Reflections on Schlick and Waismann on Philosophy

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Abstract

This essay deals with the views of two central members of the Vienna Circle, Moritz Schlick and Friedrich Waismann, on the nature of philosophy. It provides a commentary on 'The Turning Point in Philosophy', by the former, and 'How I see Philosophy', by the latter. The essay ends each commentary with some brief thoughts on what is to be learned from the paper about philosophy and the nature of its progress.

1 Introduction: the Vienna Circle

The Vienna Circle was clearly one of the most important developments and influences in Western philosophy in the 20th Century. It was always a somewhat lose collection of thinkers (philosophers, mathematicians, scientists) who were generally sympathetic to positivism, and whose membership varied from time to time. To the extent that it had a determinate view on anything, this was always a work in progress.[1] However, 2024 marks the 100th anniversary of the year in which the group of thinkers who would, in due course, term themselves the 'Wiener Kreis' started to meet regularly. It therefore seems a good time to reflect on the Kreis and its legacy.

[1]For an account of the Vienna Circle, see Uebel (2020).

Given the wealth of topics that interested the members of the Circle, and the diversity of their views, this could take up several volumes. This essay concerns just one such matter: the nature of philosophy. And even here, we will be concerned with only a part of the story. This will be the views of Moritz Schlick and Friedrich Waismann. The former was the nominal head of the Circle till his murder in 1936. The latter was an active member of the Circle, and represents what one branch of the Circle morphed into—the Wittgenstein-inspired British branch; the other, American, branch comprised the Logical Empiricists.

I will proceed as follows. We will look at one essay of each of the two philosophers on the subject of philosophy. For each of these I will explain the content of the essay, frequently allowing the author to speak in his own voice.[2] The explanation will be interlaced with my own comments on what is said. I will end each discussion with a few final comments on the essay and some thoughts on the nature of philosophy which it prompts.

2 Moritz Schlick

2.1 Schlick's Essay

Moritz Schlick (1882–1936) was appointed to the Chair of Naturphilosophie at the University of Vienna in 1922.[3] In 1930 he published the lead-off essay in the first volume of the short-lived house journal of the Circle, *Erkenntnis*. It was called (in translation), 'The Turning Point of Philosophy',[4] and it is the contents of this which will concern us here.

The essay moves through a number of issues, though it is not broken up into explicit sections. For our purposes, we may break it up as follows.

[1] The essay starts by reflecting on the history of philosophy (Western philosophy: there is no evidence that Schlick had any interest in, or even knowledge of, Asian philosophy). It avers that each great philosopher starts anew (p. 53 f.):

> every new system starts again from the beginning... every thinker seeks his own foundation and does not wish to stand on the shoulders of his predecessors

[2]All italics in quotations in what follows are original.
[3]On Schlick, see Oberdan (2017).
[4]Schlick (1930/1931). Page references are to this.

Clearly, Schlick thinks that no real progress has been made in philosophy.

[2] Well aware of the possible irony of what he is now about to say, he next proposes a new start to philosophy. But this time it will be different (p. 54):

> I am convinced that we now find ourselves at an altogether decisive turning point in philosophy, and that we are objectively justified in considering that an end has come to the fruitless conflict of systems.

What this turning point was, we will in due course.

[3] Schlick's discussion of the new start in philosophy occasions a discussion of what philosophy is—or perhaps better, ought to be—and a discussion of its relationship to science.

[4] He then applies these ideas to some specific areas of philosophy—most notably metaphysics and ethics.

[5] The essay ends with some optimistic remarks about the new philosophy and its future (p. 59):

> Certainly there will still be many a rear-guard action. Certainly many will for centuries continue to wander further along the traditional paths. Philosophical writers will long continue to discuss the old pseudo-questions. But in the end they will no longer be listened to; they will come to resemble actors who continue to play for some time before noticing that the audience has slowly departed.

Far be it from me to predict what the state of philosophy will be a few centuries hence. Here it suffices just to note that the developments did not provide the turning point that Schlick hoped. The Circle came and went. Of course, philosophical ideas often do wane and then return—but rarely in a form that their advocates would have imagined—or even approved of.

Let us now look at the central sections of the essay, [2], [3], and [4], in more detail.

2.2 [2] Schlick's New Beginning

What makes a new beginning possible, according to Schlick, was the publication, spinning off the new logical methods development by Frege and

Russell, of the *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*,[5] by Vienna's own Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was never properly a member of the group (for reasons that will become clear in due course), but he was present for many meetings, and was highly influential in discussions.[6]

How to interpret the *Tractatus* (as it is better known in English) is somewhat contentious; but the following facts about its contents are not. All statements are expressed in an "ideal language" which mirrors the structure of the world. Statements of the language are formed from atomic sentences (expressing states of affairs) compounded by truth functions and quantifiers. This gives any statement its logical form. This form cannot be expressed in language, but can only be *shown* by the sentence. Some sentences are true or false simply in virtue of their form. These are senseless (*sinnloss*), in that they do not say that the world is *thus and so*, as opposed to *thus and so*. All logical truths are of this kind, as are all mathematical truths. (Wittgenstein was never fully on board with the details of Russell's logicism; but he subscribed to it in principle.) Contentful (*sinnvol*) claims, property so called, are the others.

The central philosophical insight this provides is, according to Schlick, that (p. 55):

> all knowledge is such only in virtue of its form. It is through its form that it represents the fact known. But the form cannot itself be represented.

Hence (p. 56):

> Everything is knowable which can be expressed, and this is the total subject matter concerning which meaningful questions can be raised. There are consequently no questions which are in principle unanswerable, no problems which are in principle insoluble.

Indeed, the method of verification gives any sentence its meaning (p. 56):

> Wherever there is a meaningful problem one can in theory always give the path that leads to its solution. For it becomes evident that giving this path coincides with the indication of its meaning.

[5]Wittgenstein (1921).

[6]On Wittgenstein, see Biletzki and Mater 92021). Concerning his conversations with the Circle, see McGuinness (1979).

> The practical following out of this path may of course be hindered by factual circumstances—by deficient human capacities, for example. The act of verification in which the path to the solution finally ends is always of the same sort: it is the occurrence of a definite fact that is confirmed by observation, by means of immediate experience. In this manner the truth (or falsity) of every statement, of daily life or science, is determined.

Schlick's claim that everything true is knowable is optimistic, even by the standards of 1930. Perhaps (implausibly) an inability to determine the truth of statements about the remote past—before the evolution of sentience—can be put down to 'factual circumstances'. But there was never a reason to believe that the mess in the foundations of quantum mechanics would be definitively sorted out. And Gödel's incompleteness theorem was announced at a conference in Köningsberg the same year.[7]

The verification theory of meaning itself—that the meaning of any statement, if it has one, is its method of empirical verification (definitive or otherwise)—had a long and tortured path in what ws to follow. Perhaps most famously, it appears self-refuting, since it, itself, seems to be unverifiable. The details of all this are well known, and this is not the place to go into them.[8] Here, it suffices to say that, despite a brief resurgence at the hands of Michael Dummett, connected with intuitionist logic,[9] it presently finds few adherents as a theory of meaning.

