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WES SHARROCK

## Is there only 'what can be said'?

Wittgenstein's philosophy has had a mixed response in the social sciences. There is some enthusiasm for it, there are certain points – such as the topic of rule following – where Wittgenstein's philosophy is regularly (though often dubiously) invoked and there are numerous rejections of some or all of Wittgenstein's ideas. Meanwhile, debates about the rationality and intelligibility of alternative schemes of thought whose current state – going back to the 1960's – was initiated and has been sustained by connections to Wittgenstein rumble on.

Throughout the time in which Wittgenstein's thought has been a relevant but somewhat peripheral concern for the social sciences there has been – I think it is fair to say – a growing conviction that social science, certainly sociology, is an essentially critical enterprise. Its purpose, that is, ought to be finding fault with existing social affairs as a basis for transforming social relations so as to emancipate or empower the inhabitants of society, though there may be social conditions or sociological conceptions that would frustrate this objective.

Wittgenstein's thought is regularly identified as one potential source of frustration, involving conceptions that rule out the possibility of improving society altogether – for example, excluding the possibility of social improvement on the basis of relativism or ruling out the possibility that academic critics of society, such as sociologists and philosophers, can play the intellectually revisionist role – that of challenging the foundational conception underpinning society – that they envisage for themselves. Relativism can exclude the idea of improving society by

denying that one society can be better than another – if any society is as good (or as bad) as any other, then there is no prospect of a subsequent state of a society being an improvement on, rather than merely different to, its earlier one. Not entirely distinct from relativism, but involving a different trajectory of arguments, there is the idea that different societies are closed against each other in terms of intelligibility. If the academic critics are conceived as placing themselves outside the society by adopting and operating in specialist disciplinary terms which contrast with those in use within the society, then the argument that only those who are ‘inside’ the society can possibly find its affairs intelligible, then the would-be academic critics would be incapable of understanding – and therefore of tellingly criticising – the very affairs they aim to fault<sup>1</sup>.

Wittgenstein is often supposed to be a source of such frustrations. He is sometimes thought to be a conservative in a personal sense, for example, servile to authority, with his personal convictions percolating through to his philosophical conceptions. His philosophical thought may not espouse political doctrines as such, but may be seen as comprised of ideas which, if followed through, lead to the conclusions that there is no possibility of society changing or, more accurately, of being deliberately and effectively changed. Wittgenstein says that ‘philosophy leaves everything as it is’, which seems a plain enough statement against any interventionist role for philosophy – at least one constructed in his terms. It might also, however, express the view that it is in the nature of philosophy generally leave everything as it is, a sentiment possibly shared with Marx – the Marx, that is, who thought philosophy was useless and should be abandoned in favour of effective revolutionary activity, not a Marx who thought that the point was to change philosophy in an interventionist direction.

I’m not intending to defend Wittgenstein against the criticisms of his conservatism so much as to suggest that such conceptions arise because the connection of Wittgenstein’s thoughts to his conception of the nature of philosophy – or to his method(s) of philosophising – is underplayed. Often Wittgenstein’s

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1. ‘Outside’ can be understood in at least two different ways: as a matter of belonging to some a different society or as one of adopting a frame of reference (for scientific or academic purposes) which excludes commitment to the terms on which social affairs are indigenously conducted.

own philosophy could carry the implications ascribed to it only if it violated some of Wittgenstein's own prescriptions for philosophical practice. I am well aware that the exact nature of his thought about philosophy remains a matter of dispute amongst the most serious and dedicated of Wittgenstein scholars, and also that the attempt to align oneself amongst the diverse sides in the dispute is a large task needing far more space than is available here. It is certainly one defensible line of argument that Wittgenstein conceived of philosophy's 'problems' as largely if not entirely spurious. They were anything but *obviously* spurious, appearing as authentic, highly demanding and profound but which, subjected to pressing demands for specification would be persistently elusive. Philosophy, as Wittgenstein understood his own approach, was an activity only, one engaged solely in the clarification of thoughts, conducted prevent the formation of further philosophical 'problems'. Wittgenstein's own kind of philosophy would produce no doctrines, elaborate no philosophical theories, because attempting to develop these missed the fact that there was something seriously wrong with the supposed problems. Subjected to (often strenuous) clarification these questions/problems go away, they disintegrate in the attempt to nail them down.

This Wittgenstein is mirrored in the one who is, if he *is* accepted as being genuinely opposed to theorising in philosophy, is thereby seen as irrationally opposed to science, explanation and theorising, and is also insensitive to his own (perhaps unavoidable) doctrinaire tendencies. Wittgenstein may say he does not theorise, but that does not mean that he abstains from theorising. Whether these attributions are fair, and, if fair, invalidate his conception of philosophy are, again, issues that can't be addressed here. The other line – that Wittgenstein's philosophy considers in the application of (a) method(s) rather than in the generation of doctrines about problematic philosophical phenomena – is taken. On this, the bottom line is Wittgenstein's insistence that philosophy is different from science, though not thereby *opposed* to it<sup>2</sup>. A difference between natural science and philosophy is that the former does involve explanation, theorising and the gathering of empirical knowledge whilst the latter doesn't. Given this, however,

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2. It is worth noting that by 'science' Wittgenstein often does not intend the natural sciences but empirical information generally. Philosophical 'problems' do not involve decisive information, to there is nothing to be explained, theorised or investigated.

natural science does not require special mention in philosophy, it does certainly not provide the point of reference from which philosophy need begin, any more than do law, religion, politics, poetry or tennis. Philosophy can contemplate matters from the natural sciences just as it can those from law, religion, politics, poetry and ordinary, everyday understandings, but it is no closer to the sciences than it is to any of those others.<sup>3</sup>

