DIALECTICS AND CONVERSION IN WITTGENSTEIN'S LATER WORK: WHY IT IS GOOD TO CHANGE YOUR MIND[1]

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Introduction

I would like to explore with you today how Wittgenstein, in his later work *The Philosophical Investigations,* (Wittgenstein 2004 & 2009: henceforth abbreviated to PI) uses the dialectic method to engage with his readers and the role of conversion that is linked to dialectics. Wittgenstein is seeking to engage with interested readers for a purpose, and the dialectical method is a method that moves the reader from one understanding, which may in part be true, to a deeper one that is even more true. Wittgenstein was very aware that getting someone to change their mind is very difficult if one just asserts or writes something. This quote is from his notebook titled *The Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough:*

> *"To convince someone of what is true, it is not enough to state it; we must find the road from error to truth.'* (Wittgenstein: 2004 p1)

In this paper, I will attempt to mark out this road and hope that you will want to walk alongside me some of the ways.

Wittgenstein's writing style

Wittgenstein's deep, convoluted and intriguing writing has influenced many philosophers, however, the way Wittgenstein wrote, his style, has caused difficulties in achieving a clear conception of his philosophy. I suggest that misunderstandings exist because there has been an insufficient focus on his

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use of the dialectic method with its links to philosophical conversion. To further explore this claim it is important to understand the background and context of Wittgenstein's writing as I suggest many misunderstandings of his work, indeed his intention in doing philosophy itself is bound up with Wittgenstein not agreeing with how others around him were approaching philosophy. I argue that Wittgenstein should not be read as an analytic philosopher but as a continental philosopher seeking to persuade those around him, the early founders of analytic philosophy, of a better and more fruitful way of doing philosophy.

General aims and background

Wittgenstein's writing is usually divided between the early Wittgenstein and the later Wittgenstein. Some scholars trace the continuation of certain strands of thought between the early and the later and the discontinuation of other strands. Hacker (*Insight and Illusion* p148), writing on the differences and similarities between Wittgenstein's early and later conceptions of philosophy, writes that Wittgenstein broke decisively with the cognitive conception of philosophy that preceded and surrounded him. Hacker states that Wittgenstein in his later work *'cuts himself lose even from the notion of ineffable metaphysics'* that he allowed in the *Tractatus*. Further, as Hacker explains, Wittgenstein thought that 'philosophy really is an activity of clarification' and that it *'can give other disciplines no foundation, since it is not concerned with uncovering fundamental true propositions upon which the sciences rest.'*

Another conception which was a part of the philosophy at the time of Wittgenstein's writing is that *'the task of philosophy is 'legislative' or 'stipulative'. It should concern itself with devising an ideal language which will, for special purposes, be an improvement over ordinary language.'* Hacker (p150) writes that as early as the Tractatus, Wittgenstein contra Frege, Russell et al, repudiated the idea *'that natural language might be "logically defective" as absurd, and the supposition that one might devise a "better" or "logically more perfect" language ridiculous.'* (Note the reference to Russell, understood as the founder of analytic philosophy, which he spread throughout the UK and USA.) However, Wittgenstein's later conception of philosophy went further, as Hacker writes, *'The supposition that all possible languages have a common essential form is misguided since the concept of a language is a family resemblance concept.'*

The concept of family resemblance proposed by Wittgenstein is a concept used to allow for a loose grouping of items that bear a similarity like a nose or eyes in a family but which is not fixed or immutable. For now, it is important to note that his repudiation of a common essential form of lan-

guages is based on his later approach to philosophy and the reasons given will also be found there. It is with this background in mind that what Wittgenstein wrote in his later works can be understood. Such as: *'Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.'* This means that *'we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place.'* (PI109) Wittgenstein wanted to show the problems caused by language that has confused us hence; *'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.'*

It follows from what Hacker and others have written that Wittgenstein should therefore eschew the logical form or any *a priori* generalization that can be made in philosophy (PI 125) he felt that trying to advance any such generalization was a temptation that lures philosophers and should be avoided because it is this tendency that leads to more problems and dead ends (cf. PI 65ff and PI 109). The true task of philosophy was to avoid this; hence *'What is your aim in philosophy? — To show the fly the way out of the fly–bottle.'* (PI 309).