The thought that meaning ultimately depends on experience goes back to Hume, who took the view to have certain consequences:

> If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning, concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[10]

Hume's view is echoed by Schlick (p. 56):

[7] Gödel, like Wittgenstein, was never properly a member of the Circle, but certainly attended meetings during his years in Vienna.

[8] See, e.g., Creath (2022), 4.1.

[9] See, e.g. 'What is a Theory of Meaning (I)' and 'What is a theory of Meaning (II)', chs 1 and 2 of Dummett (1996).

[10] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), sect. 12, pt. 3

> What have been considered ... [insoluble questions of philosophy] up to now are not genuine questions, but meaningless sequences of words. To be sure, they look like questions from the outside, since they seem to satisfy the customary rules of grammar, but in truth they consist of empty sounds, because they transgress the profound inner rules of logical syntax discovered by the new analysis.

So what are we to make of philosophy? Is it simply pure confusion? Says Schlick (p. 56):

> the totality of sciences, including the statements of daily life, is the system of cognitions. There is, in addition to it, no domain of "philosophical" truths. Philosophy is not a system of statements; it is not a science.

Philosophy is not a system of statements (and so, as he later notes (p. 58), not a system of *a priori*, or even probable, statements). What, then, is it?

2.3 [3] The Nature of Philosophy

He explains (p. 56):

> Well, certainly not a science, but nevertheless something so significant and important that it may henceforth, as before, be honored as the Queen of the Sciences. For it is nowhere written that the Queen of the Sciences must itself be a science. The great contemporary turning point is characterized by the fact that we see in philosophy not a system of cognitions, but a system of acts; philosophy is that activity through which the meaning of statements is revealed or determined. By means of philosophy statements are explained, by means of science they are verified. The latter is concerned with the truth of statements, the former with what they actually mean.[11]

This is straight out of the *Tractatus*:[12]

[11] In medieval Latin philosophy, theology was known as the Queen of the Sciences. Gauss called mathematics the Queen of the Sciences.

[12] 4.111. Ogden translation.

> The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.
>
> Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.
>
> A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.
>
> The result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical propositions", but to make propositions clear.
>
> Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.

A paradigm of this activity for Wittgenstein is Russell's theory of descriptions, which showed the true logical form of sentences containing definite descriptions.

Schlick does not just appeal to Wittgenstein, however. He has his own argument (p. 57):

> It is easy to see that the task of philosophy does not consist in asserting statements—that bestowing meaning upon statements cannot be done in turn by statements. For if, say, I give the meaning of my words through explanatory statements and definitions, that is by help of other words, one must ask further for the meaning of these words, and so on. This process cannot proceed endlessly. It always comes to an end in actual pointings, in exhibiting what is meant, thus in real acts; only these acts are no longer capable of, or in need of, further explanation. The final giving of meaning always takes place therefore, through *deeds*. It is these deeds or acts which constitute philosophical activity.

Now, Schlick is right that if someone does not know the meaning of any words, one cannot explain the meaning of some words by giving them others. But the claim that meanings are ultimately given by pointing is a *non-sequitur*. Indeed, the thought that meanings are given by pointing was destroyed by Wittgenstein himself in the *Investigations*. It is exactly the view expressed by Augustine which Wittgenstein quotes in the first remark of the *Investigations*, and then goes on to demolish in subsequent remarks. Moreover, the view appears to be inconsistent with the claim made earlier that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification. There is no way of establishing the meaning of 'electrons have a charge of $1.60217663 \times 10^{-19}$ coulombs' by pointing.

Moreover, even if it were true, the claim that this shows that philosophy does not make statements is a complete *non-sequitur*. If it followed from this that *philosophy* does not make statements, since it provides a quite general and topic-neutral account of how meaning is given, it would follow that no *other* sort of inquiry makes statements either—even scientific inquiries.

The relation between philosophy and language has been a central concern of philosophy ("analytic" and "continental") in the last 100 years. Whilst it can hardly be claimed that all such matters are now resolved, I think that the following would be generally agreed: Getting clear on the meanings of the statements we are dealing with is an important part of philosophy; however, this, on its own, will settle very few matters of interest. Indeed, arguably, the real job of philosophy starts once we *are* clear about exactly what question it is that we face.

Schlick has a second argument for his conception of philosophy—an 'historical' proof (p. 57 f):

> If in ancient times, and actually until recently, philosophy was simply identical with every purely theoretical scientific investigation, this points to the fact that science found itself in a state in which it saw its main task still in the clarification of its fundamental concepts. The emancipation of the special sciences from their common mother, philosophy, indicates that the meaning of certain fundamental concepts became clear enough to make successful further work with them possible.

As many people have noted,[13] Schlick observes that other disciplines have, at various times, broken away from philosophy (physics, economics, psychology). This, he says, was because the meanings of their issue had become clear enough that they could be treated scientifically. So before that, philosophy—or at least, philosophy that was not simply confused—must have been about clarifying meanings.

Now the separation of each particular inquiry from philosophy doubtless had its own circumstances and causes. Maybe a certain clarification of meanings was a factor sometimes; maybe not. But this was not normally the most significant factor. Take physics. We might argue about when this broke away from philosophy, but the obvious thought is that it happened at the "scientific revolution" in the 17th century. This event had multiple

[13] Myself included. See Priest (1991), p. 5.

causes, but the most significant (internal) causes were two. The first was the systematic application of experimental methods, to 'torture nature to to reveal its secrets', as Francis Bacon is sometimes quoted as (infelicitously) saying. The second was the systematic application of the new mathematical tools that were being developed. As Galileo put it, 'nature is written in the language of mathematics'. These two developments did not arise from the clarification of meanings—though they may themselves have had some role in clarifying them.

Similar comments apply psychology. This broke away from philosophy around the turn of the 20th Century; and again the crucial development is arguably the systematic use of experimental methods, as opposed to introspection. And again, the systematic application of statistical methods and analyses played a major role in subsequent developments.

But even if it is right—very implausibly—that these developments were made possible by philosophy having already clarified meanings, it does not follow that that was all that philosophy—when done correctly—had been about. It had been investigating such issues as the nature and existence of God; in what sense there were abstract notions, like redness, justice, or numbers; how to lead an ethical or flourishing life; how a well-functioning state should be organised—and coming up with answers to these questions. Maybe one would not now accept these answers; but that is irrelevant.