Which brings us to the central part of this paper, which is the place of ‘ordinary language’ in Wittgenstein-style deliberations where, it seems to some, Wittgenstein is inclined to invidiously counter-pose ‘ordinary language’ (or the common-sense convictions that ordinary language is presumed to incorporate – perhaps ‘express’ might be less committal about the relation between the language and the convictions) against the language of science and the theoretical schemes incorporated into it. Did Wittgenstein really endorse common sense convictions to the extent of considering them incorrigible, ensuring on the current understanding, that they could not be revised in light of scientific findings? The short answer is: no. A slightly longer one: Wittgenstein thought philosophy paid insufficient attention to the ordinary use of words of all kinds, common sense *and* scientific, mathematical *and* religious. His concern with words from the ordinary language followed the lead of prior philosophers in singling out some of these for philosophical treatment, rather than Wittgenstein initially allowing these terms in the philosophical door. ‘Rules’, ‘thoughts’, ‘intention’, ‘belief’, ‘word’, ‘language’, ‘truth’, ‘reality’, ‘know’, and ‘certainty’ are all words that have loomed large within philosophy but which originated in the ‘ordinary language’, whilst ones such as ‘equation’, ‘proof’, ‘law’ come from mathematics and science, rather than originating within philosophy. Wittgenstein’s abiding thought was that philosophers didn’t pay enough *attention* to the ordinary uses or words from non-philosophical sources before attempting to deploy these to meet

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3. Of course, the perennial question in sociology is of the extent to which sociology is – or can be – like the natural sciences and of what it have to do to be like them (or one of them – biology seems to be the currently favoured model for sociology to follow). These questions around this are largely philosophical ones – they are not scientific, empirical, ones – and as such likely to be nests of confusion – for a very recent display of sociology’s confusion over whether it is a natural science and what it might need to do to be more like one, see Martin, 2016.

the needs of philosophy. Rather than disputing the rights of specialists to develop their own vocabularies for their specialist purposes Wittgenstein suspected that philosophers attempts at the adoption an adaptation of such words were commonly abortive, muddling up (at least) the philosopher's intendedly independent employment of these terms with their continuing use of the same words in their ordinary capacity. For example, some sceptics charged ordinary speakers with claiming certainty where they are not entitled to those claims – thereby accusing them of misusing words from their ordinary language. In its ordinary use, those sceptics alleged, the words 'know' and 'certain' are connected to the extent that one should only say one knows where one is wholly certain, one's claim to know beyond all possibility of doubt. It is true that the words 'certain' and 'know' are connected in ordinary speech but, Wittgenstein sought to show, not in the ways that sceptics suppose. The word 'know' is used where one's claims are not beyond all possible doubt. To say that one knows is in effect to acknowledge that there is the possibility of doubt, but of denying that those doubts apply. There are certainly ways in which a claim to know what time the train arrives can go wrong, and the claim to 'know' insists that the claim is not wrong in these ways. In such cases, the sceptic is not claiming, that such uses of 'know' within philosophy are distinctive and specialised ones, used only within philosophy and dedicated to its purpose. The sceptic is, rather assuming that the use of the word 'know' has sufficient in common between the philosopher's use and 'everyday' ones for the philosopher to be able to offer confront the 'ordinary' case, criticising ordinary speakers because, they are using 'know' in ways which do not honour the commitment that the philosopher sees as built into their *joint* use of the word, namely to claim knowledge only only when there is absolutely no possibility of doubt<sup>4</sup>.

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4. Quite what is going on in the sceptical context is often more complicated than this but the example is designed only to illustrate, very thinly, that the relation between 'ordinary' and 'technical' uses of a word may, in the philosophical context be not just complicated, but also muddled. The suggestion that the sceptic might be the one 'misusing' the word 'know' does not cast doubt on the philosophers competence to engage in 'ordinary language' exchanges with other speakers of their native or other languages – that one can employ the language in the course of life does not mean that one is able to reflect perspicuously on the pattern of use involved in the aspects of the language of which one's own sayings are a part.

Wittgenstein's is not, in this context engaging in any defence of ordinary language, certainly not to the extent of suggesting that ordinary language has got describing the facts about what knowledge is right, whilst the philosopher has got these wrong. Rather, he is asking whether the exchange between the sceptic and the everyday speaker is a genuine confrontation in the way it appears, where getting the issues lined up is not a matter of deciding between the two, which one of them is right about what knowledge is. What Wittgenstein thinks needs getting right is whether the philosopher has got the 'geography' of 'know' and 'certain' in their ordinary uses right – if not, then the sceptic's challenge has misfired, making defending either everyday usage or common sense against the sceptic a pointless undertaking.

The investigation into 'know' and 'certain' seeks to determine what it is that people are saying when they say they know something, it does not involve any suggestion that people who use the word 'know' in what Wittgenstein tries to show is a standard, commonplace way, are actually right about whatever they claim to know. That would involve investigation into facts of the matter – Tom says he knows what time the train arrives, but does he? Wittgenstein says that Tom's use of know gives only his personal guarantee that he is not mistaken about the time but, as we all know, people can be wrong in both their recall of railway timetables and about whether trains turn up on or after their scheduled times. Tom can be wrong, even though he said he knew. In the sceptic's conception, this shouldn't be possible, because Tom is saying that he could not possibly be mistaken<sup>5</sup>, hence Wittgenstein emphasises the strategic significance of the commonplace expression 'I thought I knew', one which shouldn't be possible if one's claim to know entailed that one couldn't conceivably be making a mistake.