However, Wittgenstein was aware that he had to go further than point out errors: he had to find the source of the error:

> *'We must begin with the mistake and transform it into to what is true.*
>
> *That is, we must uncover the source of the error; otherwise hearing what is true won't help us. It cannot penetrate when something is taking its place.*
>
> *To convince someone of what is true, it is not enough to state it; we must find the road from error to truth.'* (Wittgenstein 2004)

To achieve this end Wittgenstein needed to find an approach to be 'the road from error to truth.' Let us turn now to Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy and its connection to his writing.

Wittgenstein's approach and its connection to the text

Wittgenstein, in English at least, is generally considered to be difficult to read and is sometimes accused of being deliberately obscure. As Fergus Kerr (1997p.48) notes: *"People accustomed to scanning the newspapers or who are philosophically trained to scent fallacies, have great difficulty in reading Wittgenstein's later writings."* However, as Marie McGinn in *Wittgenstein and The Philosophical Investigations* (1997) writes, Wittgenstein's distinctive style is as it is for a reason:

"It is Wittgenstein's unique way of treating the topics he deals with that makes the Investigations so difficult to understand. It is not that his style is technical or abstract, rather that it is just not possible to see, in the style of the book, what Wittgenstein's method is or how it is supposed to work. Yet understanding Wittgenstein's method and its connection with the form of the text is the key to understanding the Investigations. This is so not because it is only by such means that we can know how to read the remarks that make up the work, but because Wittgenstein himself emphasizes over and over again that it is a method or a style of thought, rather than doctrines that characterizes his later philosophy."

McGinn continues that confusion may exist because Wittgenstein also stresses repeatedly that he has no wish to put forward '*any kind of theory*' (PI 109) therefore readers have to approach *The Philosophical Investigations* in a different way from the usual one of reading and extracting a philosopher's views. To try to understand what this approach consists of I propose that we look at the theme of therapy and what Wittgenstein himself writes regarding his aim in philosophy which is perhaps more helpful than his summary given above *'What is your aim in philosophy? — To show the fly the way out of the fly–bottle.'* (PI 309)

Method and therapy

Wittgenstein noted that there was a difference between the questions posed by science and those posed by philosophy:

'Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes and are irresistibly tempted to ask and to answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics and leads philosophers into complete darkness.' (Wittgenstein BB p18).

It is this propensity to confuse ourselves by asking the wrong kind of questions which Wittgenstein sought to correct by offering an analysis of language and its use. *'The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.'* (PI 132) Therefore Wittgenstein stressed to look and see how a word is used in practice rather than how any word can be theorized about. Moreover, Wittgenstein was not attempting to solve a single problem, rather he wanted to give an approach to philosophy which would *'give philosophy peace so that it is no longer tormented by questions itself brings into question.'* (PI 133). Wittgenstein distinguished between approaches which could solve one particular problem in philosophy and his wider ranging approach where;

'Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated) not a single problem.

(T)here is not a philosophical method, though there is indeed methods, like different therapies.' (PI 133)

This does not mean that Wittgenstein thought that all philosophy to be therapy, rather the methods used in his approach to philosophy, like the different therapies in medicine, allow the symptoms (in this case philosophical confusion) to be relieved. The simile between the methods proposed by Wittgenstein to be used in philosophy to counter philosophical problems and therapies is apt, as the reader has to be engaged in the process for clarity to be gained. Marie McGinn summarises the process thus;

> *'The concept of therapy emphasizes that Wittgenstein's philosophical method aims to engage the reader in an active process of working on himself; it also underlines the fact that the readers acknowledgment of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of philosophical error is a vital part of his method, for "we can only convict someone else of a mistake if he acknowledges that this really is the expression of his feeling".* McGinn (1997 p23)

The Dialectical Method

Clearly, if the reader is not actively engaged in the process nor accepts Wittgenstein's diagnosis then little change will occur with the philosophical problems encountered. This may account for why change does not always occur: there has to be a desire for the reader to want to go deeper into their own conceptual world. I would also say that this process will be uncomfortable and unsettling. One can perhaps understand why this conception of philosophy may want to be avoided by philosophers. However, this understanding is crucial: Wittgenstein does not want to solve one philosophical problem he wishes to change the way we think that causes us to create problems. To achieve this aim Wittgenstein uses a way of writing that engages his readers and which seeks to change the reader's habitual way of thinking, the dialectical method. McGinn writes about a gradual acceptance;

> *'Wittgenstein's style and method in the PI are important in that they support his aim to 'bring about a gradual acceptance of the fact that our attempts at explanation are empty and that "since everything lies open to view there is nothing to be explained'*   (PI 126). M. McGinn (1997 p29)

The gradual acceptance, which McGinn refers to, is brought about through the dialectical process and it is through this process that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical method is revealed.