2.4 [4] Metaphysics and Ethics

Schlick would contest this. Philosophers did engage in these matters, but they were simple confusions. This is what he next goes on to argue. He has two specific areas of philosophy in his cross-hairs: metaphysics and ethics.

Here is Schlick on metaphysics (p. 57):

> It was one of the most serious errors of former times to have believed that the actual meaning and ultimate content was in turn to be formulated in statements, and so was representable in cognitions. This was the error of "metaphysics." The efforts of metaphysicians were always directed upon the absurd end of expressing the content of pure quality (the "essence" of things) by means of cognitions, hence of uttering the unutterable. Qualities cannot be "said." They can only be shown in experience. But with this showing, cognition has nothing to do.

> Thus metaphysics collapses not because the solving of its tasks is an enterprise to which the human reason is unequal (as for example Kant thought) but because there is no such task. With the disclosure of the mistaken formulation of the problem the history of metaphysical conflict is likewise explained.

The content of the first paragraph is hardly clear. It is also puzzling. For a start, I find it hard to see how the great metaphysical "systems" fit into this mold. The root of Plato's thought was the world of forms. Perhaps these could be thought of as pure qualities, in some sense, but they were perfectly effable. Kant's world comprises phenomena and noumena. The latter *are* arguably ineffable; but assertions about the former are governed by the categories; and these are nothing to do with the content of experience, but its form.

It is even harder to see many traditional debates termed *metaphysical* in these terms. Take the positivists' *bête noir*: God. Much traditional metaphysics went into considering arguments for and against God's existence. This would seem to have nothing to do with 'the content of pure quality'. Or take another traditional metaphysical debate: realism or nominalism about universals. This debate had nothing to do with essentialism, and was certainly not about things which should be ineffable.

Another traditional metaphysical topic, discussions about which it is hard to fit into this framework, is time. About this, Schlick makes an additional puzzling comment (p. 58):

> if within a well-established science the necessity suddenly arises at some point of reflecting anew on the true meaning of the fundamental concepts, and thereby a more profound clarification of their meaning is achieved, this will be felt at once as an eminent philosophical achievement. All are agreed that, for instance, Einstein's work, proceeding from an analysis of the meaning of statements about time and space, was actually a philosophical achievement. Here we should add that the decisive epoch-making forward steps of science are always of this character; they signify a clarification of the meaning of the fundamental statements and only those succeed in them who are endowed for philosophical activity. The great investigator is also always a philosopher.

In other words, even when the study of something is firmly established scientifically, philosophy still plays an important role. So science and metaphysics

are not even disjoint.

There is a actually a deep irony in Schlick's thought. One might worry about how, exactly, to define 'metaphysics'. But the fundamental nature and structure of reality (if it has one) must surely count as metaphysics. And one does not have to read many pages of Schlick's Pole Star, the *Tractatus*, to see that this topic is centrally involved in the book.[14] And that's before one gets to the mystical parts of the *Tractatus*—which no one is really sure what to make of.[15] It is no wonder that Wittgenstein was never really a member of the Circle.

Indeed, there is a sense in which Schlick is not free from metaphysics himself. To claim that metapysical questions are meaningless is to take a position on them, and so have metaphysical views. In the same way, to say that there is no such thing as knowledge is to take an epistemological position. And to be an ethical nihilist is to take an ethical position.

Which brings us to what Schlick says about ethics. He comments (p. 57 f):

> If, today, ethics and aesthetics, and frequently also psychology, are considered branches of philosophy, this is a sign that these studies do not yet possess sufficiently clear basic concepts, that their efforts are still chiefly directed upon the *meaning* of their statements.

And perhaps feeling the implausibility of what he has just said (p. 58):

> Frequently ... the name of philosophy is bestowed on mental activities which have as their concern not pure knowledge but the conduct of life. This is readily understandable. For the wise man rises above the uncomprehending mass just by virtue of the fact that he can point out more clearly than they the meaning of statements and questions concerning life relationships, facts and desires.

[14] 1: The world is everything that is the case. 2: What is the case—a fact—is the existence of states of affairs.

[15] 5.6: The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. 5.61: Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. 5.62: This remark provides the key to the problem, how much truth there is in solipsism. For what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest. 5.63: I am my world. (The microcosm.)

Ethics is about the clarification and pointing out of meanings? Ethics is about how one should act, how one should live. I find it incredible that Schlick could hold this view when Europe, and particularly the German-speaking world, was descending into a socio-political maelstrom.

Note also that this view of ethics is quite distinct from the—equally unsatisfactory—view of ethics expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, to the effect that there is such a thing as ethics, but that it is transcendent[16]—another reason why Wittgenstein was no logical positivist.

2.5 Final Observations on Schlick

Let me end this discussion with two final comments on Schlick.

First, it is often held that the meaninglessness of statements of metaphysics and ethics was the core of logical positivism. For example, one finds this view in what is often taken to be the manifesto of positivism in English-speaking philosophy, Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic*.[17] And as we have seen, this thought is certainly present in Schlick's essay. However, as should now be clear, his view is much more nuanced than this.

He says that there are no philosophical statements at all. Such do not exist. Of course, this means that they do not exist in the canonical language of the *Tractatus*. So the statements in question which are meaningless are the statements in a natural language, such as German. But matters do not end there. The task of philosophy, he says, is to clarify meanings; and when clarified, such statements may become statements of the canonical language—and as such verifiable. Of course, they are then no longer philosophical statements; but, for all Schlick says, they may become statements of some new science—one which presently does not exist, but will break off from philosophy, as did physics and psychology.

Secondly, as we saw, Schlick held that no progress has been made in philosophy, since every new philosophy takes us back to the beginning. This was not meant to happen to Schlick's new beginning; but it did. It waxed and waned like all the previous ones. Many approaches to philosophy have,

[16] 6.42: Hence also there can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher. 6.421: It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)

[17] Ayer (1936). Ayer visited Schlick in 1933, but his 'philosophical experience in Vienna was somewhat limited by his uncertain knowledge of German'. (Macdonald and Krishnan (2018), §1.)

in fact, come (and gone) since then—one of them produced by the later Wittgenstein himself.

By its own lights, then, Schlick's movement was a failure. Indeed, there is a deep irony in Schlick's essay. As its very title indicates, this is an essay of philosophy. Indeed, it was published in a philosophy journal. But it clearly does not fit his mold of what (good) philosophy is. He is not simply clarifying meanings.

It could be argued, I suppose, that the essay is just clarifying the meaning of 'philosophy'. But if it does this, it is certainly not by the method he prescribes of pointing. Indeed, given this is a programmatic essay, there is nothing much to point to—except, perhaps, the *Tractatus*; but this doesn't fit the mold either, as we noted.