Isn't what is worrying about Wittgenstein, though, the fact that he is occupied with language, that Wittgenstein substitutes considerations about how language works for questions about what real, worldly phenomena are like – we don't want to know what people say about, say, knowledge or time or truth, we

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It is in the transition from engaged participant in to reflective reviewer of language's ordinary uses that, in Wittgenstein's view, philosophy often goes awry.

5. ...and a condition of his correctly saying that is that there is no possibility of his being mistaken.

want to know what the nature of the phenomenon is, what knowledge, time and truth each are. This is a juncture at which the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for sociology might be doubted, especially if one conceives sociology as an empirical, even a scientific, discipline. Empirical investigations not meditations on the meaning of words and sayings is the business of such disciplines, and Wittgenstein agrees<sup>6</sup>. As mentioned, philosophy and science (i.e. empirical investigations) are different, it being in the nature of philosophy's supposed problems that they do not have empirical content. *If* sociology is – at its heart – an empirical discipline, then Wittgenstein's words would have little or no bearing on it, but Wittgenstein's line of thought allows for the possibility that sociology is less of a scientific (i.e. empirical) pursuit than it sets itself out as. Wittgenstein said of psychology that it consisted of experimental methods and philosophical confusions – a point which is by no means yet outdated – and it can be argued<sup>7</sup> that the same of (about empirical studies and conceptual confusions passing one another by) can be said of sociology, with modification that conceptual confusions and empirical studies pass each other by.

Wittgenstein agrees with his would be critics that philosophical investigations don't leave anyone better or worse off with respect to empirical information because because philosophical problem don't have empirical content<sup>8</sup>. Philosophical problems are, however, deceiving in appearance<sup>9</sup>– they are not necessarily recognisable as such on sight and they may well be mistaken for other kinds of problems, empirical ones, for example. That many sociologists think of their field as an essentially empirical one does not mean that they cannot be mistaken about this, with many of the problems they are involved in being ones that Wittgenstein would consider philosophical (or conceptual) ones.

One result of the confusion of conceptual and empirical issues in the social sciences is the misreading of Wittgenstein himself. Wittgenstein has repeatedly been charged with espousing a doctrine, one about the nature of reality. Not

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6. He doesn't think, though, that the dividing line between empirical and non-empirical inquiries necessarily tracks the departmental divisions of academia.

7. See Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008.

8. This may well be disputed, but this is a presentation of the nub of Wittgenstein's positions, not an extended argument on behalf of them.

9. Because superficial features of language can be misleading.

only is it a doctrine, but it is an inimical one, namely that of idealism. It is perhaps a particular form of realism, linguistic realism, expressed especially in Wittgenstein's reflections on the relationship between language and reality. The doctrine is, crudely put, that human language shapes reality, meaning that one cannot obtain access to reality itself from outside of language. If reality can only be accessed through language then tangible material reality cannot feature in philosophy as other than a thing in itself, something existing independently of and external to human thought, but about which nothing can be said – and, as Wittgenstein once remarked, a nothing is as good as a something about which nothing can be said. These views about the irrelevance of the philosophical conception of 'the thing in itself' to philosophical problems<sup>10</sup>, are much resisted, with, currently, realists probably leading the field with an insistence that language can make contact with things in themselves, those making up real world and its intrinsic structures, perhaps only through the language of the natural sciences, but there at least.

Such disagreements are a continuation of longstanding philosophical problems, and Wittgenstein's relevance to sociology is manifest in respect of his invocation (both pro and con) with respect to the relationship of language and reality. It is here that the treatment of Wittgenstein in terms of the resistance to philosophical doctrine and the insistence on the dissolution of philosophical problems through clarification may show its advantage. Attempts to come to terms with or get around Wittgenstein the linguistic idealist can presuppose that there is a solution to the problem, however bizarre may be the measures needed for its resolution<sup>11</sup>. It is not only more fruitful, but also more plausible, to suppose that Wittgenstein thought that the problem of the relationship between language and reality is not a genuine problem that can be answered, not least because it can't be coherently posed as a question, not least because (to keep the argument as brief as possible) the question itself will have to be spoken to in the very language whose terms are supposedly to be entirely set aside.

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10. Except as a provocation to yet further confusions.

11. One fashionable way of characterising the tortured and perpetually misfiring efforts to get round Wittgenstein is to attempt to forge a view of language 'from sideways on', cf. McDowell, 1994.

It is not that questions about the relationship between words and the world, between language and reality, cannot be asked and answered, but that those questions cannot include a completely general question about that relationship. Thinking that because one can ask the question whether these words in a given case correspond to reality one can equally well ask whether words in general correspond to reality is just the kind of move Wittgenstein regards as a source of philosophical confusion, arising from assuming that specific and comprehensive questions are of the same form and thus equally viable in interrogative contexts. Of course, viable questions about whether words correspond to reality are ones that are commonly asked in the course of human life and, not just by philosophers: You said the cat was on the mat, is it there? Asking about whether words correspond to reality is, for Wittgenstein, effectively the same as asking factual questions – questions that seek and are resolved by empirical information, ones which have a strong affinity to asking whether what someone says is true or false, whether, in other words, whatever some part of the empirical world is the way that it is said to be.

One thing Wittgenstein was trying to undermine was that what words can say depends upon how the empirical world is *in the sense* that the identity of and capacity for sentential combination of words would depend upon what those words stood for, for states of affairs in the world e.g. a sentence is conceived as a combination of names, names for objects which must exist in themselves according to one reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*<sup>12</sup>. Under such a condition, one would have to know what was true in order to understand what was said, but then a leading characteristic of empirical statements is that we can understand them without knowing whether they are true or not<sup>13</sup>. For Wittgenstein, it is a leading characteristic of empirical statements that they can be either true or false, i.e. that what they say can be compared with the states of affairs they speak of – 'The cat is sitting on the mat' says that the cat is on the mat, sitting there, and one can e.g. look to see if the designated cat is appropriately posed on the

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12. There is a reading of the *Tractatus* that would insist that this idea was mocked rather than endorsed there.

