

A Ladder and a Cave

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Wittgenstein's Tractatus does, at a first glance, employ a Platonic strategy, dividing the universe of discourse into two realms, with an atemporal, rationally transparent order determining a lower stratum. On closer inspection the Tractatus' „prototypes“ (Urbilder) come surprisingly close to Platonic ideas. The Wittgensteinian metaphor of a ladder may therefore profitably be compared to Plato's parable of ascent from a cave, the crucial difference being that Wittgenstein's image does not provide a return option. Feedback between the ideal and the real is, on the other hand, an essential ingredient of the success of Plato-style progress. The later Wittgenstein, consequently, rejects the metaphor of a ladder in favor of what might be called the trouble-free plateau of the ordinary. Yet, this is not his only lesson. He also considers a kind of reverse Platonism with the philosopher, confused about the way things are, in need of redemption.



Abbildung 1: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plato_-_Allegory_of_the_Cave.png

1. Platonic forms and sentence variables

An easy (and legitimate) strategy to highlight Wittgenstein's contribution to contemporary philosophy is to draw attention to his anti-Platonism. He is quite explicit in his opposition to Plato's procedures. A very suggestive remark has made it into the Big Typescript:

In Plato when a question like „What is knowledge?“ gets asked I don't find as a provisional answer: „Let's look and see how this word is used“. Socrates always rejects talking about particular instances of knowing, in favor of talking about knowledge. (Wittgenstein 2005, 54e. BEE Ms. 213, p. 66)

„What is ...“-questions, vulgo asking for the essence of things, are to be replaced by investigations into „family resemblances“ according to the *Philosophical Investigations*. But, even though Wittgenstein's criticism of his former self is duly noted by commentators, one obvious conclusion is seldom drawn. The author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, against whom the arguments are directed, must likely have held some of those Platonic views his later self decidedly rejected. One would, admittedly, not look for a metaphysical superstructure in a book programmatically excluding traditional speculative doctrine and refusing to enter into any of the ethical concerns Plato characteristically pursues. Yet, Wittgenstein's elaboration of „logical form“ can hardly be understood without invoking some set of extra-sensual, guiding principles over and above (as the saying goes) the mere given.

It might be objected that the logical apparatus behind meaningful propositions, e.g. the Fregean analysis of sentences and truth functions, is of an entirely different kind than the „forms“ (ideas) Plato is concerned with. But there is one, admittedly somewhat esoteric, line of argument which has a decidedly Platonic touch. It runs along the following lines. The picture theory establishes an isomorphic correlation between the constituents of a state of affairs and a sentence modeling its structure. This is usually given an empiricist gloss: sentence components are arranged just like real world givens, e.g. like cars in the Paris courtroom case Wittgenstein refers to in his Notebooks (29.9.1914). There is, however, a crucial problem with this account. As far as our sensory input is concerned there are no „cars“ -- or „things“ for that matter. We are presented with stimulus patterns that can very well be „pictured“ by verbal or written pronouncements, but this is strictly *ad hoc*. There is no way a given tableau of sense impressions, mirrored by a corresponding utterance, can convey a world consisting of self-sufficient, medium-term robust entities.

Items like cars are fairly constant in time with recurring characteristics which, consequently, must be recognizable in the sentences involved. The picture theory, however, in its most basic version, does not satisfy this requirement. There is no pictorial equivalent of someone seeing *a car* when confronted with a certain shape. This well known issue of radical empiricism feeds straight into

Platonic arguments. In order to recognize shapes as *car*-shapes an *idea* of such a vehicle has to be involved. Now, it is important to note that Wittgenstein actually provides a machinery to mimic such Platonic forms. It is an intricate construction which can only be sketched here (cf. Hrachovec 2000). Generality is at the core of Wittgenstein's reconstruction. He separates this feature from truth functional procedures (Tractatus 5.521), i.e. he does not regard quantifiers as purely formal operators but rather as indicative of content. Not of single, *ad hoc* givens, but as stand-ins for *common* features in sentences, picturing common traits of the world respectively. The required syntactic work is done by what he calls „sentence variables“ (Tractatus 3.313) which, in turn, designate „prototypes“ (*Urbilder*) (Tractatus 3.24). Meaningful sentences possess an infrastructure designed to precisely capture the *commonality* „behind“ (or „above“) sense impressions first encountered.

