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Catch Me If You Can — Wittgenstein on the Ineffability of Logical Form

Abstract. Logical form and logical analysis as the search for it have been introduced during the development of logic and analytical philosophy and are still widely considered as key tools or methods for the solution of philosophical puzzles. It is instructive to have a look at a criticism of these presuppositions and I present Wittgenstein as the author who provides such a criticism. I present a development of his view of logical form which went from the thesis of the ineffability of logical form to the denial of the meaningfulness of the notion of logical form as such. This refusal is linked to Wittgenstein's abandonment of the idea of the language of pure experience. The method of philosophical therapies is presented as an alternative to logical analysis and this methodology is linked with Wittgenstein's consideration of game and family resemblance.

Keywords: logical form; Wittgenstein; game; therapy

1. Introduction

As with many other issues, it is not easy to capture what exactly was Wittgenstein's view of logical form, given the fragmentary character of the vast body of his works. Even more, given his general anti-theoretical stance, it is problematic to suppose that he had a single message to convey. Nevertheless, it is clear that he had quite a lot to say about logical form during all the stages of his development from the *Tractatus* until his last writings. It is also very plausible to suppose that his view of logical form underwent some development. I will try to tell a story of this development and indicate what lessons today's debate may still take from his more or less direct pronouncements on this topic.

2. The notion of logical form

A complex and perhaps elusive concept such as that of the logical form will naturally offer many possibilities of how one can spell it out in detail. In fact, it might be very plausible to speak of many interrelated concepts of logical form. Nevertheless, I will argue that Wittgenstein would be generally opposed to most of the specific articulations this notion has received. From the beginning, he disputed the meaningfulness of a search for logical form; later on he disputed the meaningfulness of the notion of logical form itself. I will begin by sketching the general view of what one may mean by logical form. In other words, I start by a cursory portrait of the enemy I think Wittgenstein wanted to attack. The description of the attack should then render it comprehensible, though probably not trivial, to understand how the attacks against more specific forms of the notion would go, if Wittgenstein had cared to engage in these attacks.

Logical form is easily introduced by means of a contrast with grammatical form. While the exact wording of what we want to say may influence many aspects of the final message, there is supposed to be some core meaning which one can capture and in contrast with which all those slight nuances are unimportant. In this sense, Frege claims that the sentences "The Greeks defeated the Persians at Platea" and "The Persians were defeated by the Greeks at Platea" mean the same for him because they have the same logical properties (Frege, 1967, p. 12). Put simply, what can be inferred from one, can be also inferred from the other one. Analogously, they can also both be inferred from the very same premises. Frege admits in this passage that "a slight difference in meaning can be detected" (Frege, 1967, p. 12) but this difference is supposed to play no role in his system. Given the focus on inferential properties of a sentence, it is not very surprising that Brandom saw in Frege a precursor of his inferentialism, the thesis that the meaning of a sentence consists precisely in the inferential relations it stands in, as he formulated the doctrine in (Brandom, 2000). What remains after abstracting from the unimportant details, Frege calls "conceptual content" (Frege, 1967, p. 12).

If we acknowledge that it makes sense to speak of a logical form of a given sentence, then the path is open to surmise that the logical form can differ from the grammatical form in a dramatic way. The grammatical form can then be dangerous, as it can convey false impressions of the logical form. Though Frege indicated the difference clearly enough in

the example with Persians and Greeks, it was Russell who came up with the application of this difference which really made it prominent. He did this when analyzing definite descriptions in (Russell, 1905). Although the sentence "The king of France is bald" does not speak of existential quantification on its grammatical surface, quantification really takes place in the depths of the logical form, Russell believed. According to his analysis, the sentence is then correctly analyzed as claiming the existence of an individual which is unique in that it is both a king of France and bald. In this way, Russell manages to circumvent philosophically complicated reflections on the content and truth value of a sentence which seem to speak of an inexistent (non-)entity. It is not surprising that this analysis drew attention to the notion of logical form, as in this case the contrast between logical and grammatical form appears to be particularly deep and yet so easily overlooked without careful logical analysis.