13. Because an empirical statement is one which can be true or false, depending on the facts.

relevant mat. It is at this point, that of pointing out that factually informative – i.e. empirical – statements are the kinds of sayings that can be true or false, and that there is nothing about their linguistic form which tells us whether they are true or false – a statement about how things are tells us how things would have to be if it *were* true or were false, but it does not thereby tell us that it is true or false. Whether a statement is true or false calls for empirical information but accumulating that is no part of the business of philosophy as philosophers have traditionally engaged in it, and it is of no relevance to Wittgenstein’s enterprise to make such investigations, to say which factual statements are true or false. That is the business of ‘science’ in Wittgenstein’s wide sense, of the natural sciences and all other kinds of factual investigations, including innumerable everyday ones, such as where the cat actually is. The world – reality, in the *Tractatus* sense, ‘is everything that is the case’, i.e. is the way things are according to the totality of true empirical statements. Wittgenstein’s philosophy has nothing to say on its own behalf about what the world actually consists in<sup>14</sup>, which amongst all the things being said about states of affairs in the world are the true ones – beyond their being the ones which say what some state of affairs is when, indeed, that is the state of affairs that obtains. *Whether* a statement is true depends, of course, on states of the world, the whereabouts of the cat and the mat, for example. The world, in the *Tractatus* sense has everything in it that we can truly say is in it – but philosophical questions don’t have to do with what is, as a matter of fact, in the world. Not only is this the model which operates within ordinary language, that there is a difference between what we say about the world and the world we say things about, connected by the question of whether things are as we have said they are, is also the one that philosophy has in mind, which it perpetuates as a supposedly philosophical scheme in its treatments of the ‘problem’<sup>15</sup> – one of the respects in which Wittgenstein troubles social scientists is in his apparently taking the answers that people ordinarily give to factual questions at face value – as

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14. On one reading, the *Tractatus* did apparently say that the world was made up of facts, of objects arranged in states of affairs, the *Investigations* did not.

15. But this is a ‘model’ that comes with the language that is built into linguistic forms not separate theoretical construction. Comes with the language in, for example, the way in which we distinguish a hypothesis, which says how the world is in advance of the facts, and a report, which says how the world is on the basis of checking the facts.

mentioned, realists<sup>16</sup> are troubled that Wittgenstein does not recognise that it is in the language of science (in the natural science sense) that questions about what is real and what is not must be answered. Others – call them postmodernists – are either disappointed by Wittgenstein's failure to see through the pretensions of science or gratified by the extent to which he can be seen as contributing to the humanisation of science and the erosion of its appearance of objectivity.

Wittgenstein's is an attempt to dispose of the purportedly *philosophical* question of the relationship between language and reality by pointing out that we already have, so to speak, a model for any such relationship built into the language that we already use, in terms of the relationship that words such as 'true', 'false' and 'real' play there. Wittgenstein expressed his aim as that of showing that the word 'real' is a part of the language, and not an especially remarkable one at that – it has the ordinariness of words such as lamp and door. His efforts at discouraging further pursuit of the (mangled) philosophical question certainly can't be said – in the aftermath of the postmodern turn and continuing developments – to have succeeded.

Because I must move apace, we come rather abruptly to one of the themes that has been most potently fertilised by Wittgenstein's dealings with the relationship of language and reality, which is the question of whether it is possible *objectively* to say that some users of language are comparatively – and collectively – successful in making contact with reality. There are two respects in which Wittgenstein has fed into this long running and vigorous strand of controversy – is he saying that the impossibility of delivering impartial judgements here comes from the fact that those absorbed in one way of life cannot (cannot *really*) shake off its partialities? Or is he denying that any way of speaking can make contact with what is outside itself – the speakers of a language/participants in a language game are confined within a closed circle of words?

These elements of controversy are perhaps prominent they are because they seem – if responded to affirmatively – mean that *critical* sociology is on mission impossible. How can it play the revisionist role that appoints itself to if it is shown to be impossible for residents of different 'forms of life' ('different realities' in another jargon) to even understand each other – as Bob Dylan commanded,

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16. Of which there are many and varied kinds.

don't criticise what you can't understand. The second element could be equally disabling – one of the key forms of criticism involves confronting the ways in which those who inhabit a given form of think about their form of life with the (sociologically revealed) realities of the lives they actually lead. If Wittgenstein is, as he is suspected of doing, implying that the way things are thought of within a form of life must be coincident with the way things actually are, then this principal instrument of critique is useless – the relationship between reality as experienced<sup>17</sup> and reality as it is in itself is liquidated, if there is no way of accessing the other side of representations<sup>18</sup> then there is no way of conceiving that anything could be misrepresented, that one's language is not necessarily adequate to its representational purposes. This would crowd out the possibility of discrediting a way of thinking (and its associated way of life) in the eyes of those absorbed in them, for there is no way that anything outside the closed circle of representation can make an appearance within experience as represented<sup>19</sup>. This circles back to the first of the two controversial elements: even if we could establish that one way of life is demonstrably superior to another (in the way of being, through its language, in contact with reality) this would undermine the critical purpose if the superior correspondence with reality was not in practice demonstrable to those otherwise sealed within understandings which are not in accord with reality itself. Is Wittgenstein really presenting a view of language as a straightjacket for human thought, that the limits of language are the limits of thought and that, therefore, languages prevent people from having anything other than entirely conventional thoughts?

