

# Later Wittgenstein on ‘Truth’: A Therapeutic Reading

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In philosophical discussion of this whole subject, very little attention has been paid to the actual use of ‘true’.

—P.F. Strawson, ‘Truth’, p. 95

Let me suggest a diagnosis of our aporia about truth. We are still under the spell of the Socratic idea that we must keep asking for the essence of an idea [...] But the same ugly urge to define shows up in the guise of trying to provide a brief criterion, schema, partial but leading hint, in place of a strict definition.

—Donald Davidson, ‘The Folly of Trying to Define Truth’, pp. 275-6

# Introduction

- **What is later Wittgenstein's view of 'truth'?**

“Later Wittgenstein” = author of the *Philosophical Investigations* (abbreviated as PI)  
& *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (RFM)

- **Common & influential response:**

Wittgenstein was a *deflationist* about truth.

- See esp. Dummett (1978), Kripke (1982), Blackburn (2010), McGinn (1984), Horwich (2010, 2018)

- I'll offer a focused reading that shows Wittgenstein was **not** a deflationist about truth – as that position is typically defined.

# Deflationism (or, Minimalism) about Truth

- Truth is **NOT** a substantive metaphysical property.
- Deflationists are impressed by (some version of) the following schema:

(**T**) The proposition that p is true if and only if p.

- ‘[T]he concept MEANING is more fundamental than the concept TRUTH’ (Horwich 2010: 4).
- ‘[N]o further fact about the truth predicate—nothing beyond our allegiance to [(T)]—is needed to explain *any* of our ways of using it’ (*ibid.*, 37).
- ***Why do we need ‘truth’, then?*** – It allows us to express certain generalizations, e.g.: “Everything Tamara said yesterday is true.”

# Evidence that Wittgenstein was a Deflationist

- [1] “p” is true says nothing else but p. (*Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 9)
- [2] ‘p’ is true = p  
‘p’ is false = not-p. (PI, 136) (circa **1937**)
- [3] Ramsey is cited as an influence of the PI – and he famously defended the “redundancy theory of truth”.
- [4] Wittgenstein’s general hostility to metaphysics.
- [5] ‘Use theory of meaning’ and rejection of ‘Augustinian picture’ go hand-in-hand with deflationism about truth (and reference).

Horwich (2018)

# Context of the *Philosophical Investigations*

- The quotes in isolation are suggestive – but ignore broader **context** of the PI.
- Two aspects of the context deserve special note:
  - (1) The project of the PI and the distinctive method of philosophy Wittgenstein deploys in that text
  - (2) Wittgenstein's remarks about truth are part of a sustained self-critique of his earlier views about 'the essence of the proposition and of language'
- *To be clear:*
  - My aim is to better understand what later W had to say about truth
  - I am not aiming to defend or give an argument on W's behalf, intended to persuade everyone
  - But feel free to raise philosophical challenges in the Q&A – I'll put on my "Wittgenstein hat"

# Context (1): Philosophy as ‘Therapy’

- Wittgenstein’s radical conception of how philosophy *should* be done.
- Phil-questions are treated ‘like an illness’ – i.e., with suspicion. We should ‘diagnose’ and ‘treat’ them – i.e., examine their sources without any aspiration to theory – aiming to dissolve rather than answer them via ‘therapy’.
- ‘Diagnosis’: phil-problems arise from misunderstandings about actual word-use.
- The apparent similarities between different kinds of words encourage us to assimilate them – concocting misbegotten ‘pictures’ of their meaning. We can counteract such pictures with ‘reminders’ – by *describing* use.
- Language-games: serve as descriptive *ideal* and as objects of *comparison*.

(see especially PI 100-133ff)

## Context (2): Self-critique of *Tractatus*

- Therapy requires a *subject* or *participant*.
- *Who* is asking the question and what is motivating *that person* to ask it?
- Examine their presuppositions and motives to better understand their question;
  - by showing those presuppositions (etc.) to be ill-founded, their question can be dissolved.
- This is *especially* important for Wittgenstein's brief remarks on 'truth':
  - PI 134-6 are part of a 'self-therapy' or -critique of W's early *Tractarian* views.

