Wittgenstein's Challenge to the Contemporary Philosophy

The purpose of this paper is to offer a preliminary sketch of a philosophical project. The project begins by arguing that there is a challenge addressed to contemporary philosophy, and that this challenge can be related to the development of Ludwig Wittgenstein's views, especially in his later period.   Comment(1)
The acceptance of such a challenge depends, in my opinion, on the acceptance of the following points:

1. philosophical questions can be expressed only within natural language;
2. raising philosophical questions by using a natural language exceeds the "rules of language";
3. the rules of language use cannot (and don't need to) be explicitly stated; we can only provide local elucidation by giving examples of right and wrong language uses;

   Comment(2)
4. generally speaking, there is nothing like a metalanguage in which a theory of language likely to entail a consequence opposed to (3) could be formulated, and therefore no possibility to obtain systematic clarification.

   With respect to these points, we have to show how each one of them is *contained* in, *implied* or *assumed* by Wittgenstein's view, and to critically evaluate the arguments that support them. In order to determine the scope of what I have called 'Wittgenstein's challenge' a supplementary thesis has to be considered, namely:

5. a philosophical activity which can be considered today an alternative to this challenge either disregards (1)–(4) – some or all of those points – or, by acceptance of (1)–(4), becomes an enterprise that cannot successfully satisfy the professional philosopher.

   Comment(3)

   It might come out, at the end of this investigation, that this challenge actually exists. That is to say, there are sufficiently strong arguments for (1)–(4) to be found in Wittgenstein's writings, and a brief survey of the contemporary philosophical traditions may lead to (5). If this is the case, I advance the following hypothesis as a possible starting point for a reply to Wittgenstein's challenge:

6. The strongest point in this view is (4), which prevents an alternative account of natural language – opposed to the one suggested by Wittgenstein – from being a suitable answer to the challenge.
7. A refutation of (4) can be produced only by introducing the distinction between language and metalanguage, to make it acceptable from Wittgenstein's point of view in a way that needs further explanation.

Comment(4)

I have to note – although it is questionable at present whether this situation is attainable or not – one thing: if by taking (6)–(7) for granted one cannot deal with the challenge introduced by (1)–(5) this may seriously endanger the philosophical concern of any reasonable philosopher.

None of the points above can be extensively analyzed here. In the following pages I intend to clarify (1)–(3) inasmuch as to make possible the argument that (4) is indeed related with Wittgenstein's view. I concentrate on (4) mainly because, as suggested in (6), this point makes an answer to Wittgenstein's challenge almost impossible. At the end of the paper I try to offer a preliminary and partial evaluation for my project.

1. Philosophical questions can be expressed only within natural language.

This is a trivial truth. Even if one can ask questions by using a formal language (e.g., *4 + 3 = ?*) it is hardly conceivable that these questions would be philosophical. There might be, however, a problem with this point. The way Wittgenstein himself uses the term "language" in his earlier writings differs from the way he uses the same term in his later works ("—It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of *Tractatus Logico–Philosophicus*)" – *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 23). One may think, then, that sentence (1) has at least two different meanings, if considered from Wittgenstein's vantage point. In order to avoid this, we have to notice that there are many instances throughout the entire work of Wittgenstein where "language" is not a philosophical concept, but an ordinary word (See, for instance: *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 120). It is the same case with the sentence (1) above.

2. Raising philosophical questions by using a natural language exceeds the "rules of the language."

Here we have to specify what "rules of the language" means. Perhaps, an efficient way to do this is to find analogous sentences for (2):

2.1 "Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language." (*Tractatus*, 4.003)

2.2 "[…] philosophical problems are misunderstandings which must be removed by clarification of the rules according to which we are inclined to use words." (*Philosophical Grammar*, Part I, II, § 32)

2.3 "When philosophers use a word […] and try to grasp the *essence* of one thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language–game which is its original home?" (*Philosophical Investigations*, I, 116)

It should be noted that getting from (2.1) to (2.3) – and accordingly, from Wittgenstein's earlier view to his later view – we seem to find less appropriate a sentence for translating (2) into his words. This is somehow

explained by (3).