Wittgenstein's thought about the relationship between different 'forms of life' (often used interchangeably with 'language games', another piece of his gnomic jargon) is in part a development of his thought about the relationship between language and reality, and especially the thought that 'reality' (and its cognates in English or other languages) does not have a uniform application across the language, does not work in the same way in all contexts. A main point of

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17. Between reality as experienced through language/

18. See Woolgar (2008, pp. 30ff) for a nice expression of this anxiety.

19. Arguments about whether 'nature' had been denied any role in determining the content of scientific thought by social studies of science pivoted on just this worry.

Wittgenstein's philosophy was, to repeat, to return words that had been taken from ordinary language into philosophy back to their place in ordinary language, to contrast the part they played there with that which the philosopher *imagined* them to have. 'Reality' as a case in point, the aim point being not only that there was nothing special about the word reality, but also that there was variability, not uniformity across its use in context. Much the same point was vividly made by J. L. Austin's identification of the word 'real' as a contrast term, one where the force of the contrast is determined by alternative term in the contrast pair: real as opposed to what? Real as opposed to illusory, real as opposed to artificial, real as opposed to fake, real as opposed to fictional and so on. Where such contrast are made depends on circumstances, and will involve accompanying variations in the ways in which the correctness of attributions is determined. What it takes to establish that Sherlock Holmes was a fictional character is different from what it takes to show that a painting is a genuine Picasso not a fake. Determining what things are true or false goes on in activities and the kinds of sayings which are (said to be) true vary as part of the activities within which the sayings are involved – discriminating fact from fiction is something that goes on in connection with narratives (though not only there) whilst separating a fake from the real thing takes place in connection with things that can have authentic sources (such as artworks and currencies). Clearly, these various determinations do not accumulate into a unified collection – there really is no Sherlock Holmes for he is a fictional character, but that doesn't mean there really isn't a Sherlock Holmes character in Conan-Doyle's stories. Though they do not aggregate with each other, neither are these distinctions (generally) in conflict – the uses to which 'real' can be put serves the variable purposes of different activities (many Sherlock Holmes fans intensify and extend their involvement with Doyle's fictions by carrying on as if Holmes is a real person).

An important role for the idea of 'language games' in Wittgenstein is to evaporate tendencies to exaggerate the uniformity of language, to suppose that given linguistic expressions say the same things whenever and wherever they are used (which encourages philosophers to make do with one sided diets of examples when they review how words do work, complains Wittgenstein). 'Language game' encourages attention to the way in which what words say, the sense that

they have, is tied up with the surroundings in which the words are said. This shouldn't, however, encourage the idea that different 'language games' are intendedly autonomous units, within which language users are confined. The idea of 'language game' is more a means of reinforcing the connection between the words people use, directing attention to what they do in using those words, and the circumstances in which they use them. Language games are, rather, the settings within which people can say the things that they do, within which they can say the things that are intelligibly true or false, and, therefore, within which whether what they say is true or false can be investigated, so it would be seriously misleading to suppose that language games say or determine what is true or false, what is real. One can intelligibly say that 'Rooney scored several hundred goals for Manchester United' but not that he scored several hundred goals for Lancashire County Cricket club. For Wittgenstein, the question of sense or intelligibility always comes before that of 'truth', and (to repeat) establishing what is, as a matter of fact, true or false fall outside philosophy's remit, it is of no relevance to philosophical problems – these have to do with misconceptions about how words work, not false beliefs about how things in the worlds are. Note that both football and cricket are games, and games with rules at that, so that it makes no sense to ask if 'football' or 'cricket' could be true or false (rules are a different language form than empirical statements, a form which doesn't feature the capability of being either true or false. It would be even more far fetched to think that Wittgenstein is thereby forming an explosive idea, one which really is a relativism, suggesting that all language games are true (or are equally in accord with reality). Football and cricket are, as games, neither true nor false – rules aren't either true or false, they are different in linguistic form from factual statements which can be true or false.

This line of thought is the sort that seems to pose serious difficulties for the idea of critical sociology. If what is true and false about the game of football is something that is only decided within the game of football, then does this not insulate football against all criticism? If people have to be involved in football even to understand what is said about football in football, aren't they therefore restricted to talking about football only in its own terms, meaning they are unable to question those terms? Correspondingly, those who try to speak of football

in other terms than its own must miss the target, as if they had tried to describe football matches in the vocabulary of cricket? The absurdity of this question might intimate that the segregation of 'language games' isn't any intrinsic problem, but the temptation to think that there is still a general problem of adjudication between diverse 'language games'.<sup>20</sup> Isn't Wittgenstein implying that anyone who isn't wholly immersed in a language game can understand what is going on in it and are therefore unable to cite anything that doesn't fall within the language game's own terms. Doesn't that precisely mean that a language game can't be wrong? – there is no one – belonging to or from outside it – who can say that it is<sup>21</sup>. If it was that Wittgenstein was saying that a way of life cannot be wrong, then he would surely think that one also needed to be clear about is being said. Is it a matter of saying that, as a matter of fact, a form of life cannot be wrong? Or is it more a matter of saying that a form of life 'cannot be wrong' because words like right and wrong, true or false, are not applicable *to* language games in the way that they might be to a constellation of opinions, for a language game is *not* a formation of opinions but, rather more like a rule-governed pattern, and rules are, to repeat, neither true nor false.