Reckoning with the notion of a logical form ultimately boils down to the idea that what a given sentence really says can be misrepresented by its grammatical form. The true meaning or the logical form is then to be found by a specific activity called logical analysis. Belief in the logical form and that the search for it is in important cases a non-trivial undertaking forms indeed one of the central tenets of analytical philosophy. A good later representative is Quine. Even when he argues against the notion of a meaning of a single sentence in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, when he considers whether it could be defined by the means of the notion of synonymy, he admonishes:

> Now let us be clear that we are not concerned here with synonymy in the sense of complete identity in psychological associations or poetic quality; indeed no two expressions are synonymous in such a sense. We are concerned only with what may be called *cognitive synonymy*.
>
> (Quine, 1951, p. 28)

Despite some differences which may be detected in the quotes from Frege and Quine, we see that they agree that it makes sense to distinguish between logical and grammatical form. In Quine, *cognitive synonymy* play a role analogous to that of *conceptual content* in Frege: both express what the logical form is supposed to capture. They both presuppose the existence of meaning which is objective and independent of a given situation or intention of interlocutors. What could Wittgenstein think about this notion?

3. Some preliminaries on Wittgenstein and logical form

Although I will argue that Wittgenstein ultimately developed into a critic of the notion of logical form which I just sketched and that his criticism can be relatively straightforwardly extended to apply also to the current specifications of this sketch, I have to acknowledge that he might indeed go quite some way with the analytical mainstream. He shared a lot of conceptual presuppositions with both Russell and logical positivists.

Although many analytical interpretations of it might have been one-sided, the *Tractatus* was a key inspiration to many developments in the early analytical philosophy. And particularly the adherents of the Vienna Circle who were fascinated by Wittgenstein, were very much keen on unmasking apparently deep philosophical statements or questions as pseudo-statements or pseudo-questions. When Carnap tried to attack Heidegger's metaphysical pronouncements, he relied heavily on the idea that the logical form of some statements can radically differ from their grammatical form. In the specific case of Heidegger's dictum "Nichts nichtet", the verdict was that it lacked meaning (Carnap, 1931). It had no logical form then, despite having a grammatical one, as Carnap could have formulated his verdict. It did not really say anything, although it seemed to. The analysis resembles strongly that of Russell, because it is again a quantifier which is a part of the logical form which is concealed by the grammatical form. According to Carnap's diagnosis, Heidegger uses the term *Nichts*, i.e., *nothing* as if it denoted a specific entity, just as the phrase *the present king of France.* In the reality, that is in the logical form, though, *Nichts* or *nothing* is meaningfully used in order to negate existential quantification.

On the one hand, Wittgenstein himself obviously was not so harshly opposed the Heideggerian way of philosophizing, as is obvious from his rather favourable comments on Heidegger's discussion of nothingness (Wittgenstein, 1984a). Nevertheless, he did want to show that in fact all philosophical questions should be ultimately unmasked as pseudo-questions. Therefore, he shared a lot of motivation with those who believed in logical form. And even in his later philosophy, he spoke of philosophy as of a critique of language, particularly when claiming that the task of philosophy is the battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence caused by language (Wittgenstein, 2009, §109). Nevertheless, already in the *Tractatus* and even more later, he found a lot to disagree with in the idea of finding the logical form of a statement.

