Wittgenstein’s Therapeutic Aim Reconsidered

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Abstract: I argue that Wittgenstein’s grammatical method is a form of therapy intended to help us to escape the evasions of philosophical theory and to use our language honestly. Real solutions to the problems that trouble us in life are only possible if we can think about them clearly and truthfully.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Cavell, therapy, confession, grammar.

Therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein have been around at least since Stanley Cavell’s essay, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” originally published in 1958. Since that time, and especially over the last two decades, therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy have proliferated and might even dominate scholarly opinion. However, no clear consensus has emerged as to exactly how the metaphor is to be applied. In The Claim of Reason (1979), Cavell argues that we yearn to be part of a community despite the skeptical worry that every mind and every meaning is ultimately an isolated ego, and he reads into Wittgenstein the project of overcoming this anxiety. Wittgenstein’s grammatical studies of the criteria that justify the use of an expression are “claims to community” (p. 20), says Cavell. In Philosophy as Therapy, James Peterman says flatly of Cavell’s reading “I do not find textual evidence for this claim” (p. 53).
Wittgenstein’s real aim is to illuminate the ideal form of human life, Peterman argues, and his therapy is “centrally concerned with clarifying the goods embedded in the human form of life to determine how best to realize those goods…” (p. 115). Most recent interpretations, such as one developed by Phil Hutchinson, favor the much narrower claim that Wittgenstein’s therapy is intended to treat “mental disturbances brought about by struggling with philosophical problems” (p. 694). Hutchinson suggests that philosophical problems are the sickly, painful symptoms of being caught in the grip of a false picture, and that Wittgenstein’s aim is to liberate us to adopt a new, healthier perspective:

The philosophical therapist enters into dialogue with her interlocutor and seeks to persuade him, through the use of examples, that there are other ways to see things (for example, other ways to see “meaning”). If our interlocutor freely accepts that there are other ways to see things, then the lure and thus the thought-constraining grip of the picture are dissolved. The picture that had initially led one to the philosophical problem does so no longer. Then, and only then, has the philosophical therapist provided a presentation that is perspicuous, and it is so, potentially, on this occasion only (702).

Notice that Hutchinson’s interpretation reduces philosophical problems to mere mistakes, whereas Cavell and Peterman recognize that – at least deep down – philosophical problems express deep existential worries. At first sight, Hutchinson’s dismissive view of philosophical problems seems justified by Wittgenstein’s famously provocative claim that his method of grammatical study has the power to dissolve philosophical problems. The point of grammatical study is to achieve “complete clarity,” he writes, in which case “philosophical problems should completely disappear” (PI, §133).

However, we ought not jump to the conclusion that philosophical problems are simply annoying mistakes simply
because we can begin to clear them up by studying the grammar of problematic terms and expressions. Elsewhere, Wittgenstein makes it clear that “philosophical problems … get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life...” (RFM ii, §23), and changing one’s thought and mode of life is a profoundly slow and difficult process – a slow and difficult process that Wittgenstein aims to go through himself through the therapeutic activity of writing. This is a point that Cavell also makes, and I want to start by reviewing his excellent insights so that I might then build on them in the latter half of my essay. I hope to show that Wittgenstein’s method is meant to help us with a wider variety of problems than those skeptical worries on which Cavell focuses.

In “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” Cavell argues that Wittgenstein’s peculiar style is explained by his unusual purpose, which was to gain self-knowledge by examining his own thoughts, and by the fact that the established philosophical forms of essay and dissertation were not up to the task (Cavell, 1976a, pp. 70). Wittgenstein recognized in himself – and, apparently, in other philosophers – a deeply rooted tendency to meet hard problems with facile answers. Writing was thus an activity of confession and self-revelation intended to expose those false answers and thereby to put the author back on course to find authentic solutions to his problems. Like Freud’s therapy, says Cavell, Wittgenstein’s writing was an activity intended to protect the writer against “understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change.” Cavell continues:

Both of them [Freud and Wittgenstein] are intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of self-impositions which we have not assessed (§108), or fantasies (“pictures”) which we cannot escape (§115). In both, such misfortune is betrayed in the incongruence between what is said and what is meant or expressed; for both, the self is
concealed in assertion and action and revealed in temptation and wish. (p. 72)

By reconnecting “what is said and what is meant” – that is, by helping us speak honestly about the matters that trouble us – Freud and Wittgenstein help us avoid phony solutions to our problems so the we might go on to find some that are real. Our words must remain grounded in the reality of our lives if they are to help us achieve the sort of real understanding that is accompanied by deep change, but all too often, philosophy descends into the sort of disconnected word-play that is the favored means by which intellectuals escape the complexities and difficulties of reality, especially the reality of their own inner lives. Wittgenstein famously says that “philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” (PI, §38) and that his own method is intended to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI, §116). When we take language on holiday, we cannot use it to speak or to think honestly about ourselves or our problems. Wittgenstein’s seemingly obsessive work on grammar was fundamentally an act to save himself from the neurotic distractions and bad faith of misguided philosophy.

