

# What Wittgenstein forgot to mention about Socrates

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Scholars are more or less agreed upon some distinctive characteristics of the character named „Socrates“ in Plato’s early dialogues. This Athenian citizen does not mention the more elaborate doctrines of Plato’s later books and seems to be focussed on questions of ethics and conceptual clarification. It is likely that Plato’s literary creation, in these respects, more or less resembles the historical Socrates. Wittgenstein, on his part, does not distinguish between different roles assigned to the name „Socrates“ in Plato’s writings, but I will focus on the provocative, probing intellectual, questioning received wisdom in interchanges with citizens like Laches and Charmides. Platonic philosophy could never have developed without this person’s impact and I will claim that the Socratic strategy is quite similar to Wittgensteinian inquiries.

## Games and Courage

The initial paragraphs of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) are well known. After quoting Augustin he considers the purchase of apples at a merchant’s store, continuing with a scenario of builders. He then sums up what this introductory moves are driving at. Augustin’s presentation of language learning offers *one* feasible view of human communication, but it is much too narrow to account for the more general case it purports to cover. Wittgenstein offers a comparable impasse:

Es ist, als erklärte jemand: »Spielen besteht darin, daß man Dinge, gewissen Regeln gemäß, auf einer Fläche verschiebt ...« – und wir ihm antworten: Du scheinst an die Brettspiele zu denken; aber das sind nicht alle Spiele. Du kannst deine Erklärung richtigstellen, indem du sie ausdrücklich auf diese Spiele einschränkst. (PI §3)

Now consider this exchange between Socrates and his interlocutor Laches, an Athenian general:

**Socrates:** Then, Laches, suppose that we first set about determining the nature of courage, and in the second place proceed to enquire how the young

men may attain this quality by the help of studies and pursuits. Tell me, if you can, what is courage.

**Laches:** Indeed, Socrates, I see no difficulty in answering; he is a man of courage who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy; there can be no mistake about that.

**Socrates:** Very good, Laches; and yet I fear that I did not express myself clearly; and therefore you have answered not the question which I intended to ask, but another. (Plato, Laches 190d-e)

Here is a Wittgensteinian explanation of what went wrong in Laches' answer:

It is as if someone were to say: „Courage consists in remaining at one's post and fighting against the enemy ...“ – and we replied: You seem to be thinking of fighting in an Athenian phalanx, but there are other ways to show courage. You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those situations.

We feed on too restricted a diet, as Wittgenstein complains elsewhere. In trying to explain general terms like „courage“ or „language“ we are trapped by particular instances of the use of such expressions, stuck within the scope of certain examples and oblivious to alternatives. We tend to become bewitched by language, i.e. by the unappropriate force some of its phrases impose upon our understanding of each others locutions. Let me, without going into details, simply state that a similar sentiment runs through Socrates' conversation with his compatriots. I'll just remind you of one particularly memorable example. When Kephalos claims that justice is simply the attitude of fairly returning what a person might have received, Socrates objects by pointing to a counter-example. It is not regarded as just behaviour to return his weapons to a friend in mental disarray. (Politeia 331c). The term „justice“, like Wittgenstein's „game“, covers more ground than suggested by particular examples.

The parallels are striking – so why have they, as far as I can see – rarely been noticed?<sup>1</sup> One probable reason is the lack of distinction I mentioned at the beginning, i.e. between the sayings of the historical Socrates and all the claims Plato made „Socrates“ pronounce when he modelled him as a proponent of his own doctrines. It is very likely that Socrates, the actual person, used the probing questions just discussed to stimulate and annoy his fellow citizens. But his enquiries were not yet – if I may say so – *branded*. „What is courage?“ can be treated as an altogether harmless question like „What is a phalanx?“ Socrates presupposes some understanding of this type of locution – to which he adds his own twist. Courage is *not just* fighting in a phalanx, neither is justice just being committed to give things back. And so on. A catchphrase for this kind of endeavour

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is Richard Allen Gilmore [GILMORE(1999)] 123ff. His point is similar to mine: „... both philosophers consider abstract, universal, metaphysical definitions for various important but ordinary words in the language. Both philosophers, as it were, ask for definitions, and when a definition has been presented they immediately, both, begin to examine specific examples of the use of the word in specific contexts.“ (p. 124)

nowadays is „asking for the essence of things“ (or *the* meaning of an expression). It is extremely tempting to read Plato’s theory of forms into the grammatical construct of the „what is . . .“ format and so we picture the historical Socrates striving to introduce people to this peculiar kind of knowledge.

Conflating the Socrates characters makes it look like Wittgenstein and Socrates could never agree on forms. When Wittgenstein returns to the issue of games in § 65 of the *Investigations* the emphasis has changed markedly. Early in the book a general claim is admitted and scrutinized. As it turns out, its reach is too restricted. The later remarks address a presupposition inherent in general claims, namely the *presence of a common feature* to be sought for. It is this imposition of „a form of games“ that Wittgenstein is rejecting there, distinguishing himself from Socrates conceived as someone in search of these very forms. So instead of „Du kannst Deine Erklärung richtigstellen . . .“ we get „Sag nicht: ‚Es muß ihnen etwas gemeinsam sein . . .‘“. At this point the enquiry into „das Wesentliche des Sprachspiels“ is substituted by the thoroughly unplatonic „Familienähnlichkeiten“, family resemblances.