> *'The dialectical structure of the work–seen in the interaction of Wittgenstein's different voices–is thereby acknowledged as an essential part of his method and is not seen as a mere stylistic device which obscures the general views that are being surreptitiously advanced, and which our exposition must somehow draw out.'* (McGinn 1997 p29)

The gradual acceptance that McGinn refers to is a shift in our understanding of our world–view, our *Weltanschauung*. However, I suggest that

this change of perspective can at times be more dramatic. Furthermore, this change in *Weltanschauung* either gradual or dramatic is properly understood as a conversion. And it is in this sense that I use the term conversion from the Old French and the Latin meaning to 'turn around' and to see things from a different perspective. Wittgenstein states, what we once understood to be philosophical problems completely dissolve into thin air. We cannot ever step back into how we thought before the change occurred. The next quote from Wittgenstein illustrates this dramatic shift but also how the problems we once saw seem to disappear:

> 'Grasping the difficulty in its depth is what is hard.
>
> For if you interpret it in a shallow way the difficulty just remains. It has to be pulled out by the root; and that means, you have to start thinking about these things in a new way. The change is as decisive e.g. as that from the alchemical to the chemical way of thinking.
>
> The new way of thinking is so hard to establish.
>
> Once the new way of thinking is established the old problems disappear; indeed it becomes hard to recapture them. For they are embedded in the way we express ourselves; if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment.' (Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* 55e)

Wittgenstein's approach is not a shallow form of philosophical brainwashing or a philosophical system that allows disciples to quote verbatim the master's prose without a deeper understanding. Wittgenstein wants to engage in a dialectical approach with his reader to help them to see what the limitations are of their current way of thinking and to offer a new perspective a deeper conception of philosophy, this is '*the road from error to truth*' that Wittgenstein sought for at the beginning to his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Therefore it is clear that his methodology must follow his aim, which is why *The Philosophical Investigations* should be read from beginning to end like a novel rather than as is usually the case in academia of removing sections of text to examine alone.

I propose to now turn to Wittgenstein's methodology quoted in part above PI 133 which can now be read with the above in mind:

> 'It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in–unheard–ways.
>
> For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely 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, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which itself brings into question. Instead, we can now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem.

There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods like different therapies.'

So Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy as stated in *The Philosophical Investigations* is to use dialectics to engage at a deep level with his readers to enable them to find and walk 'the road from error to truth'. Let us now turn to a deeper investigation of dialectics itself.

Dialectics

Dialectics has a long history and any definition of dialectics or, the dialectical method will include the Socratic method, as well as Hegelian, Marxist, Talmudic Medieval, Hindu and Buddhist. I will focus on the ancient Greek Socratic method used by Plato in the Socratic dialogues as it would make sense to assume that Wittgenstein in his youth would have studied classical and ancient Greek philosophy.

In brief, *"Dialectic or dialectics (Greek: διαλεκτική, dialektikḗ), also known as the dialectical method, is a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments."* Wikipedia

(Note: It is difficult to find references to Dialectic in English, I will suggest reasons later for this, but for now please excuse me having to use Wikipedia.)

Dialectics, however, must be differentiated from the dialogue, as Dialectics seeks to establish the truth. It is not debated as there are no winners or losers, nor is the term synonymous with rhetoric which seeks to persuade an audience and can rely on mere sophistry: an argument that may or may not contain truths but its aim is to win by any means including playing fast and loose with truths.

The entry contrasts Socrates method with that of the Sophists:

"The Sophists taught aretē (ἀρετή, quality, excellence) as the highest value and the determinant of one's actions in life. The Sophists taught artistic quality in oratory (motivation via speech) as a manner of demonstrating one's aretē. Oratory was taught as an art form, used to please and to influence other people via excellent speech; nonetheless, the Sophists taught the pupil to seek aretē in all endeavours, not solely in oratory.