I think that, Schlick himself notwithstanding, this is the wrong light in which to look at the essay, however. Certainly, philosophers often reject some of the views of their predecessors and introduce radically new ideas. However, there is much more continuity in philosophy than Schlick suggests. Without Plato, there would have been no Aristotle; without medieval Christian philosophy, no Descartes; without Kant, no Hegel. Maybe, without Hume, no Schlick himself.

The absence of anything like a body of received views, as there is in science—at least on many things at any given time—cannot be denied, however. And this raises the question of what progress in philosophy amounts to. My own view is that the most important kind of progress in philosophy is constituted by the deepening in our understanding of issues. That is:[18]

> progress is a progress in our grasp of issues. As philosophical thought develops, we come to understand old questions better. We can formulate them more precisely; we know more about the possible answers, their implications, their viability. Philosophical progress is thus marked by a broadening and deepening of our understanding of problems and their possible solutions.

Given this notion of progress, Schlick's new beginning was not a failure. We did learn from it. Our understanding was deepened in a number of ways. There are at least two.

The path trodden by the Logical Positivists may have ended in a dead end. Odd as it may seem, this is not a philosophical failure. We come to

[18]Priest (2020), p. 301. The view is defended in that essay.

understand that this is not a path to be trodden to address the problems wrestled with—at least, not without a very new pair of hiking boots. We understand the problems better when we see that this is not a satisfactory way to address them.

The second advance is less obvious, and takes us back to the continuity in philosophy. The ideas developed within a program, such as that of Logical Positivism, once developed, have a life of their own. So it was that the verificationism of Wittgenstein's middle period morphed into the views of the *Philosophical Investigations*; that the Circle's hostility to abstract entities morphed into Quine's behavioristic account of meaning;[19] and that Carnap's sense that metaphysical views are meaningless developed into the conventionalism of his 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology'[20]—now undergoing something of a revival. None of these would have been possible without the Vienna Circle. And whether one takes these things to be right or wrong, they advanced our understandings of numerous issues in many of the ways I indicated.

3 Friedrich Waismann

Friedrich Waismann (1896–1959) was a central, though junior, member of the Vienna Circle. A student of Schlick, he received his doctorate in 1936.[21] Wittgenstein had returned to Cambridge in 1929, though he still frequently visited Vienna, where he held continuing discussions with Schlick and Waismann. Indeed, Waismann become something of Wittgenstein exegete. Waismann joined Wittgenstein in Cambridge in 1937, though the relationship was not a happy one, and the two men fell out. Waismann moved to Oxford a few years later.

Here we will look at Waismann's essay 'How I see Philosophy', published in 1956[22]—clearly near the end of his career. The essay comprises eight "mini-lectures". These do not form a sustained argument for a considered conclusion, as much as a series of meditations, taking us on a journey with

[19]Developed in Quine (1960).

[20]Carnap (1950).

[21]For Waismann's life and work, see the essays in McGuinness (2011), esp. McGuinness' editorial introduction, 'Waismann: Wandering Scholar' (pp. 9–16), and Markovec and Shapiro (2019), esp. Markovec's editorial introduction, 'Weismann's Rocky Strata' (pp. 1–25).

[22]Waismann (1956). Page references are to this.

some unexpected twists and turns, and ending with a conclusion which is rather surprising coming from a central member of the Vienna Circle and a Wittgenstein exegete.

3.1 Section I: Approaching the Problem

Section 1 starts by throwing us straight into the question 'What is philosophy?', and an admission that Waismann has no answer to it. But, he says, it is easier to say what philosophy is not (p. 345):

> philosophy, as it is practised today, is very unlike science; and this in three respects: in philosophy there are no proofs; there are no theorems; and there are no questions which can be decided, Yes or No. In saying that there are no proofs I do not mean to say that there are no arguments. Arguments certainly there are, and first-rate philosophers are recognized by the originality of their arguments; only these do not work in the sort of way they do in mathematics or in the sciences.

It is wrong, then, to think of philosophy as trying to be a science, but failing (p. 246):

> what philosophers are concerned with is something different—neither discovering new propositions nor refuting false ones nor checking and re-checking them as scientists do.

What this something different is will emerge as the meditations proceed.

Though philosophy does not deliver definitive answers, it certainly poses questions. Waismann illustrates with the topic of time. As Augustine famously says (*Confessions*, Bk. 11):

> What is time then? If nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I do not know.

There is a sense in which we all know what time is very well, but when we start to think about it, things become very puzzling. How do you measure it when it is never all there? How does time pass when it is always the present? With a sense of 'disquietude', we ask 'how can that be?' Says Waismann (p. 347):

> From Plato to Schopenhauer philosophers are agreed that the source of their philosophizing is wonder. What gives rise to it is nothing recondite and rare but precisely those things which stare us in the face.

Now, it is certainly true that puzzling over things we take for granted is a fertile source of philosophical problems; but it is hardly the case that all philosophical problems arise in this way. 'Is there a god?', 'How should the state be organised?', 'Under what conditions is it permissible to kill someone?' do not seem to be questions of this kind. Interestingly, none of the examples used by Waismann in the essay involve matters of politics and ethics. 'Why?' one might wonder. Had his involvement with the Vienna Circle or Wittgenstein taken them off his agenda?

Waismann then tables the thought that philosophical problems are unreal, cast by the shadows of language (p. 350):

> But isn't the answer to this that what mystifies us lies in the noun form "the time"? Having a notion embodied in the form of a noun almost irresistibly makes us turn round to look for what it is "the name of." We are trying to catch the shadows cast by the opacities of speech. A wrong analogy absorbed into the forms of our language produces mental discomfort... the answer is a prosaic one: don't ask what time is but how the *word* "time" is being used.

Clearly, we are off on a form of thought familiar from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'[23]

However, Waismann warns, this is easier said than done since (with an opaque reference to Lichtenberg) to explain improprieties of language, one must use language which risks further improprieties.

3.2 Section II: The Linguistic Dissolution of Problems

Section 2 pursues the discussion of the Wittgensteinian methodology, starting by reminding us that there are many ways of addressing a question other than by giving a straight answer. He illustrates with a couple of examples.

[23] Wittgenstein (1953), §109.

The most extended of these is the Aristotelian argument for fatalism. If it were now true that I would jump in the Thames tomorrow, then I could not but do it. Similarly if it were now true that I would not jump into the Thames, I could not but not do it. So (given the Principle of Excluded Middle), the future is already determined. However, says Waismann, to say that *such and such* is true is to say no more than the thing itself. It adds nothing to the plain vanilla statement of *such and such*. So to say that it is *now* true that I will jump into the Thames tomorrow is to say that I will *now* jump into the Thames tomorrow, which is 'just nonsense' (p. 353 f):

> To ask, as the puzzle-poser does, "Is it true or false now that such-and-such will happen in the future?" is not the sort of question to which an answer can be given: which *is* the answer [to the puzzle].