4. Logical form in the *Tractatus*

On my view, there is an important basic tenet which is common to both
early and later Wittgenstein. This tenet, though, underwent radical-
ization in his later thought. Let us begin by considering the following
pronouncement on logical form in the *Tractatus*:

> Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent
> what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to
> represent it — the logical form. To be able to represent the logical form,
> we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside
> logic, that is outside the world.   (Wittgenstein, 1922, 4.12)

Here we see that the commonalities with his early-analytic contempo-
raries are far from converging towards complete agreement. Wittgen-
stein speaks of logical form, yet he deems it inexpressible. Ascribing
the hidden logical form to a sentence as Russell or Carnap intended it
seems quite problematic from this point of view. Logical form, though,
plays a role quite consistent to that which his contemporaries ascribed
it. Namely, it is supposed to be at the very heart of the ability of our
language to say something. If we stick with the standard picture theory
interpretation of *Tractatus*, then representing the world is the main goal
of language. It is what defines language. And it is exactly because of
this fundamentality that Wittgenstein deems logical form to be inex-
pressible. Logical form enables us to say anything and trying to express
it, we would be relying on it so much that the expression cannot have
the requisite distance to what it expresses. This is the sense in which
Wittgenstein is an adherent of the conception of language as a universal
medium rather than as a calculus as this difference was established by
Kusch (1989), following Heijnoort (1967). This conception claims, with
some simplification, that we are too immersed into language as its users
in order to be able to describe how it works. If logic is understood as a
discipline which is supposed to unearth the logical forms of statements,
then it is doomed to fail. It is then only natural that Wittgenstein gives
the following verdict on logic:

> But the propositions of logic say the same thing. Namely, nothing.
>   (Wittgenstein, 1922, 5.43)

Wittgenstein thus consistently follows his admonishment that neither
logic nor philosophy can put forward any theses. He stuck to this view
from his early till his late philosophy. Although he did believe that it

can be shown that philosophical questions are based on misunderstandings, this cannot be done by the means of expressing the logical form of the purported philosophical statements. Logic or philosophy was not a theory but rather an activity for Wittgenstein already in his early period. This tendency, quite unique in the analytical tradition already, was about to be radicalized even more.

5. Logical form — a temptation to be resisted

Wittgenstein saw the temptation to find out what the true meaning of a certain kind of expression is, and he seems to have struggled with this temptation himself, which is testified to by the very title of his article from the transition period *Some remarks on logical form* (Wittgenstein, 1929). This temptation was also linked to his search for a phenomenological language as documented in (Beran, 2013), correlated to the attempts by Russell to reduce all knowledge to knowledge by acquaintance, as well as the search of the logical positivists for the protocol sentences. This search for phenomenological language was, nevertheless, merely a transitory motif in Wittgenstein's work.

Ultimately Wittgenstein dissociated himself even more from the idea of the search for logical form and even from the idea of logical form itself. This dissociation can be observed through his whole development from the thirties until his death, when he considers various linguistic expressions which might seem peculiar and so call for a search for their logical form(s). Prominent examples stem from psychological language, which we use for ascribing various mental states to people. Wittgenstein shows how the temptation arises to look for example for the essence of expecting. What does it consist in when we expect a friend for a visit between 16:00 and 16:30 (Wittgenstein, 1984c, p. 42)? According to Wittgenstein, one may become a little nervous, look at the clock frequently, prepare coffee for two, etc. All those characteristics, though they may seem essential in some contexts, become irrelevant in others. Therefore, Wittgenstein does not claim that it might be difficult to find out what really the essential meanings of an assertion concerning expecting someone for a visit at a specific time might be. Rather, it makes no sense to expect that there is any such essential meaning. But that amounts to denying, although with other words, the meaningfulness of the notion of logical form.

But let us jump to the much discussed section on workers and their primitive language from the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2009, §2). In this context, Wittgenstein encourages us to imagine workers who speak a very rudimentary language. In fact, Wittgenstein introduces one of the central notions of his later philosophy here, that of a *language game*. And it will be one of the many interrelated uses of this term of art. This time, he speaks of the simple linguistic exchanges between workers as of language games, which seems to oppose language games and real language with all its complexity. This would be an illusion, though, as is made clear by further uses of this term by Wittgenstein. Later on, he would speak of undoubtedly fully fledged linguistic activities with all their complexity as of language games. The notion of a language game will thus be endowed with certain dynamism, just as the notion of a game, as we will see later on.

