

# Philosophy—Therapy—Mythology

## On a Triangulated Analogy in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein

CHRISTIAN ERBACHER

---

**Abstract** The article's main aim is to invite healing practitioners to read and interpret the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein as relevant for their practices. It outlines Wittgenstein's philosophical orientation using his own triangulated analogy between the fields of philosophy, therapy and mythology. It is argued that Wittgenstein, throughout his philosophical life, considered philosophy as an activity for clarifying philosophical confusion. Philosophizing is thus, like medicine, a treatment for making a troubling state disappear or dissolve. Wittgenstein pointed out that his methods of philosophical clarification might be compared to psychoanalysis. Based on this analogy, philosophical clarification renders a troubling mythology harmless by using a less troubling mythology. This view can in turn shed light on the philosophical confusion that may accompany a scientific worldview. Such confusion emerges when belief in the absoluteness of scientific truth hinders acknowledgement of the truths and insights from other cultures.

---

**Keywords** philosophy – psychotherapy – Wittgenstein – Freud – Frazer

---

### A frame for reading Wittgenstein

In this article I want to talk about the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and his analogical representation of philosophy, therapy and mythology. I will be concerned mainly with reading and understanding the philosophy of Wittgenstein, yet I hope to provide some useful and stimulating thoughts for the context of practical healing. This connection may be surprising, considering how Wittgenstein is often portrayed in the wider academic community: he is regarded as a philosopher of logic, sometimes even a logical positivist who, with the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922), provided the foundations for a scientific worldview (“wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung”—as the members of the Vienna Circle coined their program). In contrast to this “early and scientific Wittgenstein,” it is sometimes said that a so-called “later and unscientific” Wittgenstein abandoned and deconstructed the doctrines of the *Tractatus* and paved the way for postmodernity. While this is a nice plot for a short philosophical biography, such a highly condensed picture can be very misleading. I therefore begin by stating four main aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophizing which pro-

vide the frame for what I would like to explore in the following pages:

- 1) Wittgenstein never advocated for a scientific worldview. He lived at a time of great optimism in science and technology. His philosophizing, from the very beginning, was aimed at explicating the *limits of science* and scientific reasoning. He wanted to restrict science to its appropriate realm.
- 2) Rather than the contrast of an “early vs. late” Wittgenstein, many continuities characterize his philosophical development. One of these continuities is the afore-mentioned anti-scientific orientation; another is his conviction that the goal of philosophy is *clarification*. What changed over time were his methods of clarification.
- 3) Wittgenstein always held that philosophical clarification is a *practice*. This is closely related to another continuity in his thinking, namely that philosophy should not be used to build theories, but to clarify our thinking.
- 4) Wittgenstein was an *analogical* thinker. One of his main methods of clarification was

to find similes and objects of comparison. When juxtaposed, the objects could, he thought, clarify our thinking by illuminating each other.

The three terms in the title of this paper *philosophy, therapy, mythology* are also used as such objects of comparisons. My aim is to illuminate the relation between these three fields as conceived by Wittgenstein. If this can provide a starting point for seeing Wittgenstein's philosophy as relevant for thinking about healing and the cooperation that takes place in healing practices, then the purpose of the paper will have been fulfilled.

### **Philosophy, like medicine, seeks its own abandonment**

Throughout his philosophical life, Wittgenstein considered philosophy to be a practice of clarification, not a set of doctrines. Even as a young man, he stated this in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*:

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.) (WITTGENSTEIN 1922: 4.112)

The ability to make something clear is not mystical, but an art (craft) that may be learned through training. Wittgenstein regarded his classes at the University of Cambridge as just such training, and he sometimes compared them to practicing playing an instrument. For example, he compared his lectures to finger exercises on the piano. This musical analogy came naturally to Wittgenstein because music played an important role in both his life and his philosophizing. Another realm he often chose to compare his work to was that of therapy. For instance, when Elizabeth Anscombe came to his classes with questions concerning a theoretical conception, Wittgenstein said: "Let me think what medicine you need" (ANSCOMBE 1981: ix). Then he asked her a question that made her see how it was her theorizing that had given rise

to the troubling questions. Once she saw this, her theoretical problem was not solved, but her need for a theoretical solution *dissolved*. A regular attendant of Wittgenstein's lectures remembers a similar occasion:

The first lecture consisted largely of a disclaimer that he proposed to impart to his audience metaphysical "truths," or indeed that he would be concerned to transmit knowledge at all, in the sense in which it could be said of a geographer or physicist. If that was what any member of the audience was expecting he would be disappointed. What the lectures *would* be offering was, according to Wittgenstein, more like the work of a masseur. If anyone happened to be suffering from a particular kind of mental cramp, Wittgenstein might be able to help him. (REDPATH 1990: 18)

This analogy of treating a particular mental cramp shows that the sessions with Wittgenstein were not merely agreeable afternoons where students got together with their teacher and played philosophy as if it were chamber music. The investigations he conducted were hard work for all participants—including Wittgenstein himself—and a most serious matter (although sometimes [grammatical] jokes were indeed the right treatment to relax a cramp). Moreover, Wittgenstein's treatments were never idle academic play; he was concerned about how people authentically and outside the classroom thought, or rather: how authentic thinking can be led astray as soon as people enter the classroom. This treatment could be painful, as Georg Henrik von Wright remembered:

Each conversation was like living through the day of judgement. It was terrible. Everything has constantly to be dug up anew, questioned and subjected to tests of truthfulness. This concerned not only philosophy but the whole life. (VON WRIGHT 1989: 14)

Here we get a hint how radical Wittgenstein's way of philosophizing was. He exhibited a philosophizing that had radically turned away from the academic search for "eternal truths and fundamental principles." He substituted this search with trying to clarify specific people's specific talk. We may say that one of his lasting contributions to philosophy was precisely the fundamental in-

sight that philosophical problems are not problems of truth but of sense, an insight that he elaborated throughout his philosophical work. Both early and late in his career, Wittgenstein held that philosophical problems arise from a state of unclarity about the sense of philosophical questions. The result of clarifying the sense of a question is not to make the question meaningful, but to cause the unclarity to disappear—just like a cramp disappears after a massage. I quote from the *Tractatus*:

The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (WITTGENSTEIN 1922: 6.521)

This may be seen as a paradigm for Wittgenstein's view of what the point of philosophizing is, namely, to make philosophical problems disappear. Just as a medical doctor's aim is to make himself superfluous, philosophizing seeks its own abandonment.

### Methods of clarification

How is Wittgenstein's therapeutic clarification to be achieved? According to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* the method for clarification is "logical analysis:" logical analysis of seemingly deep philosophical questions should show that these questions are actually nonsensical. Such analysis should reveal that we cannot even know what these questions mean. A familiar example of such a question is: "How can I know that the outer world exists?" Other perplexing questions from today's academic philosophy are: "How can consciousness arise from non-conscious matter?" "How can there be free will if the universe is determined by causal laws?" or "How can we define vagueness?" In a Wittgensteinian spirit, we may say that these philosophical questions are not deep because they reach to some deep truth, but rather, that they arise because we are deeply confused about the sense of the sentences in which we formulate the questions. What is the meaning of "to know," "outer world" or "existence" in the first question? What is the meaning of "arise," "consciousness" or "matter" in the second question? What is the meaning of "defining" or "vagueness" in the third question?—The promise of Wittgenstein's philosophy is that a clarification of these meanings will make us see that the questions are nonsensical. A

consequence of this acknowledgement would be that the questions, rather than puzzling us, would simply disappear.

While Wittgenstein's general philosophical orientation remained the same throughout his philosophical life, his methods of clarification changed. The so-called middle or later Wittgenstein invented a method of clarification that replaced logical analysis. According to this new method, a main source of our failure to understand something is that we lack *an overview of the use of words*. Words like "to know" or "knowledge," "to want" or "the will," phrases like "having meaning" or "having pain," and so forth, become problematic in contexts of (philosophical) theorizing, because we tend to forget how we usually use these words and phrases. If, for example, we are reminded that we use words of vagueness precisely to allow for cooperation where acute definitions are pointless, the philosophical question of how to exactly define vagueness dissolves. The philosophical clarification has thus to make surveyable the everyday uses of philosophically problematic terms:

The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is it a "Weltanschauung?") (WITTGENSTEIN 2009: § 122)

Wittgenstein's idea of a surveyable or "perspicuous" representation suggests that we can gain this overview by assembling non-problematic cases of the use of these phrases as objects of comparisons, as well as intermediate cases that show how we are led from non-problematic usage to problematic questions. These objects of comparison may be scenarios of meaningful word usage, and thus the famous method of language games enters the scene:

Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language—as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparisons* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities. (WITTGENSTEIN 2009: § 130)