3. The rules for the language use cannot (and don't need to) be explicitly stated; we can only provide local elucidation by giving examples of right and wrong language uses.

Sentence (3) can be related only with a certain period of Wittgenstein's intellectual development, the period which is best represented by his *Philosophical Investigations*. Some kindred matters were much discussed under the title of *rule−following*. To get to this assertion from there, one has to accept that the rules for the language use are not like the rules for a calculus, that they are publicly formed, continuously changing and non−analyzable. Additionally, it has to be shown that semantic rules cannot be deduced from syntactic rules. The truth of (3) is disputable, but I do not wish to talk about that right now.

4. There is no metalanguage.

As stated above, the sentence could not belong to Wittgenstein. Yet, I wish to maintain, one of the deepest Wittgensteinean presuppositions is expressed by it. As a first remark, the hierarchy of languages seems to originate in the hierarchy of sets. This seems to be largely intuitive, if we think about Tarski's exposition. On the other hand, Wittgenstein constantly rejects Russell's theory of sets (*Tractatus*, 6.031; *Remarks on The Foundation of Mathematics*, V−29). He would never use either the formal apparatus provided by the theory of sets or the language−metalanguage distinction to solve a philosophical puzzle. The way he accounts for the antinomy of the liar, for instance, is totally different from the one adopted by Tarski (*The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages*; in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, 2nd edition, pp. 157−9) or Russell (*Principia Mathematica*, 1st volume, p. 45): "Perhaps we should say of this man [the liar] that he doesn't mean the same thing as we do by "true" and by "lying". He means perhaps something like: What he says flickers; or nothing really comes from his heart. It might also be said: his "I always lie" was not really an *assertion*. It was rather an exclamation." (*Remarks on The Foundation of Mathematics*, III−58).

I stated before that (3) is more susceptible to being attached to Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Therefore, the same thing has to be said of the entire challenge introduced by him. If we focus our attention accordingly, we will find in his later writings some useful remarks for his presumable view on the language−metalanguage question. To take only a few: "A name has meaning, a proposition has sense in the calculus to which it belongs. The calculus is as it were autonomous. – Language must speak for itself." (*Philosophical Grammar*, Part I, II, § 27); "Philosophy is concerned with calculi in the same sense as it is concerned with thoughts, sentences and languages. But if it was really concerned with the concept of calculus, and thus with the concept of calculus of all calculi, there would be such a thing as metaphilosophy. (But there is not. We might so present all that we have to say that this would appear as a leading principle.)" (*Philosophical Grammar*, Part I, VII, § 72; compare with: "One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word "philosophy" there

must be a second–order philosophy. But it is not so: it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word "orthography" among others without then being second–order." – *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 121); "In giving explanations I have already to use language full–blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); […] Yes, but then how can these explanations satisfy us? – Well, your very questions were framed in *this* language; they had to be expressed in *this* language, if there was anything to ask!" (*Philosophical Investigations*, I, 120; the italicization of "this" is mine.) Now, I do not take a series of quotations as an argument. What I wish to say is this: we cannot make sense of these sentences (or any other similar sentences to be found in Wittgenstein's writings – see, for example, *On Certainty*, § 391, § 396) if we disregard the possibility of (4) being presupposed by Wittgenstein (As a remarkable side effect, one of the most intriguing affirmations from *Tractatus*, 6.54, gets its full meaning the same way). On the other side, there are no sayings in Wittgenstein to contradict the acceptance of (4) as a presupposition.

Now, one is entitled to ask: "But what about Wittgenstein himself? Doesn't he speak about language too? Isn't his theory about everyday language implicitly formulated in a metalanguage?" Two points should be noted here. First, language is spoken about as a phenomenon. It is not something different from other phenomena, something at a different level (See *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 108.) Secondly, Wittgenstein steadily distinguishes between *saying* and *showing* (*Tractatus*, 4.121–4122, for example), or – in other words – between *explaining* and *describing* (*Philosophical Grammar*, Part I, II, § 30, *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 124, 126). It is this distinction that allows him to "describe" the phenomenon of language use or to "show" something about language without constructing a theory of some object language in another language of a second order.

