

A Conversation with Wittgenstein

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Thinking about Martin Stokhof as a friend, I am reminded of our pleasant get-togethers to discuss the meaning of life, and the art of living it, of our fruitful collaboration in writing an overview of dynamic logic, and of our times together at the Aikido club of Eric Louw.

Thinking about Martin Stokhof as a philosopher and colleague, his formal analysis (together with Jeroen Groenendijk) of questions and question answering is the first thing that comes to mind. This work is part of a fruitful tradition that has recently spawned inquisitive semantics, and the focus on question answering in dynamic epistemic logic. The theme is still very much alive at ILLC today. Next, I am reminded of the dynamic turn in natural language semantics, of the way he and Jeroen Groenendijk criticized Hans Kamp's ideas about discourse representation, and how this led to the invention of dynamic predicate logic. Later it became clear that dynamic predicate logic can be viewed as the action part of quantified dynamic logic, invented much earlier by David Harel. This led to a connection, a semantic parallel, between the analysis of programming and the analysis of natural language. Thinking about Martin as a philosopher still longer, it is impossible to further postpone the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is the connection that I am least familiar with, so this is what I will write about, in the hope that developing my thought in writing will create a somewhat better understanding.

What makes Ludwig Wittgenstein fascinating to me is his attempt to live without compromise, and getting away with it. I feel that fascination strongly because of my acute awareness of making compromises all the time myself. He did not. Born in an extremely rich family, he gave away his fortune. Would I have had the courage to do likewise, when born in similar circumstances? Hmm, I am not so sure. He called himself an architect, and in fact he did

design one house. Architects have to compromise. He did not. He decided to become a primary school teacher. Reports on how successful this career move was are mixed. Teachers have to compromise, or they are unfit for their jobs.

What makes Wittgenstein fascinating as a philosopher, to me, is his sense of wonder about how we conceptualize the world. What makes him utterly frustrating is his reluctance to accept formal means as tools for proper conceptualisation. Again, no compromise. The whole history of logic and mathematics is a story of finding better and better conceptualisations. These conceptualisations do not need a foundation. It is enough that they are useful.

Wittgenstein offers a starting point. After reading him, one should move on and do some logic, or some probability theory, or some information theory, or some formal analysis of social phenomena. Reading Wittgenstein is like reading from the Bible. It is easy enough to find thought provoking snippets and use them as starting points for a sermon. But it is more difficult, or next to impossible, to combine a substantial number of these thought provoking snippets into a coherent whole.

So the rest of this contribution is an imagined conversation with Wittgenstein as one participant. This is in a style that I have some experience with [3]. A similar thing has been done before, by John L. Casti, in [2], which I can very much recommend as bedtime reading. For the other participant I decided to pick someone who was also an architect, and also deeply interested in philosophy, ethics and religious ideas. I doubt if they ever have met, for they moved in quite different circles.

Anyway, there is also a moderator of the discussion. Let's call him M. You may also think of him as Martin. He has taken upon himself the task of letting the conversation move on, and removing possible misunderstandings. He will introduce the guests.

Moderator: This is a direct radio broadcast, and today I have the pleasure to welcome two philosophers into the studio. Let me introduce my guests to the listeners at home, that small but dedicated band of people deeply

interested in the cultured topics that we have on offer every week. May I first welcome professor Wittgenstein from Cambridge. As we all know, professor Wittgenstein is from a famous and wealthy Austrian family. But he renounced the family wealth.

(Wittgenstein just nods. The other guest is kicking in now.)

Guest: It seems to me that although my friend here renounced his wealth, he did not renounce his upperclass position. The Cambridge style of doing philosophy was very much the style of the privileged classes. Sitting in G.E. Moore's garden for a leisured discussion of whether they could be absolutely certain that the tree they were sitting under really existed. That sort of thing.

Ludwig Wittgenstein: I was referring to Malcolm discussing philosophy with Moore in that garden, and commenting on how odd it must have seemed to an outsider overhearing the conversation [9].

M: (a little bit uneasy) May I interrupt to introduce my second guest to the audience? The other guest we have today is Douglas Harding, architect, writer, philosopher, mystic, known to the general public from the second chapter of *The Mind's I; Fantasies and Reflections on Self & Soul*, compiled by Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett [7]. I have the book here with me.

Douglas Harding: It is ironic that Dennett has developed into one of the staunchest defenders of the New Atheism. One of four musketeers fighting for the new faith. Maybe including me in their compilation was Hofstadter's idea.

M: Like professor Wittgenstein, mister Harding broke away from his family in a forceful way, but for a quite different reason. You were not fleeing from wealth but from Christian fundamentalism, I believe. And you are a bit younger than my other guest, I think?

DH: I was born when Wittgenstein was already 20, in 1909, in Lowestoft in Suffolk, England. And my parents certainly were not rich.

M: Can you tell me something about your upbringing?