Socrates favoured truth as the highest value, proposing that it could be discovered through reason and logic in discussion: ergo, dialectic. Socrates valued rationality (appealing to logic, not emotion) as the proper means for persuasion, the discovery of truth, and the determinant for one's actions. To Socrates, truth, not aretē, was the greater good, and each person should, above all else, seek truth to guide one's life. Therefore, Socrates opposed the Sophists and their teaching of rhetoric as art and as emotional oratory requiring neither logic nor proof."

"For example, dialectically occurs between Socrates, the Sophist, Gorgias, and two men, Polus and Callicles in Plato's Gorgias. Because Socrates' ultimate goal was to reach true knowledge, he was even willing to change his own views in order to arrive at the truth." I would also suggest that the same happens in other dialogues like the Phaedrus. This has caused many commentators to misread Plato and fail to understand the person of Socrates, especially his willingness to change his mind, to be converted to another point of view.

There are a few key points that I want us to consider from the general definition above and the more specific Socratic form of dialectics:

1   Truth and the establishment of truth is the main goal;
2   Dialectic includes two or more people with as many (or more) different views;
3   Dialectic begins by using contradiction as a starting point, rather than as a dead end, for contemplation.
4   It is often contrasted with the method favoured by Socrates philosophical foes the Sophists in that they would use emotional appeal and rhetoric to win the bout and to impress upon their followers their point of view.

Another part of the Socratic method is Elenchus

"Elenchus is a form of a cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presumptions. It is a dialectical method, often involving a discussion in which the defence of one point of view is questioned; one participant may lead another to contradict themselves in some way, thus weakening the defender's point. This method is introduced by Socrates in Plato's Theaetetus as midwifery (maieutics) because it is employed to bring out definitions implicit in the interlocutors' beliefs, or to help them further their understanding."

I agree with Marie McGinn that Wittgenstein based his approach on the dialectic method, but I go further. The dialectical method is an interesting method to use because of its intention to deepen understanding even, as we shall see with the example of Socrates if that means that you change your mind. Also, I believe that *Elenchus* the form of a cooperative dialogue between philosophers is also at play in Wittgenstein's PI.

I suggest that the above is a good background to understand what Wittgenstein was attempting to do in The PI. Why has this not been noticed before?

Criticism of dialectic and Weltanschauung

Now to me, this all sounds like a very good way of proceeding in philosophy. I accept that truth is my goal and that others may have different points of view and that by calmly and reasonably discussing these points of view we may change our minds and/or deepen our understanding. This may have

something to do with my being able to step into two Weltanschauungs, my parents were French and I read French fluently: indeed I have had to learn to navigate the English world–view consciously. I think Wittgenstein had to learn to do this, too.

However, others are not so happy with this conception of philosophy: indeed it has been suggested that some of the hostility which has divided Anglo–American philosophy from the so–called 'continental' tradition for most of the 20th Century has been because of dialectic. As I remarked earlier, I could find no entry on Dialectics in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and turn to print not in my older Philosophy dictionary published by Oxford University. And yet it is central to the Ancient Greek, Mediaeval and European/continental traditions. I would appreciate your thoughts on this matter at the end of my paper.

A few philosophers have attempted to bridge this divide, and if you enjoy the philosophy of G.H. von Wright, Paul Ricœur, Hans–Georg Gadamer, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor then you stand with them. I, as a student of philosophy in the UK, have not been aware of this method until brought to my notice by studying Wittgenstein and finding Marie McGinn's book *"Wittgenstein and The Philosophical Investigations"*. However, in the latest edition of the PI, Hacker confronts head–on discussion about Wittgenstein's use of the dialectic by saying it "has been overplayed". My own study of Wittgenstein has revealed to me that many misunderstandings of Wittgenstein's work in the English language are not just problems of translation, though these exist, but more fundamental are the enormous differences between individual traditions *Weltanschauung* or world–view. But this works both ways. I think that Wittgenstein was moved to write philosophy exactly because he was acutely aware of the two different ways of approaching philosophy, the English one of his time and the European one in which he had been born and taught and studied. I suggest he did not agree with the philosophers around him at Cambridge, GE Moore and Bertrand Russell and others he met including Karl Popper. It was the comprehension that they saw problems in philosophy so differently from him that caused him to begin to attempt to formulate an approach that would give *rapprochement* to the two different perspectives. In this respect, I suggest that *The Philosophical Investigations* is like a Trojan horse stealthily smuggling into the constricted English world–view of 20th–century philosophy a deeper more enriching conception of philosophy, one that you on the continent may not have lost.

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