But now back to the toy example Wittgenstein thought of. The workers are supposed to bring a few different kinds of building elements, such as slabs. When one of them calls "Slab!" in the direction of another worker, this other worker is supposed to bring a slab. Wittgenstein seems to choose his hypothetical scenario in such a way that it induces puzzlement. First of all, we can ask whether their activities even deserve the name of language, as they are so primitive. Wittgenstein then offers many elaborations of this scenario when the workers acquire the vocabulary and abilities to specify the color, number and other features of the objects they desire to be brought to them (Wittgenstein, 2009, §21). Wittgenstein seems to point to the fact that it is not clear where language begins.

But furthermore, if we once settle on regarding some of these primitive forms of cooperation as language, we might be tempted to ask what the exclamations exactly mean. Does the exclamation "Slab!" mean "Bring me a slab!"? Wittgenstein does not find much to agree in this suggestion and even in such questions themselves (Wittgenstein, 2009, §19). He turns the question on its head by asking why could our longer sentence not mean the one-word exclamation. And does it even make sense to distinguish between words and sentences at this stage? Even at this rudimentary level, it is unclear what the search for the true meaning should consist in. What would justify one answer and render it more plausible than others?

The part of the *Philsophical Investigations* dedicated to the workers follows the presentation of what Wittgenstein perceived as a tempting,

yet oversimplified, account of meaning and language in Augustine: that words are here to denote things. Not only would this be a parody of Augustine himself, but also (Goldfarb, 1983) notes that hardly anybody ever defended such a simplistic view of how language works. Does Wittgenstein, then, attack a mere strawman, failing to appreciate the complexity of the conceptions which were presented by his contemporaries and which have been further developed later? Goldfarb believes that the goal was to show the very roots of the tendencies to look for a logical form of a statement. The more articulate programs of the search for a logical form can be then seen as variations on the same theme, to which these general remarks can be applied.

6. Logical form fading away

Goldfarb claims that ultimately what Wittgenstein wants to attack is "the idea of the full sense of our sentences (or a proposition as some have put it), viz., what is obtained when all 'ellipses' are filled out"(Goldfarb, 1983, p. 274). An example of the purported ellipse was that of saying just "Slab!" instead of "Bring me a slab!". As we saw, Wittgenstein deemed the idea that there is an ellipse to be filled out an illusion. But not only ellipses are what should be dealt with. For the believers in logical form, the grammatical form can contain not only too little but also too much on some occasions. It is thus necessary to get rid of all the superfluous elements which are relegated to the status of ornaments, conveying perhaps a certain feeling or atmosphere. This brings us back to the Quinean reminder that he wanted to ignore "the psychological associations or poetic quality". Even Frege made clear already in (Frege, 1892) that he wanted to concentrate on what was essential for meaning, i.e. that only that which was necessary for the determination of *Bedeutung* was a part of the *Sinn* for him.

This move from logical form is a part of a general tendency in Wittgenstein to move away from reductionist accounts. He grows more and more alienated from the idea that there is some fundamental layer, either of knowledge or of language, to which other layers should be reduced or out of which they should be reconstructed. Thus he refuses the idea that all our concepts should be analyzable into original sensory experiences and logical operations applied to them. This idea, dear to Russell and logical positivists, as I have already indicated, was similarly

challenged by Wilfrid Sellars with his attack on the *myth of the given* in (Sellars, 1956). The phenomena and various language games are seen rather as self-standing by Wittgenstein, the reductionist urge is overcome. It does not make sense anymore for him to ask how it is possible that we can use, for instance, the vocabulary of intentions. We see that the idea of logical analysis as a search for logical form was closely tied to the idea of primitive, uninterpreted experience, which was sought after by Russell using his notion of *knowledge by acquaintance* or by logical positivists with their notion of *protocol sentences.* Although this idea of primitive experience was tempting for Wittgenstein at the stage when he was seeking a phenomenological language, it is no surprise that he was progressively abandoning it together with the idea of logical form.

