

Wittgenstein: Meaning and Representation

What does he mean?

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There is a common misconception about the nature of the human mind. The view that humans have an internal identity that is independent of the world has become known as the *cartesian* model of the mind. Descartes said that he could doubt the existence of the external world and even be sceptical of the existence of his own body. For Descartes, the only fact he could be certain of, was the fact that he was doing the doubting. In order to doubt the existence of the world, he must exist as a thinking entity. Descartes mind could exist even in the absence of external influences. Descartes famous statement: "I think, therefore I am", was the result of such thinking. But was he correct? Wittgenstein offers us a different way of viewing human thought. For Wittgenstein, all aspects of the human mind are inescapably dependent upon the use of language. A cartesian view would maintain that thoughts and representation are possible without language, but Wittgenstein does not agree.

In this paper I will describe Wittgenstein's theories of consciousness and representation. One of the central goals for Wittgenstein was to account for *meaning*. What is it about human thought that makes the thought about something? Where is the meaning in an expression? How does a name, or picture pick out an object in the world? Wittgenstein offers two accounts of human consciousness. I will describe the early view, which was contained in his "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus". I will then explain his later thoughts. Although Wittgenstein changed his mind and refuted his early work, there is a central claim in all of Wittgenstein's work. This is the claim that language is essential for thought. On Wittgenstein's account, Descartes statement: "I think, therefore I am", seems to be wrong. Descartes should have said: "I have language, therefore I think, therefore I am."

1. The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein attempts to acquire an understanding of how language works. He believes that before we attempt to solve the

problems of philosophy, we must first understand our use of language, and how it relates to the world we observe. The central claim of the *Tractatus* seems to be that thoughts are pictures of how things are in the world. To talk of things that fall outside reality is to engage in meaningless discourse, because there is nothing for such thoughts to picture. Sense attaches to propositions only in that propositions picture existing facts about the world. Reality is defined as the totality of facts about the world.

How does Wittgenstein reach this position? One of the major themes in the *Tractatus* is Wittgenstein's attempt to reduce both the world and language to their basic components. He then attempts to show that the components of language have a one to one mapping on to the components of the world. On this account, the world is reduced to a collection of *facts*, which are comprised of *states of affairs (or atomic facts)*. States of affairs can be reduced to a collection of *objects*. Language is also reduced in this fashion and each level of the structure of language matches a level of structure in the world. So, language can be reduced to a collection of *propositions*, which match facts in the world. These propositions can be broken down into *elementary propositions (or atomic propositions)*, which correspond to states of affairs in the world. When we analyse elementary propositions, we find ourselves looking at the most basic level of language - *names (or objects of thought)*, and these match up to the simple objects of reality. This provides us with a view of language that mirrors all aspects of the real world. For Wittgenstein, on this early view, a proposition is a picture of reality. It is a model of the reality as we think it is.¹

This is because propositions are connected to what they are picturing. After making this claim, Wittgenstein anticipates an obvious objection. He says that at first glance, propositions (if printed on paper) do not seem to be pictures of the reality that they are supposed to represent. But, says Wittgenstein, musical notation does not appear to be a picture of a musical piece, and yet the musical symbolisation proves to be a picture of what it represents.²

The function of language, on this account, is to picture reality. Words gain their meaning by naming objects in the world. It makes no difference whether a proposition is written on paper, or contained in the mind. It still represents a fact of reality. The crucial point for Wittgenstein is that language is the only way by which we can picture the world. The importance of language is a view that Wittgenstein stresses through most of his work, although in his later work he challenged his earlier views and decided that language did not mirror reality. It is more likely the case that reality is dependent on our use of language. In the *tractatus*, Wittgenstein had stated that a name *means* the object that it designates. So, the object being pointed at literally *is* the meaning of its name.

*"The simple signs employed in propositions are called names"*³

*"The name means the object. The object is its meaning. ('A' is the same sign as 'A'.)"*⁴

There are problems with this view, and Wittgenstein became aware these problems while compiling his later works. It seems difficult to accept that the meaning of a word simply is the thing that the word points to in reality. For a start, there are many words that have more than one meaning. Furthermore, how do we account for words such as 'and', 'or', and 'when'. These words have a meaning, yet the meaning does not seem to exist as an object in reality.