Here we have the promise of a method of clarification that is not another theory. Once we sur-

vey the use of the words that lead to perplexity when they are taken out of context and put into philosophical questions, we will recognize these questions as nonsensical. Wittgenstein describes the outcome:

The results of philosophy are the discovery of some piece of nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language. They—these bumps—make us see the value of that discovery. (WITTGENSTEIN 2009: § 119)

This makes clear that for Wittgenstein the practice of philosophizing consisted in taking something away, like cleaning up a room. But here it is important *not* to understand Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical dissolving of philosophical questions in a dogmatic sense, as if it would provide yet another eternal theory. Wittgenstein was very careful in all his formulations, and he was especially careful with generalizations, since hasty generalization is one of the main means by which language can mislead us into philosophical muddles.\* Indeed, in contrast to imposing yet another dogma, Wittgenstein's philosophy may be said to be wholly anti-dogmatic. The employment of concepts like "language game" or "family resemblance" was meant to block our craving for essences and general truths, and to open our minds for recognizing the importance of differences between individual cases. It is therefore not surprising that Wittgenstein pinned the following note on the manuscript-page that discussed his philosophical method:

There is not one single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were. (WITTGENSTEIN 2009: § 133)

This note is a helpful reminder that Wittgenstein's writings—apart from the *Tractatus*, they were posthumously published from his manuscripts—may be read as examples of his attempt to create perspicuous representations meant to dissolve his troubling philosophical questions. In

\* One of Wittgenstein's closest friends, the psychiatrist Maurice O'Connor Drury, identified generalizations as belonging to the "Danger of Words" (1973), as he called his wonderful little book, which seeks to show how he as a psychiatrist has benefitted from discussions with Wittgenstein.

this sense, Wittgenstein's manuscripts are diaries of a therapeutic process.

### Philosophy and psychotherapy

The remark quoted from § 133 brings us back to the analogy between philosophy and therapy, and it is this that I would like now to consider in greater detail. This analogy highlights that a philosophical problem in Wittgenstein's sense is *someone's* problem, and that the philosophical work is work on *oneself* (cf. WITTGENSTEIN 1977: 24; WITTGENSTEIN 1994: 52). It was Wittgenstein's trouble with philosophical questions that prompted him to invent his methods of clarification. But in order for these methods to be effective, it is necessary that a person, in the first place, is troubled by a philosophical question. Only then can the clarificatory treatment bring peace to the person and resolve philosophical disquietude. It is most important that this peace from clarification cannot be passively received; just as in psychotherapy, improvement is not achieved through taking a pill prescribed by a doctor. Rather, it is a cooperative practice in which the understanding of the patient develops over time; this understanding empowers the person to clarify his or her confusion. When making this analogy between philosophy and psychotherapy, however, we should keep in mind that Wittgenstein did not propose that his methods of clarification were treatments for psychological disorders in general or for all kinds of mental trouble. Instead he proposed a treatment for a *particular kind* of mental cramp, namely that trouble caused by questions rooted in our ways of representing the world when doing philosophy. The analogy with therapy serves as an object of comparison in order to shed light on Wittgenstein's way of philosophizing. He particularly thought of the analogy with psychoanalysis as illuminating.

Wittgenstein never elaborated a systematic account of psychoanalysis, and his relation to Freud is ambiguous. However, he repeatedly referred to Freud and returned to the topic of psychoanalysis. For instance, when he visited his student, friend and colleague (and later executor of his will) Rush Rhees in Swansea in the early 1940s, he spoke of himself as a "disciple" and "follower of Freud." Moreover, when Alfred Ayer, in a popular arti-

cle, suggested that Wittgenstein conceived of philosophy as a form of psychoanalysis, it angered Wittgenstein and he said: “they are different techniques” (MALCOLM 1958: 57). At one point, Wittgenstein was especially interested in the practice of interpreting dreams, and he thought that the skills needed for practicing psychoanalysis and his way of philosophizing must be similar. He wrote the following in 1948:

In a Freudian analysis the dream is, so to speak, decomposed. It completely loses its original meaning. One could imagine a large piece of paper with a picture drawn on it: the picture is now pleated up in such a way that pieces which were quite unrelated in the original picture are now visually adjacent and a new picture (meaningful or meaningless) results: this new picture would be the dream as dreamed, while the original picture would correspond to the latent dream content.

Now, I could imagine someone who saw the unfolded picture exclaiming, “Yes, that is the solution, that is what I dreamt, but without the gaps and distortions.” In that case the solution would be constituted as such by the dreamer’s recognition of it and by nothing else. It is just as when you are writing something and looking for a word and suddenly say “That’s it, that’s what I wanted to say:” your recognition of the word stamps it as the word that you were looking for and have now found. [...]

