

*“The limits of my language means the limits of my world”*

- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921)

### **The Wittgenstinian Project**

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* from 1921, Ludwig Wittgenstein is presenting what he meant to be his final and ultimate thesis on philosophy, and he thought it would be the ultimate thesis, to end all philosophy. It is a thesis about the relationship between the world, language and our thoughts. I find that the themes of the surrounding topics of the quote is within the philosophy of language. I see two equally possible, interpretations of this quote, that I find fruitful for discussion, one realist and one idealist. I will then point out two projects within Wittgenstein works, and discuss the interpretation problem in light of the projects, and next why I think the early Wittgenstein fails, at least in some ways,

The realist, must include in some way the premise “A perfect language has in it the potential to express all possible states of affairs”, in combination with the original quote, the quote will mean that “If I can’t speak of it, it can’t exist” because there are no phenomena that can’t be described with words. It is realist in the way that nothing gets hidden, behind veils of human experience or a hidden nature of the world, I can state all the states of affairs that exist.

The idealist interpretations is much more convoluted, it too relies on a premise, that the language evolves and develops itself independent of the world. This would mean that however strong (in describing the world) our language is, that is how I experience my world.

If there is a conclusion to the problem of which interpretation is the correct, then which? In answering this I will examine the various ways he coming at this quote from. I see three philosophical aspects of this quote and theme, a Kantian project, a Logicist project and an empiricist project; and I will examine each.

However, to shed some more light upon the quote, to make more sense of what I will discuss, I will attempt to make clear some of the surrounding text and the picture theory of language (and in some ways, mind).

The picture theory is quite simple, a proposition denotes and fully represents a picture of world. The picture is the way our minds represents the world. The proposition “There are many ducks in the pond” is meaningful because I can visually form a picture of it in my mind. This also works with propositions that represent fictions or states of affairs that have never or could not be the case, as with “There are a lion and a penguin having a tea party on the bottom of the ocean”, it is senseless, but not nonsense. It can make a picture and one can imagine it. This would lean in the realist interpretation, if it were not for what he considers nonsense. Of course the theory seems sufficient to describe the world, but that is not all that is the human condition, we have values and culture and a history. How can a moral proposition be visual in our mind? Moral propositions denote something that exist for us not to see<sup>1</sup> as empirical phenomena. If one can’t picture a moral proposition then how it be said, it is alike to asking: «How much is light and days?» it does not represent and does not make any sense.

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<sup>1</sup> I tried to make this sentence neutral regarding to meta-ethical questions and theories. To explain it a bit more, Kant would obviously agree that we can’t perceive categorical imperatives as they are non-natural phenomena, for him. But I think it should be at least plausible that Hume or any other naturalistic meta-ethics could be in agreement that (take Ayer and his emotivism) emotions is not perceivable in themselves, only in relations to humans.

This leads easily to the Kantian project. It is Kantian in the sense that Kant's project in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1778) was to find the limits of possible cognition. He answers this by finding the minimum requirements of cognition, and in how we process all incoming intuition. This is done through the twelve categories, if I see a heap of apples, then I see it as a heap because I process it through the category of Quantity. All sensing is done in similar ways, I cannot see the world without seeing it in quantities, or as causal relationships and so on. This is where Wittgenstein's project comes in as relevant. It is Kantian in the sense that Wittgenstein wants to find the limits of knowledge, language and thought too. The limits of language (what can be pictured) is the limits of the world. To paraphrase Kant in a Wittgensteinian way: The extent of our categories is the extent of cognition. The similarity is plausible.

But to know the limits of knowledge can only be done if one has a conception of what is on the "other side", for Kant this would be the speculative philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff, according to Kant they are speculating about the things-in-themselves, and Kant denies that knowledge of things-in-themselves is possible. For Wittgenstein the other side is what cannot be pictured, neither in language or thought, namely questions of religion, morals or aesthetics. This part of the Wittgensteinian project leans the interpretation towards an idealistic view, that language veils us and hides certain aspects of the world.

