

Silence, Wonder, and Practice

Mystical and Pragmatic Dimensions of Wittgenstein's Philosophy

Abstracts

Agata Bielik-Robson *The Calm Bottom of the Sea: The Fullness of Silence in Wittgenstein's Tractatus*

In my presentation, I will offer a close reading of the theses 6.4 – 7: the last sequence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Yet, I am not going to limit myself to early Wittgenstein solely. The eponymous phrase – “the calm bottom of the sea” – derives from his late *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, where Wittgenstein states: “Religion is, as it were, the calm bottom of the sea at its deepest point, which remains calm however high the waves on the surface may be” (*Culture and Value*, 53e). By referring to this remark, I want to throw a bridge between early and late Wittgenstein's views on religious mysticism, which I find consistent despite all the changes in his philosophical method. I will thus argue that the silence of the concluding 7th thesis should be read in the light of the 1946 sentence that might have been inspired by Wittgenstein's reading of John of the Cross. In the writings of this 16th century Marrano mystic, the calm, which is to be discovered as the ground-bottom in the stormy “night of the soul,” is a mystical silence (*silentio*), yet not understood merely as a privation of words, but as a wordless fullness in which “things that cannot be put into words [...] make themselves manifest” (6.522). I will attempt to prove that this mystical image of the oscillation between nothingness and plenitude appears *avant la lettre* in the *Tractatus*, where silence takes on the mystical quality of the vibrant void.

James Conant *Compensatory vs. Non-Compensatory Conceptions of What 'Shows Itself' in the Tractatus and the 'Lecture on Ethics'*

Juliet Floyd *Susanne Langer and the Tractatus*

Author of what seems to be so far the largest-selling book in American speaking philosophy in the 20th century (*Philosophy in a New Key*), Susanne K. Langer is an important 20th century figure, not least for our understanding of Wittgenstein. Her commitment to the public value of the humanities and arts for democracy, as well as the broad scope of her work (touching on politics, logic, anthropology, neurobiology, and many other fields) is worth revisiting, especially in the contemporary media environment, in which popular culture and symbolic forms, as well as our forms of life, are driving forces.

Langer's 1926 dissertation “A Logical Analysis of Meaning” was the first American book-length document to offer a serious interpretation of the *Tractatus*'s picture theory. It was also the first to draw in a systematic discussion of Frege, Husserl, Russell and Whitehead. In light of the algebra of logic tradition she imbibed from Sheffer, Langer developed a specific objection to the “unsayable” that took Wittgenstein's book very seriously and also developed an original “symbolic” approach to “logical form” that she later deployed across art, language, and mind. The talk will canvas Langer's algebraical reading of the picture view of sentences, as well as her objections to the *Tractatus* on mysticism, which, at the same time, allowed her to develop

a pragmatic “philosophy of symbolic form” that in her later work flowers into a view of aesthetics and anthropology that was both influential, and lies at an interesting angle to some of Wittgenstein’s later work.

Martin Gustafsson *Beethoven and the Tailor: Wittgenstein on Aesthetic Appreciation and the Tremendous Things in Art*

In his lectures on aesthetics from 1938, Wittgenstein spends much time discussing the concept of aesthetic appreciation. Such appreciation, he says, involves a complicated family of cases, but at least in many of those cases appreciation is exhibited in judgments of correctness or incorrectness. Wittgenstein’s examples include a good tailor’s ability to judge the correct length of a pair of trousers, and a musician’s ability to judge how loud the bass should play in a certain passage. His emphasis on such cases is meant as an antidote to conceptions according to which the primary function of aesthetic judgment is to settle whether a certain quality, ‘beauty’, is present in an artwork. In the midst of this discussion, however, Wittgenstein suddenly remarks that when it comes to artworks such as a Beethoven symphony or a Gothic cathedral, appreciation and correctness are irrelevant: “One wouldn’t talk of appreciating the *tremendous* things in art”. My aim in this paper is to clarify what Wittgenstein might have meant by this puzzling remark. I will interpret it by relating his discussion to his early and later thought, as well as to other philosophers, including Kant and Adorno.