The idea that a lot of philosophizing is only so much avoidance behavior isn’t new or unique to Wittgenstein. Although he wrote about them in slightly different terms, Freud effectively invented the modern concepts of rationalization and intellectualization (Zepf, 2011), a fact that might help explain why Wittgenstein once described himself as a “disciple of Freud” (LC, p. 41). The psychoanalyst Rollo May says that “the particular form of resistance generally used by intellectuals in psychotherapy is to make an abstract or a logical principle out of the problem,” a path that inevitably leads to suffering. “The more a person lacks self-awareness,” says May, “the more he is pray to anxiety and irrational anger and resentment.” (May, 1981, pp. 190-91). Like Freud, Wittgenstein recognizes that the real enemy of a peaceful
mind is the self-deception we use to bury the problems that trouble us. “Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving yourself,” Wittgenstein says flatly in *Culture and Value* (p. 39), and one function of his philosophy was clearly confession, and long exercise in trying to avoid bad faith and the suffering it brings. “Thoughts at peace,” Wittgenstein writes. “That is the goal someone who philosophizes longs for” (CV, p. 58). To find peace, it will not do to simply dismiss philosophical questions as mistakes. To find peace, we must escape the distractions of ill-conceived philosophy and face the issues that brought those questions to light.

Wittgenstein’s grammatical investigations are nothing less than an effort to study the problems of life that give rise to philosophical musings in situ, so to speak, they are a hunt for the things we can rightly say about these problematic aspects of life before we get lost in theory. “The profoundest as well as the most superficial questions can be understood only when they have been placed in their natural environment,” says Cavell (1976a, p. 41). When we read philosophy that loses sight of the puzzling features of our experience that brought our philosophical questions to life, Cavell continues, we may “feel instead of thoughtful advice we have been handed a form letter” (p. 41). This is what happens when we “take language on holiday.”

Cavell focuses on skepticism in its many guises, and he constantly reads into Wittgenstein an acknowledgment of the valid existential worries that underlie the skeptic’s philosophical questions and theories. Cavell says of the skeptic worried about the problem of other minds, for example, that he is really worried about the extent and the conditions of his moral responsibility to respond to the needs of others (Cavell, 1981b). I see Wittgenstein’s confessional method as applicable to a far wider range of philosophical problems that arise for most of us in life. Despite that Wittgenstein wrote very little about the concept of love, it strikes me as a good one to illustrate his therapeutic method.
The philosophical question, “What is love?,” appeals to just about everyone at some point in life, but especially at moments when something has gone awry: when you are falling in love but doubt your choice, when you are falling out of love and suffering regret, when events compel you to admit that your friendships are unfulfilling, and so on. In passages such as these, we want clear answers to personal questions: Is this love, or am I fooling myself? Wittgenstein himself documented a moment like this in a 1937 entry in the Nachlass:

Think of my former love, or infatuation, in Marguerite and my love for Francis Skinner. It is a bad sign for me that my feelings for Marguerite could cool so completely! Of course, there is a difference here; but my heart is cold. May I be forgiven … may it be possible for me to be sincere and loving (1 Dec, 1937, 120:26v ).

Wittgenstein now acknowledges his former self-deception, a lack of authenticity that is shameful to him and which raises, in his mind, the worry that he may not be someone who is able to love at all. In such a mood, a man might ask, “What is love?” and hope to answer in some way that would assuage his guilt or to at least give him clear answers about his past feelings and his future prospects. Notice that the question is nearly identical to the one Wittgenstein famously quotes in PI §89, “What is time?” That question lures Augustine into the “darkness” of metaphysical speculation, according to Wittgenstein, a darkness that also threatens to swallow the poor wretch who would try to sort out his love life by coming up with a theory of love’s essential nature to serve as a measuring stick.