5. A Few Remarks

If the understatement of (4) in Wittgenstein's view is plausible, then it becomes clear why there is not much to be discussed about (3). For the later Wittgenstein in particular, it does not make a statement–like point. It is not part of a theory *about* language at all.

One may consider (4) completely irrelevant for a philosophical challenge. Indeed, as a presupposition, it is not supported by any other claims. We have to note, however, that we are not in a position to require justifications. Wittgenstein's view is fairly sound as such.   Comment(5)
More than that, the distinction between language and metalanguage is not introduced with respect to the natural language, which – according to (1) – is at stake here (See Tarski, *The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages*; in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, 2nd edition, p. 164.) Anyone who intends to ignore sentence (4) would have, therefore, to confront with it first.

I do not pretend that I offered a strong argument here, but this was not my aim. I would be content to know if I succeeded in making you suspect a threat which originates in Wittgenstein's philosophy. And if there is at least one possible world in which a proficient philosopher develops that view to its full extent by adding constraining arguments to a set of assertions similar to (1)–(4), this should worry us all.

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I want to clarify a bit my position. There are not so many points on which I would agree with Wittgenstein. This is mostly because I find the consequences of his view unacceptable. Nevertheless, even if my intention is not to defend him, I don't think that one can ignore what he says or dismiss his assertions with a wave of hand, on the assumption that Wittgenstein won't make a rational interlocutor. There have been many attempts to reconstruct Wittgenstein's arguments for one or another of his assertions (Kripke's paper on the private language argument is a good example). Some scholars have tried to rationally reconstruct his entire view, and not entirely without success. My text is partly some schemata for such a rational reconstruction. I do not pretend, with the points (1)–(4), that I preserve Wittgenstein's position entirely. In fact, I don't care too much about that. The reconstruction has to rely on Wittgenstein's philosophy, not to mirror it. The only condition it has to satisfy is this: to be formulated such that its potential refutation, once expressed, would entail the rebuttal of Wittgenstein's position itself. My basic claim is that by conceptual analysis and logical clarification it is possible to articulate such a reconstruction. An extended claim is that the reconstruction should follow the sketch presented in (1)–(4), by including, for every point from (1) to (4), a set of arguments, and the required disentanglements.

I do not wish to argue for or against any of the (1)–(4) thesis, in what follows, but only to show that they can hold together and stand for a general argument, with the unacceptable conclusion that we must give up doing philosophy (in particular, that we must abandon any systematical project of logical analysis of the natural language).

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There is a problem here, with (2), and (3), namely that, granted the truth of (3), it appears impossible to argue rationaly for (2). That is, you cannot speak of wrong use of language without pointing out the rules which are broken.

It seems to me that the problem comes from the fact that (2) is more susceptible to be related with Wittgenstein's earlier writings, while (3) expresses Wittgenstein's later views. As belonging to Wittgenstein1, (2) has a similar meaning with other assertions made by logical positivist philosophers like Carnap, for instance (the questions of metaphysics are pseudo–statements – they cannot be soundly translated into a logical language formed according to the logical syntax). Now, for Wittgenstein2 the phrase "rules of language" has a different meaning. It is not that there are no rules by which we speak (a language game is usually played by some grammatical rules, which can be expressed in grammatical sentences), only that these rules cannot be completely and systematically enumerated. A reason is that they change over time, depending on the shared agreement of the speakers. However, Wittgenstein's arguments against the possibility of a systematical approach to language are not important for the point at stake here.
Now it is clear that the point (3) should be stated rather like this:

(3') the rules of language use cannot (and don't need to) be systematically stated in an exhaustive (final) theory; we can only provide local elucidations by using local methods.

