

In Limbeck-Lilienau, C., Stadler, F., eds., *The Philosophy of Perception and Observation. Contributions of the 40th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria, August 6-12, 2017, Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society (ALWS), pp. 262–264.

Young Wittgenstein's Account of the Will, Action and Expectation

Miroslav Vacura
Department of Philosophy,
University of Economics, Prague, Czech Republic
vacuram@vse.cz

Abstract: This paper focuses on young and “middle” Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on nature of will, action and expectation. It is argued that if empiricist lines of thought in Wittgenstein's work are followed he appears to consider imperative sentences as near-identical or even reducible to sentences expressing expectations. Firstly, Wittgenstein's account of imperative sentences (commands) will be established; thereupon an investigation into the preliminary structure of obeying command will be undertaken as the basis of further discussion. In following paragraphs, we will analyze Wittgenstein's view on the relation of act to will, briefly discussing the concept of will itself. To conclude the paper is a discussion of the nature of expectation and its fulfillment. Wittgenstein's philosophical development is briefly alluded to only where relevant to the discussion.

Introduction

Wittgenstein's transition from *Tractatus* to *Philosophical Investigations* and later philosophy is usually characterized by his realization of the diversity of language, contrasting with his efforts in *Tractatus* to make all varieties of language conform to a single form. In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein developed a picture theory of propositions that almost exclusively dealt with indicative propositions, however he almost entirely neglected other types of sentences.

Philosophical Remarks, written between February 1929 and April 1930, has been viewed as the capturing of a part of a slow process of transition from the picture theory of *Tractatus* to his later philosophy, facilitated by analysis of other types of sentences such as commands and prescriptions. Although Wittgenstein wrote here: “The idea that you 'imagine' the meaning of a word when you hear or read it, is a naïve conception of the meaning of a word” (PR 58), he still believed that at least some aspects of picture theory are correct beyond doubt. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein didn't regard picture theory as an outright confusion: “Yet the naive theory of forming-an-image can't be utterly wrong” (PR 58). When he discussed details of semantics of sentences, imperative and other non-indicative types of sentences seemed particularly puzzling to him at this point.

Wittgenstein attempted to find a new way to approach imperative propositions through indicative ones – he recognized a connection between descriptions and commands because “Every instruction can be construed as a description, every description as an instruction” (PR 59). Descriptions can be thought of as “instructions for making models” (PR 57). Conversely, every instruction somehow contains a description of the desired state of the world. Unless the instruction is understood, the action cannot be performed.

Kenny asserts that it's quite intuitive to think of commands as being only slightly different from indicative statements (Kenny 1973: 120-1); just as Wittgenstein said: “A proposition *shows* how things stand *if* it is true” (TLP 4.022) one may say: “A command *shows* how things stand *if* it is

obeyed". Therefore the considerations presented in *Philosophical Remarks* are not incompatible with picture theory of the proposition, but can even be thought of as aligning with it. Nevertheless, Kenny observes that a command also communicates something else: "it says that they should so stand". So, while indicative proposition and command both contain a description of the state of affairs, command also "contains" something else – an imperative or prescriptive element. Frege, who introduced assertion-sign to his concept script to mark indicative element, also acknowledged this previously (Frege 1879).

While picture theory of propositions explains the descriptive part of command, the nature of imperative element is outside its scope. Furthermore, in *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein discusses the nature of command in detail and says: "Understanding a command before you obey it has an *affinity* with willing an action before you perform it." (PR 58, added emphasis). Use of the word "affinity" here is not clear and provokes further debate. What is the relation between "understanding a command" and "willing an action"?

Taking an analytical course from the original meaning of these concepts, it appears that *obeying a command* implies *performing an action* (unless one is prevented from doing so by external circumstances). Moreover, *performing an action*, even because of a command, presupposes *willing it*. And *willing an action* in turn presupposes *understanding of command*. The concept of understanding a command can be split into two distinct aspects: a) understanding a description of state of affairs "depicted" by content of command, and b) understanding a sentence as a command, i.e. understanding an imperative element of a command.