When addressing a person puzzled by such problems (p. 355):

> we merely remind him of how these words have always been used by him, in non-philosophical contexts that is, and then point out that, if he still wants to use them in this sense, to say what he wanted to say lands him in an absurdity. All we do is to make him aware of his own practice. We abstain from any assertion. It is for him to explain what he means.

As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Investigations* (§127), 'The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.'

Of course, one might disagree with this (dis)solution of such problems, but this is not the place to go into the matter. So far, at least, this is straight Wittgenstein. What follows is not. In particular, Waismann considers a possible objection (p. 356): 'isn't the result of this that philosophy itself "dissolves"?' Wittgenstein would presumably have said *yes*. Once confusion is eliminated, there is nothing left. But Waismann begs to differ:

> Philosophy eliminates those questions which can be eliminated by such a treatment. Not all of them, though: the metaphysician's craving that a ray of light may fall on the mystery of the existence of this world, or on the incomprehensible fact that it is comprehensible, or on the "meaning of life"—even if such questions *could* be shown to lack a clear meaning or to be devoid of meaning altogether, they are *not silenced*. It does nothing to

> lessen the dismay they rouse in us. There is something cheap in "debunking" them. The heart's unrest is not to be stilled by logic. Yet philosophy is not dissolved. It derives its weight, its grandeur, from the significance of the questions it destroys. It overthrows idols, and it is the importance of these idols which gives philosophy its importance.

What Waismann is suggesting here is opaque. The philosophical puzzles, it would seem, are solved. But in some sense the solution itself is cheap. Something more profund remains to be done—though what, is not at all obvious. Waismann still has six sections in which to elaborate. He ends with a hint of what is to come (p. 356):

> If philosophy advances, it is not by adding new propositions to its list, but rather by transforming the whole intellectual scene and, as a consequence of this, by reducing the number of questions which befog and bedevil us. Philosophy so construed is one of the great liberating forces.

The remark could almost have been made by some Buddhist teacher talking about enlightenment and its effects.

3.3 Section III: Going Beyond Ordinary Language

Waismann starts to explain, focussing on the limitations of the linguistic dissolution of philosophical problems (p. 357):

> The philosopher a fog dispeller? If that were all he was capable of I would be sorry for him and leave him to his devices. Fortunately, this is not so. For one thing, a philosophic question, if pursued far enough, may lead to something positive—for instance, to a more profound understanding of language.

Waismann gives two examples of this. The first concerns the challenge of skepticism. This, Weismann avers (p. 357):

> arises from the sceptic casting doubt on the very facts which underlie the use of language, those permanent features of experience which make concept formation possible, which in fact are precipitated in the use of our most common words.

Waismann then returns to the Lichtenbergian thought at the end of Section 1. He says (p. 357 f.):

> the sceptic struggles to express himself in a language which is not fit for this purpose. He expresses himself misleadingly when he says that he doubts such-and-such *facts*: his doubts cut so deep that they affect the fabric of language itself. For what he doubts is already embodied in the very forms of speech... in order to make his doubts fully expressible, language would first have to go into the melting-pot... These problems are not spurious: they make us aware of the vast background in which any current experiences are embedded, and to which language has adapted itself; thus they bring out the unmeasured sum of experience stored up in the use of our words and syntactical forms.

Perhaps one might put a Wittgensteinian spin on this point too (though Waismann does not do so): the examination of language forces us to examine the form of life in which it is embedded.

Waismann's second example makes the point that Schlick also makes, to the effect that the philosophical questions asked may morph into scientific questions. Waismann illustrates with the fact that Frege's philosophical questions about the nature of numbers led him to develop a whole new system of formal logic and set theory. A philosophical questions can be (p. 359):

> the first groping step of the mind in its journeyings that lead towards new horizons. The genius of the philosopher shows itself nowhere more strikingly than in the new kind of question he brings into the world.

Such groping is bound to be unclear, and necessarily so—which elicits this blast (p. 359 f.):

> It is all very well to talk of clarity, but when it becomes an obsession it is liable to nip the living thought in the bud. This, I am afraid, is one of the deplorable results of Logical Positivism, not foreseen by its founders, but only too striking in some of its followers. Look at these people, gripped by a clarity neurosis, haunted by fear, tongue-tied, asking themselves continually, "Oh dear, now does this make perfectly good sense?"

Then with a swipe at Wittgenstein (p. 360): 'No great discoverer has acted in accordance with the motto, "Everything that can be said can be said clearly." ' (*Tractatus*, 4.116).

Creativity requires wrestling with language; but the struggle with language in philosophy can act as a midwife for new ideas and new questions. This is certainly true. The production of a new idea or method does require taking something inchoate and getting it into focus. For all that, getting things into focus—and that means getting things clear, or at least clearer—is important. Confusion is not a state to be happy with.

Waismann then turns to the question of whether what emerges from such investigations can be proved to be correct to a third party. It cannot (p. 361):

> and it cannot because he, the asker, has first to be turned round to see the matter differently. What is required is a change of the entire way of thinking.

And such will occasion new forms of language. To put it in Wittgensteinian terms (again, not employed by Waismann), a new language game (p. 361):

> The turning up of a wide field of language loosens the position of certain standards which are so ingrained that we do not see them for what they are; and if we do this in an effective manner, a mind like Frege's will be released from the obsession of seeking strainingly for an answer to fit the mould. Arguments are used in such a discussion, not as proofs though but rather as means to make him see things he had not noticed before: e.g. to dispel wrong analogies, to stress similarities with other cases and in this way to bring about something like a shift of perspective.

And then, turing the point against Wittgenstein (p. 362):

> it is precisely because of the fleeting, half-formed, shadow-like nature of these analogies that it is almost impossible to escape their influence. If we are taken in by them, it is our fault. A philosopher, instead of preaching the righteousness of ordinary speech, should learn to be on his guard against the pitfalls ever present in its forms. To use a picture: just as a good swimmer must be able to swim up-stream, so the philosopher should master the unspeakably difficult art of thinking up-speech, against the current of clichés.

In this way new insights and understandings are obtained (p. 364):

> By our critical analysis we try to counteract the influence of the language field, or (what comes to the same) we may help the questioner to gain a deeper insight into the nature of what he is seeking first of all—make him see the build of the concepts and the moulds in which he expresses the question. What matters is more like changing his outlook than proving to him some theorem; or more like increasing his insight.

In summary, pursuing philosophical issues via an awareness of their linguistic frames and developing novel ones, delivers a new perspective, and so a new understanding of the matters at hand. As Waismann summarises matters (p. 364):

> Philosophy is not only criticism of language: so construed, its aim is too narrow. It is criticizing, dissolving and stepping over all prejudices, loosening all rigid and constricting moulds of thought, no matter whether they have their origin in language or somewhere else.
>
> What is essential in philosophy is the breaking through to a deeper insight—which is something positive—not merely the dissipation of fog and the exposure of spurious problems.