The examples given of language games – games, narratives, visual art etc – were chosen because these are to a large extent independent of and indifferent to each other<sup>22</sup>, and are not normally in either accord or conflict with each other. The autonomy and mutual indifference of these examples is not to be taken as the general situation for there are, as Wittgenstein recognised, other cases in which different 'language games' do come into conflict – what about, to call up an unusual example – the case of people believing in witchcraft – they have their own form of life, but it is not one which is, is it, of independence and mutual indifference? What they are apt to say goes against what we<sup>23</sup> want to say and that the point of conflict is precisely over what is to be found in reality: witchcraft

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20. This is the worry that underpins Lynch (2005) 'and, strangely, seems to loom large in recent writings by the distinguished Wittgensteinian, Cora Diamond – see e.g. 'The skies of Dante' (2012).

21. See Hinton, '(1983).

22. This is a very crude statement for purposes of simplification.

23. Lots of complications accompany 'we' in any expanded treatment of this instance.

beliefs are wrong because *there really are no witches*<sup>24</sup>. Wittgenstein's thought is that confusion over this problem, and shortcomings in the understanding of the way witchcraft (or spiritual matters more generally) can result from the tendency to absorb the division between us and the witchcraft folk to a disagreement over an hypothesis. The objection to the witchcraft claims is not of the order that the diviner yields false judgements, singles this man out as a witch when he isn't, exempts this one from witchcraft accusations when he is guilty. The objection is to the whole business of consulting diviners since there is no such thing as bewitching. The disagreement over witchcraft can't be reduced to a matter of comparing different factual claims against reality for there are no common standards of evidence – the disagreement is as much more about standards of evidence than about what the evidence shows. 'What are acceptable standards of evidence?' is not, in such a case, an empirical question. In such conflicts, the difficulty, from our point of view lies in getting the others to understand *us*, to take on board the reasons why we reject their way of speaking, the frustration with can lead us eventually, as Wittgenstein says, to combat their ways. Wittgenstein doesn't indicate that different forms of life/language games necessarily peacefully coexist, any more than he suggests that it is impossible to understand those who do witchcraft and primitive magic.

The idea has been floated that Wittgenstein runs strangely paradoxical lines, arguing, at the level of the individual, that a 'private language', one that could not possibly be understood by anyone other than its speaker, was a non-starter, whilst coming at the collective level – perhaps unwittingly – to the conclusion that one language game/form of life/culture can be private to its participants i.e. holding that only those who are full participants in them can possibly understand them<sup>25</sup>. Wittgenstein does say that using words is a matter of applying a technique, it is hard to see why he should think – even harder to establish that he *does* think – that it is impossible to learn to speak in the ways other people do. It may not be *easy* to learn those techniques – think of all of us who are defeated by more than very basic mathematics – but there is no reason to think that there is anything

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24. So our problem is an explanatory one – to explain how they can sincerely believe in the existence and effects of witchcraft when there is nothing in reality to justify that belief.

25. Cf. Lear (1984).

about mathematics that makes it impossible for anyone who does not currently have any learn some.

Of course, what may seem to raise the spectre of an impossibility limit to understanding may be almost a tautological one – that one can only understand a way of life is one is fully signed up to it. The tautological aspect comes in that in fully signing up to a way of life one is giving up one's status as an outsider – therefore, only insiders can understand a way of life. There are cases in which fully signing up to a way of life is the hallmark of properly understanding it – religions sometimes example this – and it is surely that case that one cannot understand an activity without participating in it – the idea of people understanding mathematics getting a grasp on some mathematics is surely a non-starter. Wittgenstein did think that one could understand the main philosophical problems with mathematics from relatively basic maths. Again, a fairly harmless thought, that understanding sufficiently for philosophical purposes requires at least some familiarity with the techniques used in a way of life (language game or whatever) has been inflated into a sublimed requirement.

Two further steps remain to round out this simple and basic line of argument. The suggestion that philosophy leaves everything as it is can be understood to be conservative in the sense that it leaves the presuppositions on which a way of life rests unquestioned even if it does not actively endorse them. By presenting them as unquestionable it protects them from being questioned. The idea of a critical approach through philosophy and sociology often involves the idea that, by exposing the reality-distorting character of indigenous beliefs, the critic can pull the rug from under the social order. When people become aware of their true situation (which is hidden from them beneath a layer of misleading beliefs), they will refuse to accept their part in the ongoing way of life and change its ways accordingly. But Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy does not feature the idea of either approving or faulting the fundamental suppositions which support the ways of a society. Wittgenstein questions, for example, the tendency to suppose, in the case of religion, that where some beliefs and practices are found together that the beliefs must have sprung from the practices. He is unenthusiastic, too, about the thought that activities are founded in fundamental beliefs which provide the final justification of the activity. In his view, justifications sooner or later

run out. This is not, of course, to say that activities are left ‘without justification’ but is, again, to question the idea that justification is required.

It could be taken that Wittgenstein is voicing his own distinctive conception of philosophy when he says that it leaves, for example, the use of language alone, that it in no way interferes with it, contrast that with other people’s philosophies that do not disclaim intervening. Equally well, though, it can be taken as a comment on philosophy generally, meaning that any philosophy offering to change the world doesn’t succeed in this. Wittgenstein’s conception is that philosophical problems are empty, that they have only the semblance of a problem, so those problems are not actually integral to the activities that they appear to engage with. Amongst Wittgenstein’s most notorious catch phrases was one to the effect that ‘language goes on holiday’. Philosophical problems arise when people step back from their focused involvement in some activity – where their language is ‘at work’ – and attempt to reflect on what they are doing in the course of those same activities, pondering, for example, what the true nature or significance of their doings might be. Reflecting in that way is getting into an activity that is of a different kind that which it takes itself to be about, and as such is likely to give rise to confusions. People who are good at applying scientific procedures are not automatically equipped to give good answers to popular questions about their science, just as people who are good in one branch of science are not thereby enabled to characterise the nature or essence of science. Being good at doing something isn’t the same as being good at thinking about and describing it. For Wittgenstein, philosophical problems can develop amongst those who are not professional philosophers, but when they do, as suggested, the philosophical puzzling that results is only incidentally connected to the activities it tries to address. Efforts to speak about ‘the general nature’ of science or mathematics are, for Wittgenstein, prime examples of language going on holiday when it would be better, in his view, to stay at work.

