

“*The limits of my language means the limits of my world*” Ludwig Wittgenstein: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 5.6

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In this essay, I will first discuss how we might interpret the statement before I will try to examine, in light of modern science, whether there is any truth to it.

What does Wittgenstein mean by “the limits of my world”? If he wrote something in the lines of “the limits of my knowledge of the world” the statement would perhaps be easier to accept. But instead Wittgenstein writes the limits of *my world*, as such. Consequently, can Wittgensteins statement, when pushed to extremes, be understood such that if I cannot put a phenomenon into words, it does not exist?

To answer this question, it is interesting to note the wording. Wittgenstein writes *my world*, not *the world*, and this might be a relevant difference. Here, one can easily draw parallels to Kant’s distinction between the world as it appears to me and the world in itself, which is inaccessible to me. Yet there is a difference; according to Kant, my knowledge of the world in itself is limited by the way in which I organize information and experience, one could perhaps say by the structure of my mind. Consequently, I can talk about the world in itself, although it might be meaningless, seeing as I can’t know anything about it. With Wittgenstein, it is more complicated. It is the language that sets the limits, and so not only is it meaningless to speak of a world-in-itself as Kant does, it is in fact impossible. Thus, in the light of Wittgenstein’s statement, it seems to me as if the whole idea of a distinction between *my world* and *the world* loses meaning. And then I believe one could say that if the limits of my language means the limits of my world, and my language permits me from putting a phenomenon into words that the phenomenon does not, in fact, exist in any meaningful way.

One need not take the argument so far either. Even if a phenomenon one cannot put into words only ceases to exist (or perhaps more precisely: never existed) in a personal world (whatever that is), that too is problematic. One can easily imagine individuals who have no language, for instance small children. One could point out that their understanding of the world is limited, but that is not the same as saying they have no world at all. As I have interpreted Wittgenstein’s quote up until now, that would be the conclusion. And yet I find it hard to accept that they exist as something more than objects in other people’s worlds.

I find both these conclusions quite outrageous. And the first argument is also self-contradictory. I did, after all, write of one such world-in-itself, whether it truly exists or not. And thus it seems to me that the only sensible way to interpret “limits of my world” is something in the lines of “limits of my understanding/knowledge of the world”.

The quote is taken from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It is part of Wittgenstein’s early works, in which he claims that every word in a sentence refers to an object in the world, and the structure of the sentence mirrors the “structure” of the world. If one agrees with this, it is natural to agree as well with the claim that the limits of one’s language is indeed the limits of one’s world. However, as seen above, that is problematic.

There are also other problems one might ask, such as: does truly every imaginable concept have a corresponding word? And even so, does every word have an essence? As we know, Wittgenstein leaves his former theory of language behind and makes an entirely new one that contradicts the first. In this theory, Wittgenstein stresses the lack of an essence (instead he talks of family resemblance) and the importance of context.

The quote is, as aforementioned, from his early work, but even though his later work openly contradicts his early, I still believe one can interpret the quote in light of his later work. Since according to Wittgenstein there is not (as I recall) a specific philosophical context for use of language, any philosophical statement is ambiguous at best. But in the context of ordinary conversation, I would still understand “my world” as above: “my knowledge/understanding of the world”.

However, even concluding regarding the meaning of the statement, it still remains to discuss whether there is any truth to it. To do that, I will try to discuss the statement in light of something a little more tangible.

In the last century, science has actually led to the limits of our world, or at least the limits of our understanding of it (at least temporarily), through the theory of quantum mechanics. In 1927, Werner Heisenberg formulated the uncertainty principle that states one cannot precisely determine a particle’s position and velocity at the same time (there are also other complimentary sizes, such as energy and time).

Of course, there are multiple questions to be asked. Can science ever give us true knowledge about the world, for instance? However, I will not discuss these questions here, but use as a starting point that seeing as it is impossible to deny that science has led to actual changes in form of technology, there must be *some* truth to what it proclaims, even if we can never be entirely certain.

The uncertainty principle in itself can be interpreted in different ways, and whether the consequences are of epistemological or ontological character can, and has, be discussed. Can we never *obtain* precise knowledge of both position and velocity, or is it rather that there *is* no precise knowledge to obtain? The first would leave us unable to predict future movement, whereas the latter would mean that the universe in itself is indeterministic. Or is there a third option?

Perhaps the problem is not exactly that one cannot precisely determine both a particle's position and velocity at the same time, thus leaving us unable to predict future movement. Perhaps the problem is rather that concepts like position and velocity (perhaps even particle?) when taken out of the context of the macroscopic world and put into a context where they do not naturally belong, simply makes no sense. Both Niels Bohr and Stephen Hawking (in *A Brief History of Time*) has suggested that something in the lines of this might be the case. And if it is the case, it is eerily similar to Wittgenstein's statement and philosophy in general; both in his attack of essentialism and stressing of the importance of context in his later works, and in the quote from *Tractatus*.

According to Kant's philosophy, we would still not be able to obtain more knowledge, because our mind doesn't permit us to comprehend that which does not appear in a given place at a given time (Quantum theory also challenges other Kantian propositions, but that is a topic for another time). But Wittgenstein's philosophy just might. Because while the structures of the mind cannot change, it is at least possible that our language can. And moreover, we might perhaps unravel the tangle of problems by paying more attention to our use of concepts and language in new situations.

And thus it may in fact seem like our only chance to possibly increase our understanding and extend the limits of our world, is to push the limits of our language.