It subsequently appears possible to reconstruct the general structure of "obeying a command" to the following sequence of "events":

- 1) person A *pronounces* a command to perform the action X to person B;
- 2) person B *understands* the command to perform the action X;
 - a. person B *understands* a description of state of affairs "depicted" by content of command;
 - b. person B *understands* a sentence as a *command*, understands imperative element of a command;
- 3) person B *wills* the action X;
- 4) person B *performs* the action X;
- 5) person A *recognizes* that the action X was performed.

Such description resembles seminal passages from the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* (PI §2). Those paragraphs will not be analyzed here as the research focus is on earlier Wittgenstein works, yet it is significant that Wittgenstein here avoids (at least until §20) describing the interaction between a builder A and an assistant B as giving commands and obeying them. It is clear that at this point of his philosophical development Wittgenstein does not endorse a sequential view of command and obey as described above.

The action and the will

Wittgenstein discusses relation of *will* to *action* previously in *Notebooks*, where he (under the influence of Schopenhauer) states: "The fact that I will an action consists in my performing the action, not in my doing something else which causes the action", so he concludes: "willing is acting" (NB 88). Wittgenstein believes that the will is not some separate mental phenomenon that can be differentiated from an action. Willing something is not an internal event preceding another external event such as an action. There is no causal relationship between the will and the action: "The act of

the will is not the cause of the action but is the action itself.” (NB 87). Returning to the reconstruction of the structure of obeying a command, it is evident that events 3 and 4 are conflated.

Simultaneously, Wittgenstein feels the need to emphasize that will (identified will action) is something different from experience: “The act of will is not an experience” (NB 89). Strikingly, it is exactly the opposite of the views he holds later in *Philosophical Investigations*: “Willing too is merely an experience” (PI §611). Hacker believes that these positions form the horns of a dilemma through two conflicting ideas: one Schopenhauerian, the other empiricist (Hacker 2000: 209). According to this view the empiricist tradition is linked with the ideas of R. Descartes, T. Hobbes, J. Locke and D. Hume, and culminates in the works of W. James, who claimed that our “consciousness is in its very nature impulsive” and that “our sensations and thoughts are but cross-sections (...) of currents whose essential consequence is motion” (James 1890: 526). James states that there is no difference between all these mental phenomena – sensation, thought and will are “currents” of our mind, which naturally produce external motion.

If we accept this interpretation, then Wittgenstein’s philosophical development can be characterized as traversing from the Schopenhauerian concept of will to an empiricist one. Many examples from *Philosophical Investigations* seem to illustrate (PI §617) that Wittgenstein believed at the time of writing that willing is merely something that happens to us (Hacker 2000: 210).

While Wittgenstein’s position within *Philosophical Investigations* can be contrasted with the position demonstrated at some places in the *Notebooks*, it must be noted that Wittgenstein’s discussion of will in *Notebooks* (and *Tractatus*) is not clear. Wittgenstein at one point also adopts an even more Schopenhauerian stature: “The will is an attitude of the subject to the world. The subject is the willing subject” (NB 87). However, in other places his approach to will resembles a stoic one: “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless. I can only make myself independent of the world—and so in a certain sense master it—by renouncing any influence on happenings” (NB 73).

Imperative element of a command

What then constitutes event 2b – the imperative element of a command? Wittgenstein says: “Since, for it to be possible for an expression to guide my hand, it *must* have the same multiplicity as the action desired” (PR 57). Does this mean that apart from “multiplicity of a description” of a state of affairs, there is also (higher) “multiplicity of instruction” of how to achieve this state of affairs? Initially, it might seem like viable alternative: someone may understand a description of the state of affairs that comprises the content of the command perfectly well, however they may not know (understand) how to achieve it.

The issue with this interpretation is that even if the subject does not know how to achieve the state of affairs described by a sentence, they may be perfectly aware of this sentence functioning as a command and so having imperative force. The imperative element of a sentence is the “things should so stand!” component attached to a description of affairs.

