On Teaching Philosophy

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Abstract. Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy raises two questions about the teaching of philosophy and its place in a liberal arts curriculum. First, Wittgenstein denies that philosophy is a body of doctrine, affirms that it is an activity, and assumes that the two alternatives are incompatible. This implies that teaching a body of content is not teaching philosophy and leaves open the question whether there is any relevant sense of "teaching" appropriate to the activity. On the other hand, Wittgenstein understands ethics to be an autonomous inquiry, separate from philosophy, into what is most valuable and important. This view suggests that concerns about our human condition and future are beyond the reach of philosophy, and leaves open the question whether insight into them through philosophy is possible at all.
I discuss central features of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy to explore answers to these questions and to reject the suggestion that philosophy could turn out to be utterly irrelevant in the education and life of students. I propose that the value of philosophy resides in what we do and take Wittgenstein's eloquent metaphor from *Philosophical Investigations* as a point of reference: "what *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday uses"[1]. Philosophy, therefore, is not something we can teach, even though it is an activity we should encourage.

Keywords: philosophy, Wittgenstein, teaching, liberal arts, ethics.

I. Nature of Philosophy

Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy emphasizes activity, involves a return to something ordinary, leads to clarity rather than to discovery of facts, explanations, predictions, or ways of controlling what is the case, and

[1] Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Third Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1989, numbered section 116. Subsequently abbreviated as PI.
In the citations of Wittgenstein's work, I follow the convention of listing the numbered sections or entries rather than the pages, and employ capital letters to abbreviate the titles. I give the full citations the first time a work is mentioned and thereafter use the abbreviated name.

is radically different from science. These aspects of philosophy are presented in two remarks from the earlier and later periods of Wittgenstein's career to which I want to devote attention in this section. One of them is the remark that "philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity"[2], where Wittgenstein speaks about what philosophy is by indicating what it excludes. The other is a metaphorical description given in the *Philosophical Investigations* and already mentioned, where he says "what *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday uses."

In the first remark, the meaning of the expression 'activity' is really given by the *contrast* with "body of doctrine", for a body of doctrine is always the by-product of some activity but not itself activity. The remark, then, serves to call attention to the dangers of failing to distinguish philosophy from the results of the activity. This failure leads to pernicious abstraction and is a form of reductionism.

In addition, denying that philosophy is a body of doctrine has two significant implications about the value of philosophy and the teaching of philosophy. The first is that philosophy is not the sort of thing that can be held (or taught) as dogma – *this* is what the word 'doctrine' means[3]. The second is simply that to undertake philosophy is a matter of doing something, or getting involved with an activity, rather than a matter of undergoing or receiving or studying. The remark, then, serves to remind us of the dangers of reducing philosophy to a subject and the teaching of philosophy to instruction.

Philosophy and science are categorically different activities (TLP 4.111). Science is concerned with making truth-claims about what is or is not the case and with articulating them into a corpus. Philosophy, on the other hand, "does not result in 'philosophical propositions', but rather in the clarification of propositions" (TLP 4.112) and has no corpus of its own. As Max Black succinctly puts it, "philosophy has nothing to *say*: it is an activity (not a theory) directed towards the clarification of thoughts."[4]

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[2] Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by David Pears and Brian McGuiness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, numbered entry 4.112. Subsequently abbreviated TLP.

[3] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Tenth Edition. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1993. s.v. 'doctrine': (2a): "Something that is taught"; (2b): "a principle or position or the body of principles in a branch of knowledge or system of belief: dogma".

[4] Black, M. *A Companion to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus'*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964, p. 185.

The value of philosophical activity is connected to the acknowledgement of plain and familiar facts that often escape notice because of their familiarity. One is, as Wittgenstein says, "unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes." (PI 129)

The remark that "the work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (PI 127) gives us a useful description of philosophical activity. Clearly, the task at hand is not to discover or state new facts but one requiring us to pay attention to things normally taken for granted. In this way, philosophical activity reconnects us with something ordinary. This is at the center in the metaphor of *Philosophical Investigations* 116, which bespeaks of philosophy as a return to the everyday. At the same time, the idea that philosophical works are really elucidations (TLP 4.112) connects the value of the products of philosophical activity to the attainment of clarity. In a seemingly paradoxical way, then, philosophy yields insight by returning to the familiar or ordinary and by reminding us of things that normally escape notice because of their familiarity.

In its commitment to making statements about what is the case, science is invested in actualities. The propositions of science inform us whether what happens is this or that, record newly discovered facts, discuss causal connections or other hypotheses, and advance explanations. Philosophy makes no such claims and, strictly speaking, issues no theses[5]. It brings to our attention "the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena" (PI 90) and with these "the 'possibilities' of phenomena", rather than just actualities or phenomena.

Similar points are made in the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein indicates that "a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations", and that philosophy does not result in propositions but in the clarification of propositions (TLP 4.112). Elucidations do not serve the function of informing or claiming anything; they rearrange what we have always known and serve as reminders. Unlike empirical statements, elucidations are not concerned with "whether what actually happens is this or that", with stating facts of nature, or with causal connections; they are concerned with the possibilities of phenomena (PI 90), which it is their function and point to illuminate. This clearly distinguishes elucidations from truth-claims and in particular from empirical claims, which are about actualities rather than

[5] "If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them." (PI 128)

possibilities. Elucidations can be appraised in terms of having or lacking sense but not in terms of truth-value.