It is against this background that, when scrolling through the numerous depictions of Plato's cave, a feature caught my eye. While the usual means of ascent from below is by steps, one particular picture shows a ladder instead. I take it as a hint. It might be worthwhile to explore the motive of a ladder leading out of a cave.

2. One Way only

Wittgenstein's treatise suggests that ordinary discourse is often muddled and needs to be put in order. And his prescription – *conform* to the timeless regime of logical forms – can easily be thought of as an Enlightenment advice to overcome obstacles of old customs, tradition and resistance to progress. Upwardly mobile agents may use various devices to come out top. Yet, there is an apparent difference between steps (or stairs) and a ladder: those are fixed in place whereas the latter is removable. This innocuous detail is crucial nevertheless. Both Plato and Wittgenstein are superb storytellers, completely in command of their narratives and their impact. One cannot dispose of stairs as one can get rid of a ladder (Tractatus 6.54). Wittgenstein's variation on the motive of attaining superior knowledge is markedly special because of this small twist.

There is, supposedly, no way back. The journey, according to Wittgenstein, is one way. The allegory of the cave, on the other hand, derives most of its prominence in Western philosophy precisely from its inbuilt route reversal. It does not just describe the attainment of cognitive superiority, but, at the same time, the embattled relationship between the climbers and the remaining „population“.

Enlightened, the liberated agent turns back and attempts to teach his former companions the truth about their predicament (Plato: *Politeia* 516d-517a). This feature of the Platonic fable is essential for *paideia*, the formation of human rational capacities, much touted as *Bildung* in the Central

European context. The Platonic outlook, even though it starts with an „aristocratic“ gesture, is well suited to be „domesticated“ within a democratic environment, susceptible to a productive interchange up and down some „stairs“. Wittgenstein, against this participatory construction, rejects progressive dialectics. He operates within the bare outlines of dialectical oppositions like down/up, darkness/light, confusion/enlightenment, but refuses to be drawn into the kind of drama traditional philosophy has often developed in their wake.

Substituting the customary stairs by a ladder in picturing the cave can now be seen as a non-trivial matter and Wittgenstein's complicity with the paradigm of upward mobility appears in a new light. Much of the puzzlement about his famous *dictum* as to the ladder can be traced to his distinctive use of a well established Platonic trope, which he echoes while adapting it to a different purpose. A ladder, after all, *may* be used like a stair. In mentioning this instrument Wittgenstein seems to be in line with the general draft of self-development suggested by the notion of ascent. And then he springs his surprise by exploiting precisely the feature *distinguishing* ladders from stairs, breaking the continuity of the process and leaving the agent up on a higher tier, yet isolated from her provenance.

Given that Platonic imagery is deeply engrained in our civilization's cultural repertoire, Wittgenstein's climber, eschewing the more obvious give and take between directions, is an intriguing eccentric relative to a *locus communis*. Wittgenstein did not remain comfortable with this stance as the next section will point out. In the meantime there is a benefit to be reaped from the foregoing considerations. If we *bracket* its similarities with the Platonic enterprise we arrive at a more relaxed view of the melodramatic coda of the *Tractatus*. The claim that the very language used to establish conditions of meaningful discourse is not *itself* meaningful and has to be discarded is a provocative paradox that has given rise to many a discussion. The issue should be demystified and here is a non-Platonic scenario to present the point: think of one time only passwords. Access to a realm of sense is granted to someone using code which, obviously, is not part of the meaning it gives access to. It does not, furthermore, itself possess any meaning other than to unlock a certain realm. There is no way back once you cross the line, which is in fact the Wittgenstein coup. The appropriate comparison here is not to *paideia* but rather to solving a riddle or making a joke. Once you grasp the punch line you are done.