DH: My family were small shopkeepers, and my parents were members of the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren, a small Christian sect where everything that makes life enjoyable was forbidden. Exclusive they were. We children

were forbidden all unnecessary contact with the world.

LW: Ahem. Does not sound too bad to me.

(Moderator looks worried now.)

DH: Well, I had to lock myself into the WC to read Dickens, for if my father had found the book he would have burnt it. My parents suspected that everything that was not God's word had to come from the devil.

M: Which explains why you had to break with your family, I suppose.

DH: *(Suddenly delighted.)* But Wittgenstein is absolutely right. It was not all bad. I am not grumbling. My cranky upbringing included some impressive advantages. The Plymouth Brethren were nearly paranoid, all right, but they were not shallow or petty, you know. They meant business, the Lord's business. And they gave me the luxury of a media-free education. What a stroke of good luck! Also, I spent an average of eight hours a week in church, for twenty years. Plenty of opportunity for meditation. Of course, I had to develop the interior resources to direct my attention to what really interested me.

M: And while the Brethren thought you were reflecting on the Lord on high, you were thinking of pretty girls?

DH: No, God forbid. I was thinking of my collection of fossils.

M: *(Wanting to change the subject.)* Professor Wittgenstein, for this conversation I would like to take my cue from your *Philosophical Investigations, Part II:*

The evolution of the higher animals and of man, and the awakening of consciousness at a particular level. The picture is something like this: Though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light.

What this language primarily describes is a picture. What is to be done with the picture, how it is to be used, is still obscure. Quite clearly, however, it must be explored if we want to understand the sense of what we are saying. But the picture seems to spare us this work: it already points to a particular use. This is how it takes us in. [8]

You remind us that this "must be explored if we want to understand the

sense of what we are saying”. But how? Do you want to comment?

LW: Well, if nobody can say what the experience of consciousness consists of, then it is not exactly clear what “man opens his seeing eye” means, is it? Still, people talk like this as if there is no problem.

DH: The passage is intriguing, for it points to something we all experience, without anyone being able to give a proper description of the experience. The experience of consciousness, the experience of “opening a seeing eye”, what is it exactly?

LW: Well, it is a manner of speaking, of course.

DH: So how do you suggest we should explore this problem?

LW: What do you mean, this problem? I didn’t say there is a problem, or did I?

DH: Well, you just said, “people talk like this as if there is no problem.” This suggests to me that you think there is a problem.

LW: (*Getting irritated, but trying hard not to show it.*) I am describing people who talk like this. If you talk like this, then there is a problem. If you don’t talk like this, then there isn’t.

DH: I can see you are getting annoyed with me.

LW: (*Making a visible effort to contain himself.*) No, I am not.

DH: In any case, it seems to me that trying to describe the experience of opening a seeing eye is very worthwhile. It may be the most worthwhile thing there is in life.

LW: How can anyone describe that experience? There are limits to what one can describe. And people are not aware of those limits. In fact, that is the only genuine philosophical problem there is.

DH: Yes, yes, I have read some of your stuff. The task of philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. I like the image very much, I must say. For it suggests that there is something very obvious, something that we all overlook, and seeing that thing can set us free. So what is that thing?

LW: Don’t think, look. One of the ways of saying “Don’t think, look” is by suggesting a certain picture. And your acceptance of my picture consists in looking at a situation in a different way. My picture has changed your way

of looking.

DH: Absolutely marvellous! This is exactly what I have been trying to do all my life.

LW: But I thought you were an architect?

DH: Yes, I have designed quite a number of buildings. That paid the bills for me nicely; architecture was my means of existence. But it wasn't my calling.

LW: My calling was philosophy. So what was yours?

DH: If philosophy is the love of wisdom, then our callings were the same. My calling in life was to first become a sage, to find liberation, to experience nirwana, and next to share that experience with whoever wanted to listen.

LW: Liberation? Nirwana? How can you talk like that?

DH: Fortunately I discovered that I did not need to become a sage. At some point I just found out that I already was one. In fact, I found out I am God.

(M and LW look at DH in utter amazement. After a some time M breaks the awkward silence.)

M: Just a manner of speaking, I suppose?

DH: Absolutely not. I even wrote a book about my discovery [5]. The discovery follows once you answer the big question.

LW: What *is* the big question, if I may ask?

DH: Of course you may ask. I was getting afraid you never would. The big question is "What is it like to have a seeing eye?" More specifically, "What is it like right where *you* are?" Or: "Who lives at the Centre of *your* universe?"

LW: And what makes you think you can answer that question?

DH: It is very hard, even impossible, to put the answer to that question in words. But that does not mean the question cannot be answered. In fact, I have designed a number of experiments that can serve to bring the question home. These experiments are very simple. They are all invitations to see for oneself.

LW: If a question is put into words, we are condemned to either answer that question in words, or else to remain silent. Talking about God always takes place in a certain context.

DH: There is this rumour that John Maynard Keynes wrote to his wife “Well, God has arrived. I met him on the 5.15 train.” Your arrival in Cambridge in 1929.