3.4 Section IV: Against the Logicians (and Others)

Waismann now expands on a theme of the previous lecture, to the effect that things cannot be proved in philosophy (p. 365):

> There is a notion that philosophy is an exercise of the intellect and that philosophic questions can be settled by argument, and conclusively if one only knew how to set about it. What seems to me queer, however, is that I cannot find any really good hard argument; and more than that, the example just discussed must make it doubtful whether any compelling argument can be found.

Waismann can find no examples in the history of philosophy—Wittgenstein included—where matters have been definitively settled. Then we get (p. 365):

> Out of this plight I incline to come to a new and somewhat shocking conclusion: that the thing cannot be done. No philosopher has ever proved anything. The whole claim is spurious. What I have to say is simply this. Philosophic arguments are not deductive; therefore they are not rigorous; and therefore they don't prove anything. Yet they have force.

Why cannot philosophical arguments prove anything? Waismann provides a number of considerations, but the principle one concerns the loose nature of natural language, in which, of course, philosophical arguments are given (p. 365 f.):

> I am not letting out a secret when I say that the ordinary rules of logic often break down in natural speech—a fact usually hushed up by logic books. Indeed, the words of common language are so elastic that anyone can stretch their sense to fit his own whims; and with this their "logic" is queered.

And again (p. 366):

> Ordinary language simply has not got the "hardness," the logical hardness, to cut axioms in it. It needs something like a metallic substance to carve a deductive system out of it such as Euclid's. But common speech? If you begin to draw inferences it soon begins to go "soft" and fluffs up somewhere. You may just as well carve cameos on a cheese *soufflé*. (My point is: language is plastic, yielding to the will to express, even at the price of some obscurity. Indeed, how could it ever express anything that does not conform to the cliché? If logicians had their way, language would become as clear and transparent as glass, but also as brittle as glass: and what would be the good of making an axe of glass that breaks the moment you use it?)

Waismann then adds to his swipe at logicians a swipe at ordinary language philosophers (p. 367):

> "Ah, but the ordinary use of language." All right; but even so, it is not that one "cannot" use language differently. To illustrate: "frozen music"—does this "tell" you anything? Perhaps not; yet a saying like ""Architecture is frozen music" (Goethe) drives the

> point home. To say "The arms are full of blunted memories" sounds odd, until you come upon it in Proust's context.

And even at a rigid insistence on the Principle of Non-Contradiction (p. 367):

> The "will to understand" does not even flinch before those bogies of the logician, contradictions: it transforms them, wresting a new sense from the apparent nonsense. ("Dark with excess of light," "the luminous gloom of Plato"—just to remind the reader of two examples of Coleridge.) There are about 303 reasons why we sometimes express ourselves in a contradiction, and understandably so.

This is Waismann at his iconoclastic best. His points are well-made, though I think he overplays his hand. Metaphor and other rhetorical tropes, ambiguity, implicature, suppressed premises, are everywhere in philosophical writing—of even the most careful of philosophers. But even if these things cannot be eliminated entirely, they can at least be minimised. There is a world of difference between a carefully reasoned philosophical argument, and the rhetorical ramblings of many politicians. And if one is interested in the truth, it makes more sense to attend to the former than the latter.

3.5 Section V: Examples

Section 5 is devoted to a discussion of a few examples that illustrate some of the points already made.

One concerns perception. Seeing is not an act. There is no sense to asking whether seeing you is easy or difficult, quick or slow, etc. These are the questions we ask of actions. Similarly, one cannot say 'I have finished seeing you'. All true, but such locutions can be used in special circumstances. A person with poor sight might make extended efforts to make you out, after which they might say 'I have finished seeing you'.[24]

A second example: a voluntary act is one preceded with a volition. Refutation: are volitions voluntary or not? If not, the act which it generated was not really voluntary. If so, we are off on a vicious infinite regress. Not a bad

[24] Actually, this strikes me as odd. What one would more naturally say in English is 'I have finished looking at you'. The example is also odd from a native German speaker, since in German there is no "present continuous" tense. Waismann's English is excellent; but there are signs that it is not perfect.

argument, but one might say that asking whether a volition is voluntary or not is ‘plain nonsense’.

Waismann concludes (p. 371): ‘This is meant not to belittle the argument or detract from its force, but only to get clear as to what sort of force it has.’ It is not conclusive, but then, no one has ever been able to conclusively disprove the existence of the Greek gods. What is disturbing (p. 372):

> is the ease with which arguments can be cast into pseudo-deductive moulds. And it is this fact to which I wish to call attention by examining the argument. As has been shown in the preceding discussion, it is not an isolated case. No philosophic argument ends with a Q.E.D. However forceful, it never forces. There is no bullying in philosophy, neither with the stick of logic nor with the stick of language.

Waismann is right that any philosophical argument can be challenged. Actually, all arguments, possibly with the exception of mathematical arguments (at least as Weismann understands them), can be challenged. This is just as true of scientific arguments, as Waismann is well aware. So this tells us nothing specifically about philosophy

One cannot help but feel that, by taking proof to be of the kind available in mathematics, he is setting the bar for what counts as a good argument far too high. The flat-Earther can counter all the arguments for the fact that the Earth is a globe. The view is a paradigm of irrationality, however.

Actually, even in mathematics, arguments can be challenged. Indeed, it is not unknown for “mathematical theorems” to suffer rejection, as demonstrated by Lakatos’ *Proofs and Refutations*.[25] It might be argued that this is not the case once the proof is fully set out in a formal logical deduction. But even this is false, since the logic itself may be challenged, as Brouwer’s challenge to “classical logic” reminds us.[26]

Nothing, in the end, jumps the bar as high as Waismann has set it.

3.6 Section VI: Judgement and Examples

Indeed, Waismann recognises this in the next section. This starts (p. 372):

[25] Lakatos (1976).

[26] See van Atten (2022).

> In throwing such strong doubts on the power of arguments as used by philosophers I may seem to deny them any value whatever. But such is not my intention. Even if they are lacking in logical rigor this certainly has not prevented an original thinker from using them successfully, or from bringing out something not seen before or not seen so clearly. So in the case I have discussed: something is seen in that argument, something is made clear, though perhaps not quite in the sense intended by the arguer. If so, something very important has been left out from the picture.

What?

Waismann explains: a philosopher does not prove their theory (p. 372):

> *He builds up a case.* First, he makes you see all the weaknesses, disadvantages, shortcomings of a position... [Then] he offers you a new way of looking at things not exposed to those objections. In other words, he submits to you, like a barrister, all the facts of his case, and you are in the position of the judge. You look at them carefully, go into the details, weigh the pros and cons and arrive at a verdict.