3. All I really want to do

Let us call the place Wittgenstein envisages at the end of his *Tractatus* the trouble-free *plateau*; a

riddle solved, no further questions necessary or, for that matter, possible. (High quality detective stories work like that.) This is decidedly not the spirit of modern age progressivism enshrined in the concluding verses of Goethe's *Faust*: „Whoever strives, in his endeavor / We can rescue from the devil.“ (Goethe, J.W. *Faust* v. 11936 f.). The later Wittgenstein's break with metaphysical exertions does, consequently not consist in holding an enigmatic position at the fringe of Platonism but in forswearing the ladder.

I might say, if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already. Anything that can be reached by a ladder does not interest me. (Wittgenstein 1998, 64e. BEE Ms. 109, p. 207)

The trouble-free plateau lacks the incentives common to Plato's allegory as well as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The question then becomes what kind of philosophy – if any – it supports. One answer is developed by the later Wittgenstein insisting on the power of ordinary language. There are no aims beyond our common means to make sense of the human predicament. The ordinary, according to this view, rests in itself and needs no „exits“ into more adventurous realms. We cannot outdo acquiescence with the most basic conditions governing our life. Attempts to call them into question presuppose deep-seated competences; they lose their grounding otherwise. In order to move something with our hands, Wittgenstein remarks, our feet have to stand firm (Wittgenstein 2000, Ms. 107, p.294).

While this is the position most often associated with Wittgenstein's writings after 1929 it is not the only one he considered. Alfred Schmidt, in a paper submitted to this conference (Schmidt 2014), has reminded readers of another, multilayered option.

You must not try to avoid a philosophical problem by appealing to common sense; instead, present it as it arises with most power, you must allow yourself to be dragged into the mire, and get out of it.” (Wittgenstein 1979, p.108f)

We noticed that Wittgenstein's thrown-away ladder impedes feedback, but here we are, unexpectedly, on Platonic territory again. It's just that the roles are reversed. Traditionally „ordinary people“ were caught in the mire and had to find the way out on a philosopher's promise. With Wittgenstein it is just the other way round. He advises his listeners to allow themselves to be dragged down *into philosophy* and to work their way up to common sense. This is *paideia* after all, applied to the professionals *in lieu* of those they claim to teach. The trouble-free plateau, according to this remark, is not just a flat surface and Wittgenstein is not the quietist some people have accused him to be.

Is there a way to reconcile the two approaches? Or, to put it another way, where does Wittgenstein's contra-Platonic, anti-philosophical Platonism end up? Two points have to be made. The first one is

that this very question is by no means a neutral one. It clearly does not arise within the context of a trouble-free plateau where multiple incompatible forms of (thinking about) life presumably coexist peacefully. The question pushes the issue of a correct, non-contradictory answer, which is a typical philosophical move. So, if you find Wittgenstein's recourse to the ordinary entirely convincing, stop here. The second point is that one can find some attempts to face the dilemma of trouble-free *and* troublesome in the *Nachlass*. Wittgenstein proposes a version of „end up“ covering both alternatives.

The difficulty - I might say - is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. (Wittgenstein 1981. BEE Ms. 109, p.207)

This somewhat enigmatic advice makes perfect sense if solutions are not simply unique, straightforward, and logically coercive outcomes. Riddles can have multiple solutions and cognitive conflict can be resolved in many ways. The trick is to realize that something that seemed to only be part of the problem may likewise serve as a solution. „The difficulty here is: to stop ... for you are already ‘at’ where you need to be; ...“ (Wittgenstein 1981, 314. BEE Ms. 109, p.207) So where does Wittgenstein end up? Good question. - Let us leave it at that.

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