LW: I know nothing about that.

DH: Well, never mind. Anyway, I think you will find the result of carrying out my experiments enlightening. I have described them in several books [4, 6].

M: (*Trying to ease the tension.*) I recall that one of your experiments is to look at yourself from a larger and larger distance. And another to look at yourself from a closer and closer distance. This reminded me of a little booklet by a Dutch education reformer, Kees Boeke [1]. He is taking steps through the universe by multiplying the distance from his starting point — a girl with a cat on her lap — by 10 in several steps, until the scale is $1 : 10^{26}$. And next in the other direction, until the scale is $1 : 10^{-13}$. Boeke intended to “develop a cosmic perspective on the world and on life” in this way, by making a guided tour in forty jumps through the universe. He claimed, or hoped, this would help to create the respect and understanding between people that will be necessary for us to survive together on this planet.

LW: How splendid!

DH: The point is, you have to do this for yourself. You should not take anyone’s word for it. If you do this for yourself, it gives you two ways to arrive at Nothingness, at the Void, and to discover that that is who or what you really are.

LW: Your claims sound mystical, but your methods seem down-to-earth, even trivial. But, Harding, how can you be so sure of yourself? You wrote lots of books, but they all seem to be saying the same thing. With me it is the other way around. Before I can finish a book I always discover that there is something wrong, or something that I overlooked, and I have to start all over. My final conclusion is that to form a coherent picture of “all there is” is impossible.

DH: I agree. I cannot put the whole picture in words either. But I doubt if it is wise to make it your mission to discourage people from trying to find out things for themselves.

LW: I am not discouraging people from anything. It is just that I know from

my own bitter experience how difficult it is to do genuine philosophy.

DH: Maybe you are trying too hard? Why not start out from the most basic fact of your life and from your most basic experience?

LW: What do you mean by that?

DH: The most basic fact of my life is that I occurred, that I found myself in this universe that I don't understand. And my most basic experience is the experience of myself in the universe.

LW: What do you mean by the experience of yourself in the universe?

DH: You see, in discussing the question whether it is absolutely certain that there is a tree when you see a tree, you concentrated on the tree. Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe you should have focussed on the seeing, or better still, on the 'I'.

LW: What do you mean by focussing on the 'I'?

DH: That I cannot put in words. I invite you to do my experiments, so you can see for yourself.

M: Still, it seems to me that the two of you are in the same business. For both of you doing philosophy is trying to open people's eyes.

DH: We both have hopes to cure people from their conceptual confusions, yes. The difference is that Wittgenstein is an upperclass philosopher, and I am not. (*Addressing himself directly to W.*) See, people like John Maynard Keynes and Lord Bertrand Russell unnerve me. They are aristocracy, and they know it. They make me feel shy and awkward. I do not feel at ease with them. They are your territory, for they and you are from the same class. I cannot enlighten them; I have to leave them to you.

LW: Philosophy has nothing to do with social class.

DH: Do you really think so? It seems to me that people from all classes and background have a sense of the mystical, a sense of the mystery of being alive. We all have occasional experiences of being touched by what is truly awe-inspiring or beautiful. An appreciation of art, if you wish. But it depends on your social class what triggers the experiences. Upperclass people often need upperclass triggers.

LW: I don't think I am a snob. I like going to the cinema to watch Westerns for entertainment. That is not an upperclass thing to do.

DH: There is nothing wrong with being upperclass. Your social background is certainly a thing that cannot be helped. Similarly with mine. My class background makes me feel more at home with the ordinary people, from all walks of life, who come to my workshops.

M: In any case one needs a certain level of education to do philosophy. Doesn't that put the higher classes at an advantage?

LW: Yes, it does. One has to be moderately educated to do philosophy.

DH: No, it doesn't. One has only to be prepared to look for oneself to do philosophy.

LW: Still, your experiments intrigue me. I have always found it a pity that I could not believe in God in the way of simple folks anymore. You see, religious belief is not like ordinary belief at all. Religious belief shows itself in the way it regulates the life of the believer. You cannot shake it by a piece of clever reasoning. Nor does it make sense to throw doubt on someone's belief in the Last Judgement by pointing at empirical evidence. It is in a completely different realm [10].

DH: I agree wholeheartedly that quarrels about religious beliefs are pointless and harmful. I found out early in life that arguing with the Brethren about their convictions made no sense.

M: Time is almost up, my friends. Thanks very much for joining me in this exciting exchange of ideas. One last question for both of you. What is the fundamental question of philosophy?

LW: Doing philosophy is the most difficult thing there is. The fundamental question of philosophy is: What does it mean to say something at all? I have discovered that there are many different ways in which words are carrying meaning.

DH: The most fundamental question of philosophy is "Who am I?" or "Who or what lives at the Centre of *my* universe?" And posing this question connects me to the sages and wisdom teachers of all ages.

References

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