Sometimes the method consists in giving an example for the normal use of a word, to contrast it with some abnormal use, sometimes the example is constructed by pushing a wrong analogy a little bit further, just to show that it was wrong in the first place, other times the elucidation is done by invoking a grammatical rule. To someone which states that my computer is a donkey I might reply by pointing out that computers are not animals. "Computers are not animals" is, for Wittgenstein, a grammatical sentence. It shows something about the way we usually speak. Again, whether all the cases are reducible to the later and the grammatical rules are in fact, pace Wittgenstein, completely and systematically enumerable, does not seem of much importance for this discussion.

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Another probleme here. Since everything which is a language game is all right, why say that philosophy (as such) is not all right? There is no reason for not regarding philosophy as another language game, one may think. As long as we have different speakers involved in a philosophical discussion, speaking according to some special commonly agreed conventions and rules, we must have a language game, too. In fact, one may think, we have many philosophical language games.

I am not so sure that Wittgenstein would agree with philosophy being a language game. What he can say, despite this, is that all of them differ from the language games of the common language in at least one respect, namely that they have not organically grown up in a form of life. To put it shortly, they are in no way related with our common life habits, tasks or purposes as humans and are therefore dispensable.

I asked myself the same question some time ago, maybe because I took the later Wittgenstein to be a relativist. I had the impression that, in Wittgenstein's model, one can not escape from the level of language and find some external criteria for what would be a right or wrong use of a word. Some people have said that this is not so, because Wittgenstein never abandoned his representation theory (one of them is Hintikka, for instance), so you can always check and see if there is something in the world to correspond to a descriptive sentence. I do not think, however, that this will answer the question.

The first answer that seemed satisfactory to me, at that time, was given to me by Adrian Paul Iliescu – a few years ago. He based his answer on Wittgenstein's metaphor of common language as an old city with tortuous streets. Doing philosophical analysis would be like building some new, symmetrically ordered streets at the periphery. Only that this won't help you to find your way in the old city. For instance, when one initiates the analysis of the concept "knowledge", he is supposed to deal with the word as in its every day use. Instead, either the word is grabbed from its place in the common language and transformed into a concept which has nothing to do with it, or a homonymic word is construed by means of analysis, who's definition will affect in no way your mastery of the usual word.

Anyway, the answer was not perfect. One may ask: "Why should the analyst be taken to explain something about the usual word?" In which sense is the common language privileged? Here, I think, Wittgenstein's answer would be that only the common language relies on a (genuine) form of life. The analogy with the old city stops here. You may always think that you can rebuild the center of the old city, but you cannot imagine yourself (and the rest of the people) speaking some sort of philosophical idiolect 24 hours a day. (No way, sir. You won't speak of *res extensa* when you buy yourself a pair of shoes.)

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This is one point almost anyone would agree on: Wittgenstein does not give a theory of language. In his words, he says nothing about language. If one takes him to say something, he will find out that Wittgenstein's assertions are meaningless. Here comes his distinction between "saying" and "showing", and it seems to me that his later distinction between "describing" and "explaining" is somehow related with this. Wittgenstein says that he is only showing something with respect to language or, in other words, that he is only describing the phenomenon of language (not entirely and systematically, of course). Somewere in *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, he says that he is showing to his students portions of an infinite painting (he says something similar in the introduction to *Philosophische Untersuchungen*). I take language to be this painting. One can, of course, extract from his examples some basic concepts and rules, because not even Wittgenstein is immune to that "craving for generality" which he criticizes so much. But all these concepts and rules have not a theoretical status, but rather a mnemonic role.

In short, the solution, to explain how is he allowed to speak of language but no theory of language can exist, lies in the distinction saying / showing.

Note: I do not feel very confortable with this distinction and I think that there is something wrong with it, but I have not succeeded yet to find out where the mistake lies.

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I sometimes imagine that a philosophical dispute goes like a tennis game. You can easily say where is the ball and who is at turn to hit it. My point here is that we have an argument from Wittgenstein and now is our turn to reply to it. That is to say, in order to constitute a coherent argument, Wittgenstein's position does not need to be supplemented with other theses (but only clarified, or mapped into a clearer scheme).

Note: I did not provided an entire reconstructed argument here, but only a sketch for an argument.

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