2. The Later Wittgenstein

In his later writings, Wittgenstein began to refute his earlier views. He decided that the function of language was not to mirror reality. According to the later Wittgenstein, the meaning of words could not be found by looking for their association with particular objects. Instead, the meaning of words should be understood by the way in which they are used within their social context.⁵

In other words, the meaning of a word is nothing more than the role it plays in language. A word's meaning simply is the word's role in our grammatical calculus, and its use in language. In making this claim, Wittgenstein is refuting the idea that meaning can be found in the world or in any mental act. Wittgenstein reaches this conclusion when he compares the content of thought to other types of experience, such as the experience of pain. Pain experiences have a specific beginning, a certain duration and a precise end. On the other hand, the experience of intentional states, such as meaning, do not have these properties. Intentional states are not continuously present to consciousness. 'Meaning', 'understanding', and 'thinking a thought' are not processes or acts of any kind.⁶

To Make this point clear, Wittgenstein asks us to point to a piece of paper.

*"Point to a piece of paper. - And now point to its shape - now to its colour - now to its number (that sounds queer). - How did you do it? - You will say that you 'meant' a different thing each time you pointed. And if I ask how that is done, you will say you concentrated your attention on the colour, the shape, etc. But I ask again: how is that done?"*⁷

Here, Wittgenstein is asking us how we come to *mean* different aspects of the piece of paper each time we point at it. Our behaviour is the same every time we point, so our *meaning* the colour or the shape cannot be in the act of pointing. Furthermore, if we attempt to point to these different

aspects of the paper *mentally*, we have the same problem. We cannot point to the colour or shape of a piece of paper without using language. Pointing to certain aspects of a piece of paper requires some expression of what we are meaning each time we point, and this can only be achieved through the use of language. Meaning involves nothing more than using words. The same point seems to apply with all intention and representation. If I tell someone that I am thinking of Napoleon and they ask me "who do I *mean*?", I will respond by defining Napoleon further. I may say that I *meant* the person who won the battle of Austerlitz. This is done with language. My meaning 'Napoleon' consists not in an internal act or representation, but rather a collection of dispositions and background ideas that I have gained solely through the use of language. Whether I am in a state with a particular intentional content is not determined by anything that happens to me while I am in that state. What is important is what else is true of me while I am in that state, and the situation or context that I happen to be in. How I come to understand a thought is not a matter of consciousness or introspection, but a matter of how I make use of the thought.⁸

The point is this: No internal act, or event can suffice as an act of meaning. Even mental representation does not help. There will always be a problem of connecting the mental image with reality.

"Suppose that a picture does come before your mind when you hear the word "cube", say, the drawing of a cube. In what sense can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word "cube"? - Perhaps you say: "It's quite simple; - if that picture occurs to me and I point to a triangular prism for instance, and say it is a cube, then this use of the word doesn't fit the picture." - But doesn't it fit? I have purposely so chosen the example that it is quite easy to imagine a method of projection according to which the picture does fit after all ...

I see a picture; it represents an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick. - How? Might it not have looked just the same had he been sliding downhill in the position?"⁹

This paragraph is supposed to show that mental pictures, or pictures in general, do not contain meaning. Wittgenstein states that even God could not look inside our minds and see *who* we were speaking of. Meaning is not an act which accompanies a word or thought, rather, it is the use that a word gets put to in the context of a given situation. There is no internal representation and there is no internal act of meaning. The content of a thought exists only in the expression of the thought, and meaning is defined purely in terms of dispositions.

It is important to note that words do not all gain their meaning in the same way. A word gains its meaning through the way in which it is used and taught to others. Consider the word 'pain'. We do not learn the word 'pain' through any form of introspection, because if we did, everyone may

mean something different by it. The use of the word 'pain' is linked to public events and behaviour. When a child hurts herself and cries, adults teach the child words and sentences, thus teaching the child new pain behaviour.¹⁰

The child learns the concept 'pain' when she learns the language. Everything that humans think or intend gains its meaning from the use of words, which gain their meaning from the customs of the *collective human culture*. This is a crucial point for Wittgenstein. Language *must* be a public device and there can be no private languages that refer only to an individual's private sensations. This is because private sensations cannot be adequately categorised without external criteria. A person using their own private language would find themselves introducing new rules whenever needed, and for Wittgenstein, a game in which anything could be included as a rule is no longer a game. Such languages would be impossible to teach to others, and therefore would not be languages.

In stressing the importance of language, Wittgenstein shows that the common view - that we can represent the world without language - is difficult to maintain. We intuitively believe that before we learn language, we come into contact with a pre-existing reality that we can represent, and form beliefs about. We often see language as an acquired tool with which we describe the real world. We also find it plausible to think that we can form our own personal beliefs independently of reality. Wittgenstein would find it hard to accept that we could have thoughts, beliefs, and intentions prior to learning a language. Furthermore, I suspect that Wittgenstein would not accept that we could adequately represent the world to ourselves before acquiring language. For Wittgenstein, it is our language that shapes reality, not the other way around. Only by using a public language can we conceptualise and understand the world around us. Of course, Wittgenstein is not trying to say that the world does not exist independently of language. He is saying that our ability to represent and form beliefs about the world is only possible through the use of language.