What is intriguing about a dream is not its causal connection with events in my life etc. but rather that it functions as part (indeed a very life-like part) of a story the remainder of which is in the dark. [...] To be sure, as the paper unfolds the original picture disintegrates—the man that I saw was taken from there, his words from here, the surroundings of the dream from a third place, but the dream-story has its peculiar charm, like a painting that attracts and inspires us.

Of course one might say that we view the dream in an inspired way, that it is we who are inspired. Because when we relate our dream to someone else, generally the imagery doesn’t inspire him. The dream affects us like an idea pregnant with possible developments. (WITTGENSTEIN 1977: 68–69; WITTGENSTEIN 1994: 132–3; translation by MCGUINNESS 2002: 226–7)

In dream interpretation, elements of the dream are assembled in a way that presents a convincing story. As Brian McGuinness stresses, a crucial

point of this passage is its acknowledgement of the dreamer as the judge of the rightness of the interpretation: the interpretation must be accepted by the person whose dream is interpreted. This acceptance, however, would not be evidence or proof of the correctness of the interpretation in a scientific sense. The dreamer’s acceptance of the interpretation shows instead that the representation of the dream elements in that specific way is attractive and convincing. According to Wittgenstein, psychoanalysis is far from providing scientific explanations (he said that the propositions of psychoanalysis are even pre-hypothetical!)—rather, it would provide a new mythology.

Wittgenstein’s statement that psychoanalysis is not a science was not meant to disregard the practice. In this respect he differed from Karl Popper, who criticized psychoanalysis for not being a science. Wittgenstein never considered it could be—he appreciated Freud’s achievement of showing that it is possible to replace an older way of looking at things with a new story and to couple it with new rituals. According to Wittgenstein, it would be dangerous to think of a psychoanalytic interpretation as scientific truth, but if one could choose it as an alternative way of looking at one’s life, it could be fruitful and enlighten one’s thinking. The important thing is to be able to relinquish this frame of interpretation when one wants. In this sense, psychoanalysis provides an object of comparison for other ways of looking at things that may be mistaken for scientific truth. Such examples may themselves be descriptions in science, such as the Darwinian description of evolution or the world-picture of physics. Even in his early career, Wittgenstein saw these as “modern mythologies:”

At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. (WITTGENSTEIN 1922: 6.371)

So people stop short at natural laws as something unassailable, as did the ancients at God and Fate. (WITTGENSTEIN 1922: 6.372)

This passage from the *Tractatus* foreshadows Wittgenstein’s later remarks on the work of James Frazer, the Cambridge anthropologist who wrote *The Golden Bough*. This brings us to the third term of comparison in the title of this paper, “mythology.”

### Philosophy as uncovering the mythology of modern times

In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein asked his friend Maurice O'Connor Drury to get a copy of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* so that they could read it together. Drury—who became a psychiatrist on Wittgenstein's advice—later remembered Wittgenstein's main criticism on this work, and precisely with a view to the passage from the *Tractatus* just mentioned:

The whole modern view of the world resting on an illusion ----- the ancients were clearer. To believe this really, to let it sink in, then we are aliens to nearly every thing [sic] that is going on around us. You cannot accept this without hurting oneself. This is indeed to turn oneself right around.

Once Wittgenstein asked me to read to him part of "The Golden Bough." Fraser [sic] always treated the myths and customs he had so assiduously collected with a certain condescension [sic]. He said we must not despise them for their errors because they represented the first rudimentary thoughts from which later science was to spring. But, as Wittgenstein pointed out, these ancients had indeed already their science. Agriculture, irrigation, weapon making, etc: they were able to survive under conditions where we would now perish. No, these myths, these customs, had nothing to do with the beginning of science. They were the expression of a belief and a longing for something other than the bread and comforts of daily existence. And in so far as we have now lost these common myths and customs, so much are we the poorer. The belief that the further progress of scientific discovery and invention will bring us any nearer to the relief of our deepest needs, is a superstition worse than anything Fraser cast his pity on. (Letter, Drury to Rhees, Spring 1966: 18–9)

For Wittgenstein, the modern optimism regarding science and technology was a myth that held us captive. He saw the myth as a worldview, and philosophizing, for him, had the task of freeing our thinking from habits of thought emanating from this worldview. According to Wittgenstein, a worldview was necessarily entrenched in a corresponding way of living and speaking. He thought the way of living in modern times gave rise to the confusions in language that undergirded current philosophical problems. Wittgenstein's work was partly aimed at freeing philosophy from the idea of it being a science; or, to put it another

way, to make us see how the assumption of philosophy as science and the use of scientific jargon constitute a powerful myth that hinders us from pursuing our philosophical needs, since it hinders us from being open to look at the world with fresh wonder. Thus, around the time when he was reading Frazer with Drury, he wrote the following draft for a book preface:

I now believe that it would be right to begin my book with remarks about metaphysics as a kind of magic.