Waismann likens matters to how a judge in a courtroom proceeds (p. 373):

> A judge has to judge, we say, implying that he has to use discernment in contrast to applying, machine-like, a set of mechanical rules. There are no computing machines for doing the judge's work nor could there be any—a trivial yet significant fact. When the judge reaches a decision this may be, and in fact often is, a rational result, yet not one obtained by deduction; it does not simply follow from such-and-such: what is required is insight, judgment.

Indeed so. The analogy is a good one. But the view seems surprising only if one identifies rationality with formal deduction—a view which even Artificial Intelligence has now given up.

But then, belittling the use of argument again, we have (p. 373 f.):

> What do you find in reading Ryle or Wittgenstein? Lots of examples with little or no logical bone in between. Why so many examples? They speak for themselves; they usually are more

> transparent than the trouble maker; each one acts as an analogy; together they light up the whole linguistic background with the effect that the case before us is seen in the light they produce. Indeed, examples aptly arranged are often more convincing and, above all, of a more lasting effect than an argument which is anyhow spidery. Not that the "proofs" proffered are valueless...but they point only. The real strength lies in the examples. All the proofs, in a good book on philosophy, could be dispensed with, without its losing a whit of its convincingness.

Now, it cannot be denied that examples are important in philosophy. They clarify, explain, pump intuitions. But saying that the proofs (better: arguments) could be dispensed with really is going too far. A legal judgment does not just give examples, though it may appeal them in the form of precedents. It reasons from laws and legal principles to a conclusion—and does so essentially. Similarly for the philosopher. Take the arguments out of any philosophical text you choose, and the result will be unintelligible. This is even true of the philosopher who comes closest to Waismann's paradigm: the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*. Do a text search and see how many times the words *therefore, because*, *so*, *if ... then*, and similar inference-indicators show up in the text. The same goes for Waismann's own essay!

In something of an admission that he has just overstepped the mark, Waismann then adds (p. 374):

> In order to forestall misinterpretations which will otherwise certainly arise I have to concede one point: arguments on a small scale, containing a few logical steps only, may be rigorous. The substance of my remarks is that the conception of a whole philosophical view—from Heraclitus to Nietzsche or Bradley—is never a matter of logical steps.

True, it is never simply a matter of deduction. Even if deduction of some kind is involved, the premises must come from somewhere. But now Waismann has turned his claim into something of a truism.

The next and final paragraph of the section signals one final twist along our path: if you cannot arrive at a philosophical position by deduction, how do you get there?

3.7 Section VII: Vision

The section starts with an apparently new train of thought (p. 374):

> To ask, "What is your aim in philosophy?" and to reply, "To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle"' is ... well, honor where it is due, I suppress what I was going to say; except perhaps this. There is something deeply exciting about philosophy, a fact not intelligible on such a negative account. It is not a matter of "clarifying thoughts" nor of "the correct use of language" nor of any other of these damned things. What is it?

The textual reference is, of course to Wittgenstein (*Investigations* §309).

Waismann's answer comes as a new surprise (p. 374 f):

> Philosophy is many things and there is no formula to cover them all. But if I were asked to express in one single word what is its most essential feature I would unhesitatingly say: vision. At the heart of any philosophy worth the name is vision and it is from there it springs and takes its visible shape. When I say "vision" I mean it... What is characteristic of philosophy is the piercing of that dead crust of tradition and convention, the breaking of those fetters which bind us to inherited preconceptions, so as to attain a new and broader way of looking at things.

To see things in a new light is the central feature of all philosophy—at least all philosophical revolutions (p. 375):

> It has always been felt that philosophy should reveal to us what is hidden... Yet from Plato to Moore and Wittgenstein every great philosopher was led by a sense of vision: without it no one could have given a new direction to human thought or opened windows into the not-yet-seen. Though he may be a good technician, he will not leave his marks on the history of ideas. What is decisive is a new way of seeing and, what goes with it, the will to transform the whole intellectual scene. This is the real thing and everything else is subservient to it.

Of course, Waismann is aware that there is lots of perfectly respectable philosophy which is not of this kind. We might call this 'normal philosophy', by

analogy with what Kuhn calls 'normal science' in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (*SSR*). But great philosophy is intellectual—even phenomenological—revolution.

Naturally, once someone has had such a vision, they will try to show it to others (p. 375):

> The arguments he will offer, the attacks he will make, the suggestions he will advance are all devised for one end: to win other people over to his own way of looking at things, to change the whole climate of opinion. Though to an outsider he appears to advance all sorts of arguments, this is not the decisive point. What is decisive is that he has seen things from a new angle of vision. Compared to that everything else is secondary. Arguments come only afterwards to lend support to what he has seen.

One cannot help but be reminded, again, of what Kuhn was to say, six years later, about scientific revolutions in *SSR*,[27]—a book which appeared, ironically enough, in the series *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, an offspring of the Vienna Circle, and edited by its (ex-?)members Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap.

Waismann even makes use of the Gestalt-shift metaphor used by Kuhn. What the philosophical radical sees is an aspect of the situation not seen before (p. 376):

> Suppose that you look at a picture-puzzle: at first you can see in it only a maze of lines; then, suddenly, you recognize a human face. Can you now, having discovered the face, see the lines as before? Clearly not. As with the maze of lines, so with the muddle cleared up by Hume [about causation]: to recapture the mood of the past, to travel back into the fog has become impossible—one of the big difficulties of understanding history of philosophy. It is for the same reason that the rise of the linguistic technique in our day has put an end to the great speculative systems of the past.

Waismann was wrong about both Hume and Wittgenstein ('the linguistic techniques of out day'). Recent philosophy, Popper aside, has found Hume on causation unsatisfactory. Like Waismann's supposed demand on rationality, the requirement of a relationship of entailment between cause and effect is

[27]Kuhn (1962). On Kuhn and the book, see Bird (2018).

just unreasonable. And the general acceptance of a Wittgensteinian version of linguistic philosophy, though it may have been generally agreed upon by the philosophers of Oxford and Cambridge when Waismann was writing, has now gone into history.

Indeed, Waismann goes on to note the similarities between science and philosophy, airing another Kuhnian theme: the scientific resort to philosophy in times of crisis (p. 377):

> Whenever science arrives at a crucial stage where the fundamental notions become uncertain and are held as it were in solution, disputes of an odd kind are breaking out. The mere fact that leading scientists, in spite of differences in temperament, outlook, etc., take part in them, feel bound to do so, should make us reflect. Now what the protagonists avowedly or unavowedly are trying to do is to win their fellow scientists over to their own way of thinking; and to the degree to which their arguments are attempts at changing the whole intellectual attitude they take on a philosophical character. Is this coincidence?