It also seems that at the time of writing *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein was somehow puzzled by the relation of event 2 to event 3 due to the declared affinity between “understanding a command” and “willing an action”. He also acknowledges: “the problem of *understanding* language is connected with the problem of the *Will*” (PR 58, added emphasis).

Turn to expectation

In search for a solution to this problem, Wittgenstein shifted his interest to the concept of expectation. It is undeniable that expectation is connected to imperative sentences on many levels. Referring back to the aforementioned scheme of issuing a command: a person A *pronounces* a command X (event 1) and subsequently *expects* that some future event fulfilling the command X – an action of person B, will occur (event 4). If person B *understands* the command X of person A (event 2) then he comprehends that person A *expects* him to perform an action fulfilling command X (event 4).

Kenny notes that B. Russell concurrently investigated the problem of expectation in his book *Analysis of Mind*, and some of Wittgenstein's notes in *Philosophical Remarks* confront Russell's position (Kenny 1973: 123). Russell wrote: "Suppose I am believing, by means of images, not words, that it will rain. We have here two interrelated elements, namely, the content and the expectation. (...) Exactly the same content may enter into memory "It was raining" or the assent "Rain occurs". The difference lies in the nature of the belief feeling" (Russell 1921:250). Wittgenstein's position was comparable with Russell's concept of expectation – expectation consists of a content and "expectative element" that he called at some places "looking for": "Expecting is connected with looking for: looking for something presupposes that I know what I am looking for, without what I am looking for having to exist" (PR 67, 70). Content of "expectation of *p*" must comprise a description of *p*: "Could we imagine any language at all in which expecting *p* was described without using '*p*'?" (PR 69)

Also notable is that expectation is in many places described by Wittgenstein as an activity – looking for, searching or preparing: "To *look for* something is, surely, an expression of expectation. To paraphrase: How you *search* in one way or another expresses expectations (...) If I expect to see red, then I *prepare* myself for red" (PR 70, author's emphasis). Similarly, Russell in *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948) explicitly connects animal expectation with a "savage" movement: "A cat will watch for a long time at a mousehole, with her tail swishing in *savage expectation*; in such a case, one should say (so I hold) that the smell of mouse stimulates the "idea" of the rest of what makes up an actual mouse" (Russell 2009: 89, added emphasis).

Fulfillment of expectation

How then does Wittgenstein understand the fulfillment of an expectation? If a person A *pronounces* a command X (event 1) how does she later establish that the command was fulfilled (event 5)?

According to Wittgenstein, there is at first the expectation of X – i.e. an activity similar to "looking for X", then there is an event X, that fulfills the expectation. But Wittgenstein emphasizes that there is no third element to this picture: "The fulfillment of an expectation doesn't consist in a third thing happening which you could also describe" (PR 65). Wittgenstein contrasts this exposition with Russell's conception that in addition to these two elements there is also third: the *recognition* (PR 63). Action fulfilling the expectation cannot be recognized because it cannot be confronted with it. It does not stand side by side with expectation but it replaces it: "I cannot confront the previous expectation with what happens. The event that replaces the expectation, is a reply to it." (PR 67). Subsequently it can be viewed once more that events 4 and 5 from our scheme are conflated.

It is not surprising that for Wittgenstein "it is essential to a command that we can check whether it has been carried out" (PR 312). Command draws similarities with expectation in this respect. This is also the reason behind Wittgenstein's consideration of command as "Throw it [dice] infinitely often" nonsensical (PR 312).

By following empiricist-stoic lines of thought in Wittgenstein, it is clear that he appears to consider imperative sentences as very similar to sentences expressing expectations. It has previously been observed that at times Wittgenstein approves the Schopenhauerian concept of subject as essentially “willing subject” whose essential attitude to the world is the will (NB 87). Nevertheless, he also claims with similar force that “The world is independent of my will” (NB 73, TLP 6.373). This in turn reduces human will to just expectation. Such a description – the human being as an essentially willing subject but at the same time completely powerless, immersed in a world completely independent of one’s will, depicts a deeply tragic human situation.

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