But what about infants and non-human animals? Does Wittgenstein's account show that they cannot think, simply because they do not use a language? It would seem that if Wittgenstein is correct, infants and non-human animals could not feel pain or experience other sensations because they have not learned the concepts associated with those sensations. I do not know how Wittgenstein could answer this question. He would find it difficult to accept that there could be a mental life without language. He maintains that our mental life is in need of the outward criteria gained through language. Perhaps we could solve the problem by suggesting that infants and non-human animals possess a very simplistic language. This would enable them to conceptualise the world in a rudimentary way. However, Wittgenstein tells us that language must be public, and learned through the interactions other language users. If infants and non-human animals do possess a primitive language, it is hard-wired and not learned. I do not know how Wittgenstein can get out of this problem. Though, it

could be the case that Wittgenstein is not denying the existence of sensations like pain. Perhaps the sensation exists but can play no role on its own. Language is required to conceptualise the pain and to give it a role in conscious life.

The next question that arises is: how do humans ever come to learn a language in the first place? On Wittgenstein's account, language is a crucial part of our ability to conceptualise the world. Language shapes the world. But, how do we come to learn the concept of certain words like 'cup' or any other word. Before we learn how to use language, we must have some way of picking out objects and recognising other instances of those objects. If we do not have that ability, it would seem that it would be impossible for us to ever learn a language. We could never learn the meaning of the word 'cup' if we had no way of identifying that object and picking it out from other objects.¹¹

Furthermore, we have to question the ancestral beginnings of language. How could our ancestors have ever developed language without first having a way of conceptualising their environment? These are difficult questions and I am not sure how Wittgenstein can answer them. I do not think that Wittgenstein would accept that we could conceptualise the world without language. In the case of infants, it could be that as they come to learn language, their conceptualisation of the world becomes increasingly complex. From simple beginnings the world grows in sophistication as the use of words are learned. For ancient humans, a similar story may be true. Perhaps they accidentally came to utter a sound which meant something and could be understood by other humans as meaning that thing. Their world view would have been very simple, but as time passed language evolved. As language evolved, the human experience of the world changed and became more elaborate. We represent the world in more complex way than our ancestors. Our conscious life and view of the world has become rich, and full of complex meanings. Without language, the world would be empty and meaningless.

3. The Human Experience

Wittgenstein has shown us that language and intention are inseparable. We cannot represent the world without language, and we cannot mean anything without language. In his early work, Wittgenstein wanted to show that language mirrored reality. Each level of the world corresponded to a level in the structure of language. In his later work, however, Wittgenstein refuted this view. There is no reality over and above our conceptualisation of the world. It is impossible for us to step out of our language system and take an objective look at the world. The meaning of our thoughts and expressions do not exist independently of language. To question the meaning of a name, or expression, we must look at the role that the name, or expression plays in the language game.

I have attempted to point to some problems for Wittgenstein's theory. In particular, it seems difficult to accept that we cannot conceptualise the world without language. We would like to say that infants and non-human animals have some way of categorising objects in the world, but Wittgenstein does not think this is possible without language. Wittgenstein could answer this question by pointing to the way in which we learn language. It is a slow process, and perhaps the human view of the world becomes more complex as this learning process progresses.

Wittgenstein's work is very fragmentary and is difficult to follow. He doesn't supply us with standard argumentation and conclusions. He asks many questions and provides 'sign posts' that point us in the right direction. His views, while difficult to come to terms with, could be right. In order to understand what Wittgenstein is trying to tell us, we have to let go of some of our intuitions. If we can successfully re-examine what it is to be conscious creatures, we may find ourselves with a different view of our conscious life. We may look at the world and ourselves differently, and go where Wittgenstein wants to take us.

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Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus".

1 Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus", Paragraph 4.01.

2 Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus", Paragraph 4.011.

3 Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus", Paragraph 3.202.

4 Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus", Paragraph 3.203.

5 Trigg. R., Ideas of Human Nature, Blackwell Publishers, 1988, Page 151.

6 Budd. M., "Wittgenstein" in A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind, Edited by Guttenplan. S., Blackwell Publishers, 1994, Page 620.

7 Wittgenstein, "Philosophical Investigations", Paragraph 33.

8 Budd. M., "Wittgenstein" in A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind, Edited by Guttenplan. S., Blackwell Publishers, 1994, Page 621.

9 Wittgenstein (1953), Quoted in Rey. G., Contemporary Philosophy of Mind, Blackwell Publishers, 1997, Page 139.

10 Trigg. R., Ideas of Human Nature, Blackwell Publishers, 1988, Page 152.

11 Trigg. R., Ideas of Human Nature, Blackwell Publishers, 1988, Page 158.