But in doing this I must not make a case for magic nor may I make fun of it.

The depth of magic should be preserved. –

Indeed, here the elimination of magic has itself the character of magic. (WITTGENSTEIN 1967)

This passage shows us that Wittgenstein did not want to deprive science of its scientific merit. This would be completely mistaken. The point was to assign scientific thinking to the places where it belongs and to remind ourselves that we are led into confusion when we confuse the measuring rod of scientific language with the actual phenomenon, or when we imagine that such language is the only correct way to measure or represent the phenomenon.

### Concluding remark

In this article, I have tried to sketch an orientation in Wittgenstein's philosophizing by elucidating the relation he saw between the fields of philosophy, therapy and mythology. It is certainly not more than a sketch: for each of the three fields, you will find connections to Wittgenstein's philosophy that go much deeper than what I have touched on here, and all the connections are explored in scholarly literature. Nevertheless, this article may give an idea of how to approach the reading in order to render fruitful Wittgenstein's thinking regarding questions of healing and the cooperation that takes place in healing practices. It thereby situates Wittgenstein in a tradition of other philosophers who have worked out a therapeutic self-understanding. Given that few thinkers have delved into Wittgenstein's manuscripts as pieces of great modern literature reflecting a lifelong therapeutic dialogue, healing practitioners would find here an open field for further elaboration.

## Acknowledgements

The work on this article was funded by the Collaborative Research Center “Media of Cooperation” at the University of Siegen (SFB 1187, TP P01 Wissenschaftliche Medien der Praxistheorie: Harold Garfinkel und Ludwig Wittgenstein).

## References

- ANSCOMBE G. E. M. 1981. *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind (The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Volume 2)*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- DRURY M. O’C. 1973. *The Danger of Words*. New York: The Humanities Press. [The letter from M. O’C. Drury to R. Rhees, Spring 1966, was quoted with permission from the Drury Archive, Mary Immaculate College Library, Limerick, which has a copy of Drury’s correspondence.]
- MALCOLM N. 1958. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MCGUINNESS B. 2002. *Approaches to Wittgenstein: Collected Papers*. London: Routledge.
- REDPATH T. 1990. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A student’s memoir*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd.
- VON WRIGHT G. H. 1989. Intellectual Autobiography. *The Philosophy of Georg Henrik von Wright* (Library of Living Philosophers, Volume 19), SCHILPP P. A. and HAHN L. E. (eds). La Salle, IL: Open Court, 3–58.
- WITTGENSTEIN L. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. OGDEN C. K. (ed), translated by OGDEN C. K. & RAMSEY F. P. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- 1967. Bemerkungen über Frazers The Golden Bough. *Synthese* 17: 233–23.
- 1977. *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. VON WRIGHT G. H. (ed) with assistance of NYMAN H. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- 1994. *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. VON WRIGHT G. H. (ed) with assistance of NYMAN H. Neubearbeitung des Textes durch PICHLER A. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. HACKER P. M. S. & SCHULTE J. (ed), translated by ANSCOMBE G. E. M., HACKER P. M. S. & SCHULTE J. New York: Wiley.

Manuscript received : 25.10.2017

Manuscript accepted: 30.04.2018



**CHRISTIAN ERBACHER** Dr. phil., studied psychology at the Universities of Regensburg and Bergen (Norway). In connection with the eContentplus project DISCOVERY, he worked at the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen from 2007–2010 and received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Bergen in 2010. Between 2010 and 2015, he was lecturer at the University of Siegen and conducted a postdoc research project on the history of editing Wittgenstein’s writings (NFR 213080). He is continuing this work as part of the Collaborative Research Center “Media of Cooperation” at the University of Siegen (Germany).

University of Siegen  
 Collaborative Research Center “Media of Cooperation”  
 Herrengarten 3, 57072 Siegen  
 e-mail: christian.erbacher@uni-siegen.de