To face the problems in our lives that brought questions about the nature of love into being, we must continue to use the word “love” naturally, we must continue speaking about our lives if we are to say anything helpful. Our everyday words and our lives are inevitably far more complicated than our theories would suggest. Compare Wittgenstein’s well-known comment about the grammar of the word “thinking”: “‘Thinking’, a widely ramified concept. A concept that comprises many manifestations of life. The phenomena of thinking are widely scattered” he writes (PI, §111). “And the naïve idea that one forms of it does not correspond to reality at all. We expect a smooth contour and what we get to see is ragged. Here it might really be said that we have constructed a false picture” (PI, §112). In contrast to the false picture, the real concept “seems like something muddied … In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by side-roads” (PI, §426). When we are puzzled about the nature of thought or love, we must avoid the temptation to speculate and instead turn to the facts that brought our questions into being in the first place. “Grief describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life” (PI ii, p. 174), says Wittgenstein, a statement at least equally true about love. People love spouses they fight with and cousins they haven’t seen in years. For happy newlyweds, “love” and “lust” needn’t be sorted out, but an old couple might need to make a clearer distinction. And so on. You can’t possibly understand love if you take the word “love” on a holiday somewhere that makes it look neat and tidy. You’ll almost inevitably come back from your journey and insist that all these cases must have something in common, or you might insist that there are really four kinds of love, or six, or some other nonsense. “Don’t say: ‘There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘[love]’” (PI, §66) but instead look and see the real patterns.

If you want to figure out whether or not you love someone,
the only honest method takes you headlong into the messy, painful domains that brought your question to mind in the first place. You must look at the thoughts the course through your head, at your dreams, at your choices, at your fears, at your mood. Wittgenstein hints at what an honest investigation of love would look like when begins to limn a real case of introspection:

It makes sense to ask: „Do I really love her, or am I only pretending to myself?“ and the process of introspection is the calling up of memories; of imagined possible situations, and of the feelings that one would have if.... (PI, §587).

The list of mental exercises that the troubled lover might try is very long indeed. One could spend months or years in psychotherapy trying to reach an honest answer, and most of us have sat through many hours of conversations with friends in romantic limbo. To sort out your questions about love, there is no serviceable path that is short, certain, or easy. It is the nature of the problem that it can only be addressed by following many threads, seeing many sides, and facing the hard reality that many questions end in uncertainty. But notice that the unhappy lover’s questions are likely to fade from his mind as he puts his love life in order. If he succeeds, the nature of love won’t be revealed to him through theory but through the reality of his life. The troubled lover will find peace when she lives in a manner that agrees with her thoughts and feelings, and she can only achieve that if she is honest with herself. “The solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic disappear” (CV, p. 31), Wittgenstein writes elsewhere. Someone who asks the philosophical question “What is love?” may well have deep personal needs she hopes to meet, but the question invites a sort of philosophical speculation that won’t help much, and one that will likely be a distraction and a hindrance.

Wittgenstein didn’t spend much time pondering the nature of love, but his copious writings on the philosophy of psychology
repeatedly cover concepts that we know were relevant to problematic dimensions of his life: grief, hope, shame, joy, sorry, happiness, vanity, and more. Witness a few of Wittgenstein’s remarks about the challenge of knowing one’s own motives. “Understanding oneself properly is difficult,” he writes, “because an action to which one might be prompted by good, generous motives is something one may also be doing out of cowardice or indifference” (CV, p. 48). Did you buy your lover dinner to show support while he was writing his book? Or was it with the hope of guaranteeing his affection? Or was it because you wanted to lure him away from his work so you wouldn’t have to eat alone? In the following passage from The Big Typescript, Wittgenstein reminds us of the messy reality of trying to get clear about your own motives in a moment such as this:

“How do you know that you did it from this motive?”
– “I remember having done it for that reason.”
– “What are you remembering? – Did you say that to yourself then; or do you remember the mood you were in; or that you had trouble suppressing an expression of your feeling?” These things will show what having done it from this motive consisted in.

And if perhaps you suppressed an expression of your feeling only with difficulty – how did you do that? Did you at that time utter the expression softly to yourself? etc., etc.

A motive is not a cause “seen from within”! Here the simile of “inside and outside” is totally misleading – as it so often is. – It is taken from the idea of the soul (of a living being) in one’s head (imagined as a hollow space) (TS, pp. 401-02).

Our inner lives are as “muddy” and filled with “detours” as the concepts we use to describe them, and getting to the bottom of things is inevitably a hard slog.