In *Zettel*, Wittgenstein writes that it is a mistake to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in (Wittgenstein, 1970, §16). This, again, is in line with his other analyses, such as that of expecting a friend, reading out loud, recognizing a word I know, etc. There is not the one underlying essence which they would consist of, for example a specific feeling of being led by the text I am reading. And if there is nothing meaning something can consist in, then there is neither meaning as an object which formal semantics tries to capture. The very idea of meaning as a specific entity which can be contrasted with the expressions which have it, fades away. Logical form thus is not inexpressible anymore, as it was in the *Tractatus*, the very notion of logical form fades away. There is nothing to be attempted to express, even to be doomed to attempt in vain.

7. What philosophical method, if not logical analysis?

The idea of logical form and the aspiration to capture it are very natural, though. I concur with Goldfarb that Wittgenstein wanted to attack not only a specific philosophical theory, but rather a deeply rooted tendency or temptation, out of which various such theories can come about. Furthermore, Witgenstein shares with Russell and logical positivists the view that language can be deceptive and that philosophy should be able to work as an antidote against the ills caused by its deception. How can his philosophy achieve this, if he does not adhere to logical analysis as a method? His leading idea will be that of therapy, rather than of logical form. But some more conceptual tools from Wittgenstein's kit are needed in order to make this clear. First, let us focus on Wittgenstein's

understanding of game and on his notion of family resemblance, which will then illuminate the notion of therapy.

It is no coincidence that Wittgenstein introduces two of his important concepts together, namely family resemblance and game, in paragraph 66 of *Philosophical investigations*, (Wittgenstein, 2009). They in fact form a package and they clarify each other at the same time. From one perspective it seems that Wittgenstein is using game as a good illustration of family resemblance. To quickly retell the well-known story, there is a temptation to suppose that there must be at least one feature common to all games, justifying our practice of calling them all games. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein believes, no such common thread is to be found, if we abide by what can be observed and do not put any of our preconceptions into it. At best we can find various partial resemblances between various games, analogous to those between members of a family. One pair of the members shares the shape of nose, another the color of eyes, yet another the somewhat curious gait, etc.

Game thus serves as a great instance of the phenomenon of family resemblance. But Wittgenstein wants to apply the notion of family resemblance also to many further phenomena. So he claims that philosophical analyses which try to reduce a complex phenomenon to some basic primitive constituents stem from a mistaken conception of logical analysis and on the ignorance of the notion of family, (Wittgenstein, 1984c, p. 158). It is clear that Wittgenstein alludes to the notion of family resemblance here. So, game serves to introduce the notion of family resemblance, which then can be applied to a range of many other phenomena and in particular many notions and linguistic expressions. Nevertheless, a game is not just one example among many, it itself is central for understanding of what Wittgenstein wants to convey and also why he does not find much use in the notion of logical form.

The notion of game reappears as language game in Wittgenstein. Although it is not uncontroversial, there are already interpretations which claim that this terminological decision is not a chance. Indeed, if language is a language game or consists of the complicated family of language games, then there is something playful about it, as Lauer (2014) and Arazim (2022) claim. And therefore, language cannot have a logical form, which formal logical systems strive to capture. It would be too stable and predictable, then. In a passage focused on psychological notions, Wittgenstein claims that it is rather clarity than exactitude that he strives for (Wittgenstein, 1984d, §895). His method of therapy can be

said to strive for a specific kind of clarity, while logical analysis strives for exactitude, which it confuses with clarity.