# *Tractatus*: Propositions and Truth

- An account of the ‘essence of language’ via ‘the general form of the proposition’.
- Any proposition is either *atomic* or composed of truth-functional combinations of atomic propositions (&,  $\vee$ ,  $\sim$ ,  $\rightarrow$ , etc.). [**N**-operator]
- Atomic proposition = names referring to simple objects; put into a certain arrangement – every proposition is a ‘picture’.
- ‘Determinacy of sense’: a meaningful proposition involves no ambiguity about what it refers to or whether its true.
- A proposition is true or false by virtue of representing a state of affairs.
- Whether p is true or false: determined by comparison with facts.
- “The general form of a proposition is: This is how things stand” (TLP 4.5).



# *Investigations: A Sustained Critique of TLP*

- [1] Critique of the ‘Augustinian picture’ = the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands (PI 1ff).
- [2] Critique of ‘absolute simples’ (allegedly) revealed via analysis (PI 43ff).
- [3] Critique of idea that *meaning* is revealed via such an analysis; replaced with suggestion that (by and large) best way to understand meaning of an expression is by looking at its *use* (PI 43ff).
- [4] Critique of ‘determinacy of sense’: expressions *can* be meaningful without being ‘determinate’ – allowing vagueness and gray area in ordinary expressions & concepts (PI 70ff).
- **I mention the above *only* to make clear that Wittgenstein’s remarks on ‘truth’ are *part of this* sustained critique of TLP.**

## ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

Let’s examine this sentence “This is how things are”. – How can I say that this is the general form of propositions? – It is first and foremost *itself* a sentence, an English sentence, for it has a subject and a predicate. But how is this sentence applied – that is, in our everyday language? For I got it from *there*, and nowhere else. (PI 134)

- TLP 4.5: “The general form of proposition is: This is how things stand.”
- “This is how things are”: a sentence from ordinary language.
- How is it used?
- “bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI 116)

## ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

We say, for example, “He explained his position to me, said that this was how things were, and that therefore he needed an advance”. So far, then, one can say that this sentence stands for some statement or other. It is employed as a propositional *schema*, but *only* because it has the construction of an English sentence. One could easily say instead “such-and-such is the case”, “things are thus-and-so”, and so on. [...] But surely no one is going to call [any of these] the general form of propositions. (PI 134)

- “This is how things are” refers to a previous claim.
- Its ordinary use has nothing to do with the essential inner-workings of propositions.

## ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

But haven’t we got a concept of what a proposition is, of what we understand by “proposition”? – Indeed, we do; just as we also have a concept of what we understand by “game”. Asked what a proposition is – whether it is another person or ourselves that we have to answer – we’ll give examples [...]. So, it is in *this* way that we have a concept of a proposition. (PI 135)

- ‘Proposition’ is akin to ‘game’.
- I.e., ‘proposition’ is a family resemblance concept.
- We explain the concept with *examples*.

## ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family [...] overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family. [...] And we extend our concept [...], as in spinning a thread we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of the many fibers. (PI 67)

- Mistake to look for ‘the general form of propositions’.
- No common feature *by virtue of which* all propositions are propositions.
- *Might* find a common feature, but it will not ‘reveal the essence’.
- We explain with *examples*.

# ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

Consider the **variety** of language-games, in the following examples and others:

- Giving orders, and acting on them -
- Describing an object by its appearance, or by its measurements -
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) -
- Reporting an event -
- Speculating about the event -
- Forming and testing a hypothesis -
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams -
- Making up a story; and reading one -
- Acting in a play -
- Singing rounds -
- Guessing riddles -

- Cracking a joke; telling one -
- Solving a problem in applied arithmetic -
- Translating from one language into another -
- Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

- It is interesting to compare the diversity of the tools of language and of the ways they are used, the diversity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (**This includes the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.**) (PI 23)

# ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

At bottom, giving “This is how things are” as the general form of propositions is the same as giving the explanation: **a proposition is whatever can be true or false**. For instead of “This is how things are”, I could just as well have said “**Such-and-such is true**”. (Or again, “**Such-and-such is false**”.) But

‘p’ is true = p

‘p’ is false = not-p

And to say that a proposition is whatever can be true or false amounts to saying: we call something a proposition if *in our language* we apply the calculus of truth functions to it. (PI 136)

- Another attempt at the general form of p.
- “Such-and-such is true” is unhelpful: there’s no special difference between saying p and ‘p’ is true.
- Trivial: “we call something a prop. if we apply ‘true’/‘false’ to it.”

## ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

Now it looks as if the explanation – a proposition is whatever can be true or false – determined what a proposition was, by saying: what fits the concept ‘true’, or what the concept ‘true’ fits, is a proposition. So it is as if we had a concept of true and false, which we could use to ascertain what is, and what is not, a proposition. (PI 136)

- It might *seem* like we have an independent grasp of ‘true’ – which might reveal what a prop. *really* is...



# ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

But this is a **bad picture**. It is as if one were to say “The chess king is *the* piece that one puts in check”. But this can mean no more than that in our game of chess only the king is put in check. Just as the proposition that only a *proposition* can be true can say no more than that we predicate “true” and “false” only of what we call a proposition. And what a proposition is, is in *one* sense determined by the rules of sentence formation (in English, for example), and in another sense **by the use of the sign in the language-game**. And the use of the words “true” and “false” may also be a constituent part of this game; and **we treat it as *belonging* to our concept ‘proposition’, but it doesn’t ‘fit’ [that concept]**. As we might also say, check *belongs* to our concept of the chess king (as, so to speak, a constituent part of it). (PI 136)

- Explaining ‘prop.’ with ‘true’ is akin to explaining ‘king’ via ‘check’.
- We learn ‘king’ and ‘check’ together, one is not “more fundamental” than the other.
- ‘King’ and ‘check’ are understood by seeing how they function in the game.
- Same with ‘prop.’ and ‘true’.

## ‘Truth’ and ‘Proposition’ in PI 134-6

The word “accord” and the word “rule” are ***related*** to one another; they are **cousins**. If I teach anyone the use of the one word, he learns the use of the other with it. (PI 224)

The use of the word “rule” and the use of the word “same” are interwoven. **(As are the use of “proposition” and the use of “true”.)** (PI 225)

- ‘**p**’ is true = **p** illustrates that ‘true’ and ‘prop.’ are *interwoven*.
- ‘True’ and ‘prop.’ are *cousins*.
- Inseparable – in *our* language-games.
- Learned together.
- Neither is “more fundamental”.

# Why Wittgenstein was not a Deflationist

- Deflationism:
  - (T) tells us everything we need to know about ‘true’.
  - ‘[T]here is a correct order of grounding among [the concepts ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’]—a definite hierarchy whereby the more superficial ones [‘truth’] reduce to the more basic ones [‘meaning’]’ (Horwich 2010: 113).
- Wittgenstein would **disagree** with the idea that (T) *tells us everything*.
- He would also **disagree** that ‘true’ is “*less fundamental*” or “*more superficial*” than ‘proposition’ or ‘meaning’ – they *belong* together, they are ‘cousins’
- Wittgenstein invites us to ask the following:
  - How do we *use* the word ‘true’? (*Describe* the use, don’t formalize it)
  - How does it relate to ‘knowledge’, ‘accuracy’, ‘correctness’, ‘success’, ‘honesty’, ‘sincerity’, ‘deception’, etc. (conceptual ‘cousins’ of ‘true’)?
  - How should we understand the life of someone who identifies as a ‘truth-seeker’? (Wittgenstein: “Call me a truth-seeker and I will be satisfied”.)
  - And so on ...

# Why Wittgenstein was not a Deflationist

- “*But Wittgenstein still agrees with deflationists that ‘truth’ is not a special metaphysical property ...*”
- It’s true! W resists ‘substantive theories of truth’. But also resists aims of deflationism.
- Deflationists want to tell a *simple* yet *complete* story about role of truth  
– one that shows it is trivial or superficial.
  
- Wittgenstein emphasizes that ‘true’ and ‘proposition’ are conceptually on a par.  
Asks us to *describe* their various uses & the language-games containing them.
- W’s concern about ‘theory’: it encourages us to depart from an honest effort to study the details of word-use – to see all language through the arbitrary requirements of theory  
(see esp. PI 101, 103, 114).
  
- **The problem about truth, if there is one, is not that there is so little to say, but rather that there is too much to say than can be confined to a narrow formula.**

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