Wittgenstein says that the business of philosophy is to make it possible for us to get a clear view of problems *before* they are resolved (PI 125) and that philosophy "simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything." (PI 126) The emphasis is on perspicuously displaying relationships over making or justifying statements.

Wittgenstein traces the source of the traditional problems of philosophy back to internal features of our language. This alters our received understanding of them and of the practice of philosophy. His conception of philosophy suggests that the traditional problems of philosophy are best regarded as dead-ends[6] into which we routinely fall because the grammar of our language does not display perspicuously how expressions are used in activities. In this light, the return of professional philosophers and teachers to these problems certainly shows a connection of philosophical activity to its past[7], but it does not confer to the traditional problems of philosophy any special status or depth. We can understand their recurrence simply as a matter of grammar and, when this is accomplished, we can effectively put them behind. For this reason, the value or significance of philosophy cannot reside in the fixed aspects of the practice and its history.

II. Encouraging philosophy

In this section, I take for granted the conception of philosophy outlined and show why philosophy ought to be encouraged rather than cultivated.

The idea that philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity implies that, properly speaking, philosophy is not something of which one could come to have knowledge, and brings attention to the dangers of reducing the activity to the school subject with which it is some times confused. Philosophy is an activity driven by the need to overcome conceptual confusion and attain clarity. It aims at addressing confusion and misunderstanding at their source. By making the source of our problems explicit, philosophy helps us eliminate or dissipate them. Conceptual confusion is rooted in language, it has to be felt, or experienced before it can be addressed, and it cannot be addressed vicariously, or without

[6] PI 436

[7] I think that this connection is contingent. For a different view, see: Stroll, A. *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 3.

personal involvement. Encouraging is just what this involvement on the part of the student calls for.

Philosophy is not reducible to any one particular kind of activity or doing. It includes everything we do to address and eliminate confusion. It follows that philosophy is not reducible to any method, procedure, strategy, or sequence of operations.

Philosophy is not a pursuit one properly speaking cultivates, for *not* running away is not the object of any target or effort. The clarity that is gained after a problem has been solved is not a goal one could independently cultivate. Clarity is gained with respect to our understanding of this or that problem, rather than in absolute terms. The value of philosophy is derived from the conceptual misunderstandings we come to be in a position to solve by pursuing the activity, yet the misunderstandings are not *pursued*, but something one should want to overcome. Finally, to say of an activity that it is open to cultivation connects it to the idea of purpose and suggests a plan to reach a target or goal. This is a misleading picture, because conscientious people simply run into problems or catch themselves in the midst of misunderstandings, and neither these nor the steps we take to overcome them are planned or fixed events.

It is more appropriate then to speak of encouraging than of cultivating philosophy.

I assume that in teaching philosophy, we want our students to acknowledge confusion and work diligently to dispel it; that we want them to accept the reality of misunderstandings in the human world; and that we want them *not* to turn the other way, *not* to ignore, and *not* to be afraid. These attitudes require courage and nurturing and are best promoted in an environment of mutual trust. Because 'encouraging' bespeaks of courage while 'cultivating' lacks this reference, 'encouraging' describes the task of bringing the teaching of philosophy to life better than 'cultivating'. Encouraging suggests confronting, or helping others confront, fear. 'Cultivating' resonates with 'culture' and 'cult' and invites an idea of work aimed at developing mastery of a discipline or technique, rather than the idea of work centered on our own selves.

'Encouraging' –being a transitive verb- makes reference to an object. It also presupposes that something is already under way, and –unlike 'discouraging-- that it is worth doing or supporting. We may then ask what is taken for granted in encouraging philosophy.

I propose that in the teaching of philosophy, we should want to encourage a sincere exploration of ideas and an acknowledgment of

confusion. Since this admission is a first-person act, encouraging students begins with this decision, and not impersonally.

Encouraging philosophy, whether in our selves or in others, goes hand-in-hand with taking two things for granted. The first is the *possibility* of becoming confused, which is distinctively human and uniquely connected to the fact that we are language users. This possibility is open to us all, for all of us (with the exception of infants and the severely retarded or mentally ill) can at any time become entangled or confused. That we can miss our way is a plain observation of just the sort Wittgenstein calls "facts of our natural history"[8]. I want to suggest that philosophy is grounded in this possibility of loosing sight or becoming confused, for without it there would be no need for clarity and no drive to do philosophy.

Encouraging the activity should lead us to question "the usual way of doing things"[9] if and when the fixed aspects of the practice become impediments. We want to discourage taking theses and systems as primary, putting justification and knowledge before clarity, and dismissing context. In place of these, we want to encourage attention to the circumstances in which we say what we say, and discourage abstraction.

In encouraging attention to what we say in context, we want to encourage a return to something ordinary, namely, language and activities, and a kind of work that is within, rather than beyond, the world, for our language and activities are something empirical and given, rather than other-wordly[10]. However, making sense of what we say in context is not simply a matter of making statements, and so the activity we want to encourage is different from science.