The interest in games was quite strong in the work of some of Wittgenstein's contemporaries, such as (Huizinga, 1949) or (Heidegger, 1928). Nevertheless, it is of particular interest that Moritz Schlick, the member of Vienna Circle whom Wittgenstein particularly valued and with whom he engaged in extensive discussions in his transition period, did ascribe games and playing a very central position in his work, beginning with his early work (Schlick, 1907) until his later article (Schlick, 1928). Schlick considered games and playing both as the meaning of life and as the goal of the evolution of all life. That is, the more one plays, the more meaningful a life one has. Furthermore, as the nature keeps developing, it produces ever more playful organism. Schlick even envisaged social progress which proceeds into creating a more playful society. Although it remains to be shown that Wittgenstein was particularly influenced by this trait of Schlick's thought, it is not completely unwarranted to speculate that this feature might have been transported into his work during his transitional period in the thirties.

8. Plurality of logical forms vs. the refusal of the notion of logical form

The usage of the term "language game" and the focus on the plurality and diversity of language games might induce one to suppose that Wittgenstein could subscribe to some form of logical pluralism, probably to a quite radical form. Namely, that depending on context there can be many ways to analyze a given proposition and that therefore there are many acceptable analyses, perhaps carried out with the help of many logical systems. Russell and Carnap were wrong, a logical pluralist would say, mainly in the quantitative respect, when they supposed that there is one logical form which we have to discover. Instead, it depends on why we do the analysis and in what context the given proposition finds itself. Or if, together with (Restall, 2002), we consider Carnap as a pioneer of logical pluralism, then he was not pluralist enough, according to some contemporary pluralists, such as (Beall and Restall, 2006).

I claim that this interpretation is flawed and fails to appreciate what is truly special about Wittgenstein. First of all, Wittgenstein is far from being so decisive about the purported plurality of language games. In

paragraph 7 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he proposes to call the whole of language and all its surrounding activities a language game. His position is thus less clear than it would seem and the question of the multiplicity of language games might be trickier than the pluralist interpretation would have it. The notion of a (or the) language game thus retains, as I already stated, a certain dynamic and fluid character. Indeed, a language game is itself a game and the lessons about the lacking stable essence of games from paragraphs 66 and 67 of the *Philosophical investigations* applies to it. When Wittgenstein speaks of the variety of phenomena we call games, he seems to allude to more than to a possibly very high number of kinds of these phenomena. This can be seen from his refusal of a position on the essence of a game, which might be considered as a pluralist position:

> But what if someone wanted to say:"So there is something common to all these constructions — namely the disjunction of all their common properties" — I'd reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say, "There is something that runs through the whole thread — namely, the continuous overlapping of the fibres."
>
> (Wittgenstein, 2009, §67)

Wittgenstein's goal is to induce mere unprejudiced observation, not a search for a great multitude of hidden logical forms. Paradoxically, mere observation may prove very difficult, as the temptation to interpret is great. It consists in seeing that which appears as incomplete as complete (Wittgenstein, 1984d, p. 138, §723). This recalls Wittgenstein's refusal of reductions. Ultimately, the problems surrounding various kinds of expressions should disappear, not be given an astonishingly high plurality of solutions.

Wittgenstein thus cannot be seen as a prophet of logical pluralism. The philosophical method he proposes is that of therapy. Or rather a plurality of therapies as he express it:

> There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were.
>
> (Wittgenstein, 2009, §133d)

Just as there is a vast family of uses of a given expression and of language games, there is also an analogously vast family of therapies that philosophy offers in order to show that the seemingly deep problems are actually no real problems at all. It does not bring us further when we regard something as more fundamental to which we reduce other

phenomena. What seems to be a curious phenomenon which should be analyzed is no more curious than that which we purport to use for the analysis. Either both are curious or both lack any particular interest. In this way, a purported logical form is just as curious or just as ordinary as the sentence which it was supposed to analyze. Put otherwise, it cannot analyze it.

One of the goals of logical analysis was to purify philosophy of meaningless questions. There is some irony to the fact that for Wittgenstein, this project itself has produced a host of new meaningless questions, namely those pertaining to the logical forms of the pronouncements from various areas of language.

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