One also cannot but feel that Waismann's picture of philosophy, like Kuhn's picture of science, is something of an over-reaction to the rather sterile picture they had inherited from the Vienna Circle (and—in Kuhn's case—its offspring, Logical Empiricism).

However, Waismann is right that changes in philosophy can open of whole new perspectives on matters, though this comes with its own dangers (p. 376):

> A philosophy is an attempt to unfreeze habits of thinking, to replace them by less stiff and restricting ones. Of course, these may in time themselves harden, with the result that they clog progress: Kant, the *Alleszermalmer* to his contemporaries, yet proudly upholding his table of categories—which appear to us unduly narrow. The liberator of yesterday may turn into the tyrant of tomorrow.

I think we are all familiar with philosophers who, somewhat unthinkingly, trot out the shibboleths of some orthodoxy or other.

3.8 Section VIII: Seeing Aspects

Waismann has one last twist in store for us in the final section. In this, he starts by returning to the subject of Gestalt switches. A philosophical radical sees an entirely new aspect of a situation. But what is that? (Of course aspect-seeing is a central issue in Part II of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.) Waismann gives the example of a logician who is struck by a structure inherent in a formula that they had never noticed before. Then (p. 378):

> This example may illustrate what is meant by the "seeing of a new aspect." Seeing such an aspect is often the core of a new discovery. If you look at the formulae, the moment you notice the new structure in them they suddenly seem to change—a phenomenon akin to seeing a figure, say, a drawn cube differently, now as solid and protruding, now as hollow and receding. The one pattern suddenly "jumps" into the other. Similarly in our case, though there are also differences; thus the new aspect, once it has dawned, can steadily be held in mind and has not that perceptual instability.

This kind of Gestalt shift shows how one can discover something without any process of argumentation—indeed entirely unexpectedly.

Waismann then reflects (p. 379 f):

> Is there any truth in what I am saying? I shall not argue. Instead, let me remind you of some observations which will be familiar to you. It is notorious that a philosophy is not made, it grows. You don't choose a puzzle, you are shocked into it. Whoever has pondered some time over some dark problem in philosophy will have noticed that the solution, when it comes, comes with a suddenness. It is not through working very hard towards it that it is found. What happens is rather that he suddenly sees things in a new light—as if a veil had been lifted that screened his view, or as if the scales had fallen from his eyes, leaving him surprised at his own stupidity not to have seen what was there quite plain before him all the time. It is less like finding out something and more like maturing, outgrowing preconceived notions.

Consistent with his own methodology, Waismann does not argue that philosophical discoveries are as he has described, but just reminds us of the situ-

ation when one has been struggling with a philosophical problem, and then is suddenly struck by a solution.

I think that most who have wrestled with a philosophical (or mathematical, or scientific) problem are familiar with this phenomenon. But of course there has to be much more to the matter than this. Even if there is such a moment of *satori* involved, this will not normally happen without much prior hard work examining and analysing various possibilities. Moreover, after it, the supposed insight has to be examined to see that it really does make sense of the situation. And such analyses require a good deal more than looking.

Still, Waismann avers—as might a Zen Buddhist might—that the instant of *satori* is they key element of the whole matter (p. 380):

> The view advocated here is that at the living center of every philosophy is a vision and that it should be judged accordingly. The really important questions to be discussed in the history of philosophy are not whether Leibniz or Kant were consistent in arguing as they did but rather what lies behind the systems they have built.

What lies behind is an aspect of things that no one had perceived before.

Waismann ends his meditation with a word on metaphysics, and another shot at the Vienna Circle (p. 380):

> To say that metaphysics is nonsense *is* nonsense. It fails to acknowledge the enormous part played at least in the past by those systems... There is something visionary about great metaphysicians as if they had the power to see beyond the horizons of their time.

The subtle details of Descartes' work are not important. What was important was his vision, which inspired those who came after him (p. 380):

> To go on with some hairsplitting as to what substance is and how it should be defined was to miss the message. It was a colossal mistake. A philosophy is there to be lived out. What goes into the word dies, what goes into the work lives.

With this vision of philosophy itself, Waismann concludes. We might summarise with Waismann's own words, 'Nicht *Klarwerden*, *Insicht* ist das Ziel der Philosophie'—not *clarity*, *insight* is the goal of philosophy.[28]

[28] Quoted by Markovec in Markovec and Shapiro (2019), p. 6.

3.9 Final Observations on Waismann

Let me end with two observations concerning Waismann's account.

First, Waismann, true to his own account of the nature of philosophy delivers a new perspective on philosophy itself—one, I think, that few have pondered deeply. It is clear that he overplays his hand in many places, as I noted: clarity is important; argument is important. Maybe this was the result of an over-reaction to the restricted framework of a certain philosophical education. Much the same may be said of Kuhn's *SSR*.

Notwithstanding, he has put his finger on something very important: the insight to be obtained from a new perspective. Seeing something (though not necessarily visually) in a different way can be crucial. Moreover, arguments given for the perspective may well we weak; indeed most of the arguments one finds in the texts of the great philosophers break when put under pressure; but that does not matter. It is the perspective itself that is important. Many philosophical perspectives are, to put it bluntly, somewhat bizarre at first appearances. Plato: the ultimately real are abstract objects inhabiting a realm outside space and time; Kant: space and time are not in reality, but only the way that we look at things; Heidegger: being hides itself and sets people (Dasein) the task of revealing it. Yet these perspectives can provide a tantalizingly attractive way of thinking about things.

This takes us to the second point. Does being able to see things in this way increase our understanding of them, or is the new framework just different from the old: something to ponder when we get bored with the old? We are back to the question of philosophical progress.

Oddly enough, Waismann says little about this matter. There is much about breaking through an old way of seeing things, but little about one perspective being an advance on another. Certainly, there is nothing better about seeing Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit[29] as a duck, rather than a rabbit. I think that supposing that the new perspective in philosophy is *merely* different would be an act of utter cynicism. But how does the new perspective constitute an advance?[30]

The answer, I take it, is that seeing something from a new perspective can well increase one's understanding of it. To use some examples: Learning a foreign language increases the understanding of one's native tongue. Simi-

[29] Wittgenstein (1953), p. 194.

[30] Interestingly, after the publication of *SSR*, Kuhn faced the charge of relativism from many critics—a change which he strenuously denied. See, e.g., Siegel (1987).

larly, living in a different culture increases one's understanding of one's own culture. One comes to see things that were before so obvious as to be hidden. One comes to see things that were taken for granted; things which can now be questioned, and so on. Nor does one have to come to the conclusion that the new culture is better than one's own—though one might. One can come to see both the weaknesses and the strengths one's own culture. The (argument by) analogy with a different philosophical perspective is obvious enough not to need labouring. Waismann might approve.

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