Wittgenstein suggested, at one point, that his important philosophical work was his work on mathematics. His philosophy of mathematics is a paradigm case – excuse the expression – of the idea that the philosophy leaves everything as it is. Leaving everything as it is a matter of making no difference to the mathematics. It makes no difference to the mathematics because Wittgenstein’s own philosoph-

ical efforts do not involve him in creating new mathematical devices, in making what would be counted in mathematics as a contribution to mathematics, as suitable for publication in its journals. His efforts were devoted to disentangling entirely surplus philosophical elements that crept into mathematical reasoning<sup>26</sup> from the *bona fide* mathematics. The separation was needed to, for example, show that the philosophical conceptions gave misleading interpretations of what was going on in the mathematics. As always, much of the difficulty could be that of recognising that the apparent problems were philosophical, not mathematical, in nature. Wittgenstein was much interested in the issue of the foundations of mathematics. Some mathematicians began to worry that their mathematical achievements might not be as secure as they thought them to be. What if even something as basic as arithmetic contained as-yet- undetected contradictions? Could it be proved that they didn't? Surely this called for more mathematics, the development of mathematical proofs of the thoroughgoing consistency of mathematical systems. In Wittgenstein's view, this was a classic tackling a problem with the wrong methods. The problem was not a mathematical problem, but one of mathematicians being unclear about, for example, the part that contradictions play in thought generally, and hence in mathematical and logical systems. He regarded the mathematicians' intimidation by contradiction as amounting to superstition, his own efforts being to show that the possibility of contradiction in some branch of mathematics was nothing to be *especially* worried about – the mathematics housing the contradiction needn't completely collapse just because there was a contradiction in it.

It is debated whether Wittgenstein was as abstemious of the mathematics as he claimed, or whether he was in reality a 'revisionist', one whose philosophy challenged and sought to change some of the mathematics, but it is enough, here, to point to the way he conceived philosophical considerations as extrinsic to – rather than foundational of – the mathematic affairs that they addressed. If the everyday activities within which philosophical problems arise – mathematics,

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26. Wittgenstein made a distinction between the mathematics and its 'prose' accompaniments, between the parts made up of mathematical notations and the verbal parts commenting on what was going on in the notated parts. The philosophy was characteristically to be found in the verbal parts.

natural science, religion, fell walking – were thought of as ‘working mechanisms’ then Wittgenstein’s argued that philosophical reflections were no part of these – hence comparisons with freely turning wheels, empty ceremonials, idling engines and mere ornaments were made. Hence, the appearance of a philosophical problem wasn’t generated by any malfunction of the working mechanism, meaning there was nothing about that which needed fixing, and therefore eradicating the philosophical problem would not affect – one way or another – the working elements. This is not to say that his philosophy wasn’t meant to have any effects at all. Clearly, the philosophy of mathematics was meant to make a difference to mathematicians, to change their conception of their situation, and to perhaps redirect their effort. Wittgenstein’s entry into, say, the controversy about the foundations of mathematics wasn’t meant to criticise the mathematics of consistency proofs, but to diminish mathematicians’ enthusiasm for them. There is nothing mathematically wrong in trying to prove the consistency of a system but there is nothing special about producing those kinds of proofs either. If that could be shown, the sense of urgency and significance attached to producing proofs of that kind might dispel, and the determination to produce more of them might too.

On this version, it is only an illusion that something important and profound might hinge on philosophical problems, and that the persistence or transformation of an established practice might depend upon the provision of correct solutions to philosophical problems (when they don’t have any solutions because they aren’t really problems). Reaching this, for some, depressing philosophical conclusion that the nature and consequences of philosophical problems are as empty as Wittgenstein says they are, does not entail either that criticism of society is impossible or that society’s cannot be substantially changed. That something cannot be done by philosophy does not mean that it cannot be done at all.

Wittgenstein’s rejection of the idea that philosophy would make any mathematical difference to mathematics was paralleled by his insistence that philosophy could not interfere in the use of language, but, contrary to that, but some feel that he can be found to be doing just this with his philosophy, acting as a kind of language policeman, telling people what they can and cannot say. For Wittgenstein, what you can say and what you can think are very much tied up

together<sup>27</sup>, and one way of summarising his general pre-occupations is to see it as tracing – by means that varied over his career – the limits to language and to thought. Philosophical puzzlement arises when philosophers bump up against the limits of language, when they try to say what cannot be said, can't really think about the problems they are trying to raise. It is one of Wittgenstein's own worries that this image suggests that he is saying that there is something that cannot be done when this is just what he is trying to avoid. The first construal – that he is saying there are things that cannot be done – can make his philosophy seem a considerable let down – we want, say, to secure our own convictions, perhaps by establishing that there are things about the nature of our view of the world which, though independent of us – objective ones – back up our reasons for thinking that our point of view is the right one. If Wittgenstein tells us that we cannot do that because our world views are without justification, we may draw what we feel is a negative conclusion, that our beliefs have been left wanting, they are without justification – they rest on nothing. Wittgenstein did not intend that we should draw this negative-sounding conclusion, reluctantly accepting that we have to settle for a second best outcome – the best outcome would be to be able to prove that our own convictions are wholly justified, and uniquely so. We are left, then, having to reconcile ourselves, if Wittgenstein is right, to the fact that there are obstacles built into our language games which prevent us from providing such final justifications. Wittgenstein's actual intention was to eradicate, in each case, spurious philosophical problems, showing that they were entirely empty, that there was nothing to them<sup>28</sup> – the aim was to show that the supposed problem could never get off the ground. It isn't, then, the fact that the language prohibits certain sayings, outlaws certain expressions that prevents philosophers from achieving their clear objectives, it is, instead, that the philosophers objec-

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27. This does not mean that they are tied up altogether for a 'dumb' animal such as a dog certainly can think it is going to be beaten.