Logicism is a theory in the philosophy of mathematics. It is dealing with how math is founded, it is (at least partially) independent of the ontological question whether math exist. Logicians claim that all math really is, is logic. The best known example of this is the grand work of Bertrand Russell and Alfred Whitehead in the *Principia Mathematica* in where they (I have heard) needed 40 pages to prove that  $1+1=2$ . As Wittgenstein was a pupil of Russell, he inherited the lust to solidly found math in logic. He says in the *Tractatus*, that "Mathematics is a logical method"

Wittgenstein is under the first of the seven propositions "1.0 the world is all that is the case" presenting a relational ontology. "All that is the case is the states of affairs", this stands in opposition to substance ontology. What is, is not substance, it is relations between things and properties, for example "A cat lies on the floor" logically represented as Lcf. This is how the world is, the set of all logical states of affairs. All complex propositions can be analyzed into simpler ones, until one reach the Logician goals, the atomic facts, or axioms. Once found and understood, one can derive all meaningful statements about the world. However he understands that most of these statements is empirical, and hence should be left for science and our regular living in the world. He does however not give any examples of atomic facts, he does not do any of the linguistic analysis he deems necessary to finish philosophy. I think that the inherent Logician project of the *Tractatus* leans on a realist interpretation of the original quote, as the language is ordered in the same logical way as the world, this means that the world is knowable and understandable as we have the linguistic concepts to describe it.

I think however that both interpretations is in some way wrong, because I think that most of early Wittgenstein is wrong about language, I am much more inclined to his later works, specifically the *Philosophical Investigations*. In which language is practice, understanding a proposition is not understanding its logical form and how it represents visually in our minds. To understand a proposition one must know what context it is said in, and what its use is. The strict logical answer to: "Can you pass me the salt?" is to say yes or no, depending on whether

one can reach the salt at the table. But if one did that, the one who asked first “Do you not understand English?!” and in some way one don’t. It was always an inherent imperative: “pass me the salt” and the answer should be to give her/him the salt and say something like “of course.” Language is a set of practices, what Wittgenstein calls language games.

What then becomes of the interpretations and the other general theories they bring forth. The idealist interpretation, where language acts as the outer limit of what is meaningful to speak of, that language is in a way a regulating force on how we perceive the world. In a weak sense this seems to be true, in some east-Asian countries, such as China, Japan and Korea they don’t distinguish by word what we do when we say green or blue, so if we point to a green leaf and a blue flower and tells them to say theirs color, they would say a version of their respective language’s “Grue or Bleen”.

Taken to the extreme, one has the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that claims that if you does not have the word, you can’t have a thought of it. This line of thought can be traced to slave owners in America, whom construed and nourished Pidgin language, which used a hybrid of native and Anglophone vocabulary and a similar hybrid in grammar, but what they was very careful of was to not include words and senses that could lead to thoughts and actions of rebellion or uprising, no such word existed nor any word associated to freedom or liberty. Research has shown that a strong interpretation of this is probably false. A weaker version is probably correct, this is part of the reason why translating is difficult, the Norwegian word “koselig” can in some sense be translated to “cozy”, but not all “koselige” situations are cozy. English is in this particular sense poorer, it is worse situated to describe such situations because the language acts as a limit.

The realist says that language is sufficient to express all truths of the world, and the world means the wittgenstinian way, where only empirical phenomena are meaningful to talk of. I think this is wrong because I say thing that other understand about things Wittgenstein’s regards as nonsense, I discuss art, literature and general aesthetics. The world is better of “not passing over in silence, whereof one cannot speak”. If no one spoke about what is wrong or what one ought to do, then how could one know? We have moral intuitions for a reason, and that might be because we need them, at least, psychologically to operate rationally and in agreement with our nature as social animals

In combination with the language game theory: morals and aesthetics becomes lifeforms, ways to act and react to the world, to live a life form is to understand its language games, and to understand the language games one must understand the language one uses in it.

It is in the Logicist heritage that makes Wittgenstein miss the point in the *Tractatus*, where the point is us and our world. The Logicist-Wittgenstinian claim and its accompanying theory, that language can be reduced to logic, can’t explain the complexity and variety of all the natural languages nor the complexity of human interaction. Our being in the world is a being of social interaction, where languages are used to live. The logical picture theory of language sees that *one* of the interactions is sharing information and develops a theory where it becomes the sole task of language