Urszula Idziak-Smoczyńska *“God be with me! Amen”. The hidden prayers of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

„To pray is to think about the meaning of life,” wrote Wittgenstein on 11 June 1916. These words arise amid the brutal realities of the Brusilov offensive. Only five days earlier, he had distinguished himself through exceptional bravery at a forward observation post – an act formally recognized after the war. A week later, during a retreat near Shipenitz, his unit was devastated by a Cossack attack.

Three weeks later, in the uncoded philosophical section of his notebook, Wittgenstein writes:

„To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life”

„To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter”

„To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning” (8.7.1916)

Yet, nowhere in the *Tractatus* does the word „prayer” appear. The remarks from these wartime days clearly converge upon thesis 6.43 and 6.521: the waxing or waning of the world as a whole, its gain or loss of meaning and the dissolution of the problems of life, which once solved leave no trace, no proposition capable of expressing their resolution.

Although praying is enumerated among the language games listed in paragraph 23 of *Philosophical Investigations*, it finds expression some 35 years earlier in Wittgenstein’s wartime notebooks, where it appears over 350 times. These written prayers must be interpreted within the horizon of the *Tractatus* and its understanding of language, on the verge of silence, within the straightening of written lines.

Adam Lipszyc *What Are We Really Silent About: Wittgenstein, Buñuel, and the Traumatic Core of Social Practice*

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, our forms of life, the nebulae of overlapping language games, rotate around propositions which “stand fast”, but only because they are defined as immobile by the totality of our linguistic and extralinguistic practices. We can articulate them, but such an articulation is rarely a meaningful move in our set of language games – and so we’d better remain silent about what is certain. Now, my main contention is that Wittgenstein’s take on the ‘axis propositions’ makes perfect sense, but it should be seen as radically displaced. The real axis of our form of life is constituted by propositions that are much less innocent than the ones Wittgenstein perceives as forming the axis. In fact, it is composed of truths which we are unable to face experiencing trauma, which – nevertheless – form the conditions of possibility of the very stability of our oh-so-non-traumatic social practices. When evoked (e.g. when we say something about the economy of the Global South being the very condition of possibility of the economy of Global North), they are either denied or perversely disavowed. As I will try to show, the director Luis Buñuel, in his surreal, but methodical analyses of our social practices, was a true master of showing the traumatizing core of our forms of life. For, as Wittgenstein taught us, what cannot be really said, can sometimes be shown.

Maxine McCuller *A “Grammatical Morphology” of Aspects: Aspect Perception as Imagination in the Philosophical Investigations*

My central aim is to propose *imagination* as a family resemblance feature of some aspect perception examples from the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI). Much like a game, [PI §66-67] one encounters deep conceptual difficulties when defining the boundaries and features of spect perception. Its scope is, by design, multifaceted, and rigid conceptualizations run the risk of oversimplifying a diverse phenomenon. One method that *celebrates* this diversity is *morphological*: the set of examples from the *Investigations* have “criss-crossing” [Ibid.] features – both differences and similarities – among them, the overlaps of which form family resemblance connections. I propose that some examples require a sense of *creative imagination* or *wonder* that is not captured in typical bistable images, such as the duck-rabbit [PI II §118] or Necker Cube [PI II §116]. The role of imagination can also, I argue, shed light on the felt significance of this “family” of examples.

I begin with Juliet Floyd’s intuition that some aspect perception examples have a more “open-ended range of significance” than others: for instance, a child engaging in a story or game, or a student solving a mathematical puzzle. [Floyd, 324] The imagination demanded by this family of examples is a two-step creative process, deeply inspired by Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* and *Philosophical Investigations*. To imagine that certain aspects are possible is to (1) grasp the application of a rule, and then (2) go beyond what is already given. Only after recognizing the limitations of our current modes of expression or methods of discovery can we move beyond the previous framework “...in a way which defies expectation or convention.” [Currie, 254]

In simple cases, this may require further articulating our current methods so they better suit our needs. For instance, one does not have to reach too far to find alternative aspects of Wittgenstein’s triangle, but to see it as “overturned,” our perspective must nevertheless shift in a way that is unexpected. [PI II §217]

In more complex cases, seeing an aspect may require the resolution of accumulated anomalies, which cannot be solved by the simple application of a concept or idea. Rather, defying convention

involves establishing a new set of principles or intuitions that are better aimed at resolving inconsistencies. Central to these examples is that for an open-ended aspect to “dawn” on an agent, she must make a “leap” from what is *given* to what is, by design, inexpressible in the language of our current paradigm.