Notice that the preceding remark closes with a comment about the inner/outer picture, which is one of the central targets
of Wittgenstein’s remarks on psychology and, indeed, of his later philosophy. Of all the philosophical mistakes that Wittgenstein hopes to unearth and to undo, the tacit assumption that the mind is an interior realm of processes is clearly one of the most difficult and one of the most important. It is not only Descartes who would be undermined by Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology, so too would much of cognitive science, psychology, linguistics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Yet in the passage cited, Wittgenstein is worried about how the inner/outer picture scuttles the effort to know one’s own motives. The fiction that the mind is something interior and private is “totally misleading,” he says, and a hindrance to confession. Psychological theories that treat motives as interior processes, as forms of psychical energy and the like, only blind us to the reality that the concept of motive picks out terrifically complex patterns in the weave of life. “Don’t see it as simply a matter of course that man has motives, (or) says things because of motives,” Wittgenstein writes elsewhere, “These phenomena constitute the mental (spiritual) life of man.”63 The phenomena of motive and confession are terrifically complicated, subtle and profoundly important:

But is it not peculiar that there is such a thing as this reaction, this confession of intention? Is it not an extremely remarkable instrument of language? What is really remarkable about it? Well--it is difficult to imagine how a human being learns this use of words. It is so very subtle (Z, §39).

Were an intention just a particular class of private mental phenomena, then “confessing an intention” would really be more or less the same thing as reporting an observation; “I saw this

thing inside myself,” or “I saw this thing inside myself and lied to you about it in the past.” But confessing an intention is nothing like that. If you examine yourself and realize that you invited your lover to dinner in an effort to guarantee her love, you might feel the need to confess your selfish intention. Understanding the messiness of what intentions are, which one must do in order to understand the meaning of a confession, is a complicated but subtle thing to do. You can only see the remarkable pattern of “confessing a motive” if you speak as a participant, as one who uses words like “confess” and “motive” with their everyday meanings. It takes a delicate understanding to appreciate the fact that “a false confession is not necessarily deception” (RPPii, §692), for example, to see that there are layers of the self to peel, to examine, to acknowledge. Elsewhere, Wittgenstein reminds us that:

The criteria for the ‘truthful’ confession that I thought such-and-such are not the criteria for the description of a past process. And the importance of the truthful confession does not reside in its rendering some process correctly and certainly. It resides rather in the special indications of subjective truth and in the special consequences of the truthful confession. (LWi, §897)

To master the concept of a “truthful confession” requires someone to grasp the nuances of human life and gesture, those “special indications of subjective truth” that are part of the phenomena of confessing. Someone who is puzzled about the confessions of a president, a lover, or herself is almost certainly puzzled about those gestures, or about some “special consequences” of confession, and a facile definition or a theory of the hidden mental accompaniments of honest confession will only burry those questions deeper.

When we fall prey to the temptation of taking the word “intention” on holiday, when we imagine that it names some
specific mental phenomenon or process in the private, inner realm of the mind, we remove ourselves from life and forfeit the chance to understand ourselves. When it comes to understanding our motives, our grief, our love, the picture of the mind as an interior realm of observable facts does enormous harm. Wittgenstein writes:

To say that thinking is an activity of mind, as writing an activity of the hand, is a travesty of truth. (Love in the heart. Head and heart as places in the soul.) (Nachlass, 114:91-92 5 Jun, 1932)\footnote{\textit{Zu sagen: Denken sei eine Tätigkeit des Geistes, wie Schreiben eine Tätigkeit der Hand, ist eine Travestie der Wahrheit.} \textit{(Die Liebe im Herzen. Kopf und Herz als Örtlichkeiten der Seele.)} (114:91-92 5 Jun, 1932)}

Thinking and love are not interior processes gazed upon with an inner eye. They are complex and subtle dimensions of life, and we can only get to know our own thoughts and our own experiences of love if we acknowledge their real natures. “Thinking” is a “widely ramified concept” (RPPii, §218), Wittgenstein says elsewhere, it is a concept that deals with many complex and subtle dimensions of life.

Questions about the nature of love and the nature of intention are gripping because they deal with such complicated and important features of human life, but those questions are most gripping when something is amiss, such as when our love is faltering. In such moments as these, philosophical theories (and psychological theories) nearly always impede rather than aid in our understanding. Wittgenstein writes:

The solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic disappear. … But don‘t we have the feeling that someone who doesn‘t see a problem there is blind to something important, indeed to what is most important of all? Wouldn‘t I like to say he is living aimlessly…Or shouldn‘t I say: someone who lives rightly does
not experience the problem as sorrow, hence not after all as a problem, but rather as joy, that is so to speak as a bright halo round his life, not a murky background. (CV, p. 31)

Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing is an exercise in confession, an attempt to avoid the evasions of conventional philosophy, to face life squarely on, and to live in a manner that transforms puzzles about love and intention into a joy. “A confession has to be part of one’s new life” (CV, p. 16), says Wittgenstein elsewhere, it must be part of a change – hopefully towards a life of joy. Confession is a therapeutic act that Wittgenstein repeats over and over again in the course of his wide-ranging grammatical studies. His copious, obsessive writing is a document of his tortured efforts to know his thoughts and his heart truly, and recreate himself and his outlook in the form of a happy man.

Reference:
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