – only actual usage can do that – the comparison just affects the way that we *perceive* the meaning of the sentence. The imagined picture leads us to think that this is the actual application for the sentence in question. Thus through the analogy we are led to see a possible context of application for the sentence we wish to interpret. The problem arises when we sometimes make a poor analogy. Philosophical confusions arise because pictures force a particular mode of application on us. When he says that we

³ “Different ‘interpretations’ must correspond to different applications.” (*Culture and Value* p.46)

⁴ “The term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (*Philosophical Investigations* §23)

are in the grip of a picture, what he means is that we have compared a particular piece of language with a model of discourse (a picture) and are thus convinced that the original utterance language has that same application, the same sense.

Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. (*Philosophical Investigations* §90)

Now we can see why the comparison with literature is helpful. When reading science we assume that the sentences say something, we take for granted the specific context of application that is required, and we only worry about whether what the sentences say is true or false. In literature we do not make this assumption and instead look to see which context of application, if any, makes sense of the language. We imagine unlimited models of discourse for comparison without having to say that the sentence is reducible to a true claim. When we are doing philosophy we should look at our language in the way that we do when we are reading literature, rather than the way that we do when we are reading science.⁵ We must be active, imaginative and pluralistic rather than inactive, dogmatic and monistic.⁶

It is important to note that simply imagining a context of application does not thereby establish the meaning of the words. This is precisely what often happens in philosophy and generates the problems.⁷ The point is that when we want to see clearly the grammar of language we must employ imaginative activity to consider the multitude of possible contexts of

⁵ "I know how the colour green looks to *me*" – surely that makes sense! – Certainly: what use of the proposition are you thinking of? (*Philosophical Investigations* §278).

⁶ "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a stupid prejudice" (*Philosophical Investigations* §340).

⁷ "Instead of imaginability one can also say here: representability by a particular method of representation. And such a representation *may* indeed safely point the way to further use of a sentence. On the other hand a picture may obtrude itself upon us and be of no use at all" (*Philosophical Investigations* §397).

application – this is part of the process of trying to see what is the actual context of application.⁸ Being imaginative helps us to avoid making an assumption that illegitimately limits the context of application.

The ‘actual infinite’ is a ‘mere word’. It would be better to say: for the moment this expression merely produces a picture – which still hangs in the air: you owe us an account of its application. [...] What application – even though a fictitious one – might be made of this concept? Let us ask now, not ‘Can there be such a thing?’ but ‘What do we imagine?’ So give free rein to our imagination. You can have things now just as you choose. You only need to *say* how you want them. So (just) make a verbal picture, illustrate it as you choose – by drawing comparisons etc.! Thus you can – as it were – prepare a blueprint. – And now there remains the question how to work from it. (*Zettel* §274 and §275)

Look again at the Rushdie passage. It makes a big difference to imagine that the actual application of the passage is in a scientific context or an ironic context, but we cannot see the application just by looking at the words on the page.⁹ One of Wittgenstein’s most important contributions to philosophy of language has been to undermine the idea that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the structure of the sentence.

You say to me: ‘You understand this expression, don’t you? Well then – I am using it with the sense that you are familiar with.’ – As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application. If, for example, someone says that the sentence ‘This is here’ (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense. (*Philosophical Investigations* §117)

⁸ “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases” (*Philosophical Investigations* §122).

⁹ “In ordinary circumstances these words and this picture have an application with which we are familiar. – But if we suppose a case in which this application falls away we become as if we were conscious for the first time of the nakedness of the words and the picture” (*Philosophical Investigations* §349).

Sentences do not carry their sense with them like an aura. What matters is not the way that the sentence is constructed, how it appears, but how it is used and it has application in some contexts but not others. *Seeing* the application of the text involves the activity of the reader, it is not something provided by the text. We imaginatively compare the passage with different models of discourse (pictures) until we find a picture that presents an acceptable context of application – the language-game where the language has its home. As Wittgenstein puts it: “one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used this way in the language-game which is its original home?” (*Philosophical Investigations* §116).¹⁰

But why is this approach necessary? Why do we need such an elaborate way of approaching language? Surely if we want to achieve clarity in our grammar then we can do that using the traditional methods of philosophy – by analysing our concepts, stating definitions and identifying logical rules? Here we see the most radical idea in Wittgenstein’s work, arising from his point that we need to approach our language in an imaginative manner because we want to see clearly the grammar of language. The grammar, or sense, of a proposition shows itself and “what can be shown cannot be said” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.1212). What shows itself becomes apparent when we look at the usage of language, but it is not something that can be said. This is a theme that runs throughout Wittgenstein’s philosophy, early and late. The task of philosophy is not to state truths, but to see clearly whether or not an utterance has sense.¹¹ The task of philosophy is not to *say* something, but to *see* clearly what can be said. What is said through language shows itself, but cannot itself be said by using further language. In effect if we try to say what a particular sentence says, we will either simply repeat the sentence or we will generate another sentence, which will then require further clarification and create a regress. The end

¹⁰ “What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do not interpret. I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present picture” (*Zettel* p.42).

¹¹ “Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions’, but rather the clarification of propositions” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.112).

result of a philosophical task is therefore not something that can be said – it is a *way of seeing*.¹²

I wanted to put that picture before him, and his acceptance of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*. (*Philosophical Investigations* §144)

When we dissolve a philosophical problem it is not by saying something informative, but by seeing clearly that nothing needs to be said. We take it for granted that we can say things in language, but if we want to see clearly whether or not our language says something we must at some point stop speaking and look. When you see clearly the appropriate context of application for a sentence – the role of the language in our form of life – there is not something further to say. You have not discovered new information, you have recognised something that you already knew but were failing to see clearly.¹³ Your acceptance of the picture will mean that you do not feel the need to say something. You find peace from the urge that something needs to be said.¹⁴

The clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely*

¹² “Work in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)” (*Culture and Value* p.24).

¹³ “[Philosophical problems] are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (*Philosophical Investigations* §109).

¹⁴ G.E. Moore’s notes from Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-1933 record the following: “What Aesthetics tries to do, [Wittgenstein] said, is to give *reasons* e.g. for having this word rather than that in a particular place in a poem [...]. Aesthetics ‘are of the nature of further descriptions’: e.g. you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of different pieces by Brahms, or by comparing him with a contemporary author; and all that Aesthetics does is ‘to draw your attention to a thing’, to ‘place things side by side’. He said that if, by giving ‘reasons’ of this sort you make another person ‘see what you see’ but it still ‘doesn’t appeal to him’, that is ‘an end’ of the discussion. [...] And he said that the same sort of ‘reasons’ were given, not only in Ethics, but also in Philosophy” (*Philosophical Occasions* p.106).

disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace. (*Philosophical Investigations* §133)

In the case of philosophical problems, as soon as we see that the utterance says nothing then the problem disappears, because the problem was nothing more than the confused idea that something was being said. The absence of confusion is thus the absence of the problem. In opposition to the traditional view, a problem is not solved by saying something, it is dissolved when we realise that nothing needs to be said. This is why Wittgenstein emphasises that philosophy is not a body of doctrine, but an activity – it is not the statement of true claims, but the activity of seeing our language clearly.

In conclusion, Wittgenstein teaches us to take a new approach whenever we are confronted by language. He says “don’t think, but look” (*Philosophical Investigations* §66). Rather than take for granted that the utterance says something, we must be open-minded and imaginative and consider the possibility that the language lacks an application that makes it meaningful, we must look to see whether the utterance says anything at all.

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