Finally, active *imaginative* involvement in the creation of a new concept, fact, or connection, is precisely what gives the discovery of a new aspect *meaning*. What is important is not just the discovery itself, but rather the method behind the discovery, and the possibility that it could be done again. The use of imagination in these examples helps us to see that “...what is to be discerned is not an object or fact or concept, but a world, a human being, an expression or gesture, a total field of significance.” [Floyd, 324]

Alice Morelli *The normative and the familiar: Wittgenstein’s philosophy of habit*

This talk explores a key practical dimension of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy by examining the concept of practice in the context of the claim that “rule-following is a practice.” I argue that Wittgenstein’s notion of practice is deeply informed by the idea of *custom*, which underpins a broader Wittgensteinian philosophy of habit. The talk unfolds in two parts. First, I analyze Wittgenstein’s use of custom as an acquired pattern of behavior, focusing on the Rule-Following remarks. Second, I examine custom as a process or power—one through which individuals acquire, sustain, and transform patterns of conduct. In both perspectives, I emphasize that custom carries normative weight and possesses an aesthetic dimension, suggesting that it plays a key role in Wittgenstein’s pragmatic turn.

Marcin Poręba *Is Depth an Illusion? A Critical Examination of One Aspect of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Therapy*

Part of the therapy Wittgenstein wants us to undergo concerns our sense that some problems—philosophical ones included—are deep. He considers this feeling to be largely illusory and related to what he calls the *bewitchment of our reason by the means of our language*. I examine the sources of Wittgenstein’s mistrust of the idea of depth, analyze one of its manifestations in his philosophy of mathematics, and attempt to diagnose a fundamental misunderstanding in which it is rooted. In conclusion, I argue that depth, properly understood, is precisely what is at stake in our understanding of the world.

Vincent Vincke *Trisecting Angles and Wondering about Tautologies: Logical (Im)Possibilities and Miracles in Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics*

Konrad Wyszowski *The Lebensform of the Geist. Mystic boundaries of rational practices*

Among the other concepts present in later Wittgenstein’s works, the form of life (*Lebensform*) is one of the best suited (if not the best one) to reconstruct his socio-ontological standpoint. That is so, because the concept of the form of life does not denote only some language or thought phenomena, but all the natural and cultural conditions that determine (or at least influence) the way in which people living in the given form speak, think and act. Moreover, this concept at least suggests that there is some unity, which comprises all the said conditions and allows to present

some general outline of the process of determining (or influencing) by the conditions. In this respect Wittgensteinian form of life seems similar to the Hegelian spirit (*Geist*).

Nevertheless, the differences are striking: The form of life is contingent (i), particular (ii) and, as I will elaborate, naturalistic (iii). The spirit is necessary, at least *ex post* (i), universal (ii) and, as I will elaborate, historicist (iii).

I argue that the relation between the form of life and the spirit could be seen as a diachronic relation of the evolution of the human kind from the state of lack of self-consciousness and self-reference to the state of acquiring them. The later Wittgenstein's investigations are from this point of view – the project of thinking like the first humans, before the emergence of social self-consciousness, especially in the form of philosophy (the last shape of the absolute spirit). But this is not a project set up in vain, as it adds to the Hegelian view the naturalistic perspective, which challenges the Hegelian dictum: “die *Metamorphose* kommt nur dem Begriff als solchem zu” (Enzyklopädie, §249), and hence gives place also to the evolutionary thinkers: Lamarck, Schelling and Darwin. Wittgensteinian thought experiments concerning the most rudimentary features of human language, and Lamarckian, Schellingian, or Darwinian theories of evolution of the human species complement each other giving us the methods to deal with the problem lying in the mystic mists: the question of the emergence of the humanity.