III. The significance of philosophy

My main thesis is that philosophy is grounded in the possibility of confusion and misunderstanding, and that it is an activity driven by the need or will to acknowledge and sort these human experiences. I suggest that philosophy is grounded in these experiences in order to indicate that it is significant and important on a human scale, rather than just in the hands and lives of experts or professional philosophers.

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[8] Facts of natural history are uncontroversial, universal, and contingent. The plain statements of fact about them are purely descriptive, and are the focus of attention of natural history as contrasted with science. See Garver, N. *This complicated form of life. Essays on Wittgenstein*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1994, p. 155.

[9] *Merriam-Webster's*, s.v. 'practice' (1c).

[10] Garver, N. *This complicated form of life*, p. 270-271.

However, I find it impossible to deny that the problems we are in a position to overcome are conceptual ones, and these are to be distinguished from the ethical, political, and spiritual concerns with which thoughtful people are acquainted, which concerns philosophy cannot solve or eliminate. Conceptual problems are like others in that they have to be acknowledged before they can be addressed. Unlike other concerns, however, they are completely eliminated when we come to understand their roots in language and are no longer troubled or puzzled.

The significance of philosophy is tied to the way in which it is practiced; it derives from the way in which it is carried out, or from the activity. Thus a correct appreciation of philosophy presupposes clarity concerning the question what it is we do, and extends as far, but not farther than this. The metaphor that Wittgenstein presents in the *Philosophical Investigations* (116) spells this out: "what we do – he says– is to bring words *back* from their metaphysical to their everyday uses." Philosophy goes about problems with an interest in solving them. The point of bringing words back is to solve the problems and to move on with life. For those who are not stumbling, there is no reason to recommend bringing words back.

The value of philosophy, however, extends to everyone, and not just to the professional philosophers or to those actually confused or lost, but it is not derived from hope of answers or solutions. Philosophy has human significance, despite the air of paradox of this observation. How can bringing words back to their everyday uses have any significance for those who have not been troubled by conceptual problems? Furthermore, how can *what we do* have any significance on a human scale, when philosophy does not solve the "problems of life" that are the concern of large numbers of people?

Wittgenstein's metaphorical description of what *we* do, to wit, "bringing words back to their everyday uses", is not routinely part of what people outside the profession of philosophy do. Since the activity is driven by problems, there is little reason to recommend minute attention to uses of language when there are no problems to solve. Yet in the primary sense of the expression and in the sense I take it to have in Wittgenstein's discussions, philosophy is not what the experts do, and it need not be the exclusive occupation of any one particular group of people. Philosophy is what people troubled in specific ways – conceptually– do in their attempts to find a way out of the difficulties. Everybody, save for the exceptions already noted, can be distressed by conceptual problems, in the sense that

no one is immune to the *possibility* of becoming confused or entangled. This possibility and its liabilities are rooted in language. For this reason, philosophy is significant or valuable not just to experts and professional philosophers but to language users, and it is immediately valuable to any thoughtful or conscientious person, regardless of the actual concerns they may happen to have at any given time.

Yet not all our concerns are successfully solved by bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday uses. Philosophy cannot eliminate the "problems of life", as any conscientious person troubled by them could attest, and it is not even clear whether these concerns are problems at all, for they do not seem to be questions for which answers *could* actually be found. This is the position Wittgenstein seems to take in the *Tractatus*, as the following remarks eloquently indicate. "We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer." (TLP 5.52). Immediately after this Wittgenstein remarks that "the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem" (TLP 6.521) and poignantly asks: "Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?" (TLP 6.521)

These comments suggest that the value of philosophy is not to be assessed by its success in making the "problems of life" disappear. It is not just that bringing words back does nothing to remove them, or that philosophers are in no special situation to solve them, but that the concerns are not of the sort that philosophical activity is in a position to address. I think that this is the significance of Wittgenstein's insistence in keeping ethics and aesthetics separate from philosophy. He seems to have recognized that there are concerns that do not go away when we gain the requisite clarity and perspective about what we say in context.

Insisting that a distinction between ethics and philosophy be maintained is a way of acknowledging that there are more concerns than philosophy can address, more concerns than there are conceptual problems. This goes hand-in-hand with recognizing that philosophy has limits. Whether or not this was Wittgenstein's position, it is useful to recognize limits to philosophy.

I have argued that understanding philosophy as an activity aimed at dispelling confusion and misunderstanding by way of a return to the grammar of ordinary language gives us at least one powerful reason to

make room for it in an education aimed at the whole person. What we have good reasons to encourage is not a school subject but an activity that brings us back from metaphysical abstractions and speculation into the things we say and do, in order to dispel confusion and gain perspective and insight into some of our misunderstandings and divisions. Encouraging this activity does not increase our knowledge of anything, hence it does not add to our power to predict and control what happens or is the case. Philosophy does not increase our dominance over nature or the world of human affairs. It sharpens our perception and our ability to discover alternatives and possibilities. The commitment to dispelling confusion and discover alternatives gives to *what we do* immense value and urgency in our time.