28. Rather than trying to constructively respond to those problems, the procedure is to track back, as scrupulously as possible, to the deepest sources of apparent problems. I've been trying to show that the various dissatisfactions with Wittgenstein themselves arise from reading him in a way designed to answer philosophical problems rather than *entirely* dismantle them. Currently I'm discussing the dissatisfactions that arise if the decomposition is less than thorough.

tives are unclear even to them and if they can't work out what they want, they can't work out ways of getting what they want.

Wittgenstein wanted to do away with the idea that there are two kinds of thoughts, lying on opposite sides of the boundary of sense. It could be tempting to think of the two kinds of thoughts as being, on the one hand, those thoughts we can put into the words of our language and, on the other, those thoughts that we cannot currently find words for in our language (they could perhaps be worded in some other language). This would feed into the idea of Wittgenstein as conceiving language as straightjacketing thought, restricting its freedom of movement, allowing some movements but only a selection from the full range of movements possible if the straightjacket were removed. The *critical* possibility is that the straightjacket can be removed, and Wittgenstein's obstructive role is imagined as that of persuading us that the straightjacket can't be taken off. Wittgenstein is trying to expel the idea that the boundary of the language does straightjacket. On this conception, Wittgenstein's approach is seen as (unwittingly) acquiescing in the conception that language operates to regulate thought in such a way that it allows certain kinds of ideas but blocks out others. The time honoured social science conception of this kind is that forms of language serve to naturalise (or reify) phenomena, leading their users to think that a certain phenomenon – say the differentiation of persons into male and female genders – is a natural, consequence of immutable biological facts, thus preventing the thought that this arrangement could be changed from occurring to them.<sup>29</sup> Does Wittgenstein's reliance on ordinary language (in the absence of any 'critical discourse analysis') mean that his own philosophy is continuous with such stultifying linguistic practices, thereby obscuring the possibility of the alternatives there might be to any given way of speaking?

Whether or not there is anything to the 'critical discourse' case<sup>30</sup>, it really has nothing to do with Wittgenstein's concerns, for his contrast between what can

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29. See Segerdahl (2013).

30. To the extent that they are not themselves voicing philosophical confusions then the things that critical theorists want to say are themselves things that can be said, for they are being said. To the extent that they feature things that 'cannot be said' then that will be because they have not managed to work out what they want to say. Here I make no judgement as to what extent these points apply.

and what can't be said doesn't distinguish between, on the one hand, statements which are favoured and permitted, and, on the other, statements that could be made but that are suppressed<sup>31</sup>. The contrast Wittgenstein is interested in is that between cases in which there is something to those in which there is simply nothing to say. If there is nothing to say, one can't be prevented from saying it, nor empowered to say it either.

Thus we come to the undramatic, and doubtless thereby, disappointing conclusion that Wittgenstein's philosophy, as such, doesn't prevent anyone from saying anything, nor, neither, does it show that it is the language which prevents them from saying something. Wittgenstein's pre-occupation is with those cases in which people mislead themselves in thinking there is something to be said where there isn't. His aim wasn't to block philosophical efforts so as to defend ordinary ways of speaking and protect any common sense understandings supposedly associated with them. That there are ordinary ways of using words and that 'common sense understandings' can be expressed with them are just plain facts about the operations that go on in language.

The question Wittgenstein raised about language most definitely wasn't 'Is what people say right or wrong?' but 'Is that really what counts as 'right' when people say that?' He also maintained that his philosophy had no interest in people's 'opinions', the thoughts and beliefs they put out in the language, rather in the ways in which they used the language to do it. His critics tend to assume, on his behalf but wrongly, an interest that was, in his mind, extra-philosophical. If his method worked, this would alleviate frustration with intractable problems through the realisation that philosophy – or, perhaps social science – were largely dealing in self-inflicted difficulties and were, therefore, the wrong places<sup>32</sup> to be looking for help with any genuine problems they might actually have.

I've argued that Wittgenstein's philosophical arguments don't develop a 'conservative' case against the idea of 'criticising society' or even of 'criticising society from outside', for those arguments, being dedicated to demonstrating that phil-

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31. Ones lurking in the wings of language, waiting their opportunity to step out onto centre stage.

32. Sociology being a much more assorted, all over the place, affair than philosophy is, it may be less thoroughly permeated by the difficulty.

osophical problems can be liquidated, say nothing *philosophical* about whether society can be critically transformed or not. Whether society can be criticised or not is answered by consideration of whether, in social life, there is or is not criticism, it is not something to be licensed by a philosophical prescription. *Insofar* as the possibility of criticism discussed amongst sociologists is a philosophical problem, then Wittgenstein is certainly relevant to those discussions but not in the way that is usually assumed. Does Wittgenstein have wider relevance than that? This depends on the extent to which the range of sociological problems involves philosophical confusions. I've intimated that Wittgenstein's relevance to the 'criticism' question really draws from the fact that it perpetuates the philosophical problem of the relationship of language to reality, which, for Wittgenstein, was on the front line of misconceived problems. I did not develop the thought that the problem of the relationship of language to reality runs widely and deeply through large parts of sociological thought. Wittgenstein does not draw the line between empirical and philosophical inquiries in the way that many sociologists have in mind.

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