## Market and Theory

I do not think that one can step out of the Platonic tradition that easily and that Wittgenstein’s criticism is much more subtle than suggested by the standard account of his position. In the remainder of this paper I want to elaborate on these claims by dealing with two issues. The first one suggests itself from what has already been discussed. If Socrates does indeed occupy (at least) two different roles within the Platonic corpus, *could we reposition him vis-a-vis to Wittgenstein?* Not only can this be done, I want to claim, but it considerably improves our understanding of „family resemblances“. The second point will be that a more sophisticated view on Socrates and Wittgenstein allows us a better grasp of the latter’s view on the philosophical enterprise as such. A surprise is waiting here. Wittgenstein’s relationship to Platonic concerns is a complicated issue.

„What is courage? But don’t overgeneralize!“ This type of reminder is typical of Socrates as well as Wittgenstein. There is a crucial difference, though, which cannot be detected from the mere phrasing of the remark. The difference resides *in whom such remarks are addressed to*. Socrates talks to Athenian compatriots, whereas Wittgenstein quotes Augustin, a fellow philosopher. This is a most important switch and it hinges on distinguishing a real life Greek person (albeit presented within a philosophical narrative) from an expounder of Platonic opinions. The systematic impact differs relative to this address. In one case a philosopher – Socrates – is *provoking ordinary men* by subjecting them to a question the point of which has hitherto been unknown; in the second case a philosopher – Wittgenstein – *engages another philosopher* – Augustin – in order to dissuade him from a certain answer to a position both are familiar with. While Socrates prepares the ground for Plato, Augustin continues the use of forms that Plato introduced into philosophy as his response to the Socratic challenge.

Now, this shift would be of minor importance, if Socrates working the market place would

show a similar attitude to the subject as Socrates transformed into a supporter of Plato. But all the evidence point into a different direction. In fact, among the characteristic features of the early dialogues are their aporetic endings. There is simply no answer commonly agreed upon to Socrates' enquiries, with the master himself regularly deferring the issue. It is only at a later stage that the development of Platonic theory actually provides answers to questions about essence. If this is true, an unexpected conclusion suggests itself: this Socrates is distant to „ideas“, just like Wittgenstein. Or, to put it the other way round: Wittgenstein's criticism of Platonic forms is compatible with the first stage in Plato's own account of how his theory evolved.

Picking a philosopher – Augustin – as representative of over-generalization can now be seen as a subtle, but far-reaching comment upon the Platonic enterprise. Against the establishment of metaphysical philosophy Wittgenstein teams up with Socrates *this side* of the invention of ideas. He expresses his interest in asking beyond appearances and conceptual chauvinism, but he refrains from affirmative accounts of the cognitive order. The biographical affinities between Socrates and Wittgenstein that have recently been noticed by Thomas Wallgren and M.W.Rowe [[WALLGREN(2006)], [ROWE(2007)]] are philosophically appealing because of this more systematic diagnosis. Heidegger's rejection of Platons doctrine about truth is a well known move to reach, as it were, back behind Plato in order to „overcome metaphysics“. Wittgenstein's gesture is simple and carries a comparable message: We have to re-start from before Plato.

## Conclusion 1 to 3

The general advice to move outside the Platonic spell is fairly popular. But taking into account the indeterminacy of reference of the term „Socrates“ I have been pointing out allows us to distinguish between several competing readings of this suggestion. These are, in fact, alternative readings of the later Wittgenstein's general philosophical outlook since his rejection of forms in favor of family resemblances counts as one of its most characteristic moves, which resonates through much of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Three different views on Wittgenstein's relation to the established philosophical canon can be derived, depending on which „Socrates“ one has in mind. Start with Socrates as an umbrella term for the whole Platonic enterprise.<sup>2</sup> This option implies the most common understanding of Wittgenstein's position within the disciplinary matrix, namely as some kind of relativist.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to see that putting Wittgenstein side by side with the

<sup>2</sup> This is Wittgenstein's attitude in several remarks along these lines: „Sokrates stellt die Frage, was Erkenntnis sei, und ist nicht mit der Aufzählung von Erkenntnissen zufrieden. Wir aber kümmern uns nicht viel um diesen allgemeinen Begriff und sind froh, wenn wir Schuhmacherei, Geometrie etc. verstehen.“ Ms 111, 69. (Compare Ms 114, 108; Ms 211, 42) I quote Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his *Philosophical Investigations* using the decimal system and paragraph numbers respectively. Quotes from the *Nachlass* [WITTGENSTEIN(2000)] are given according to G.v.Wright's classification.

<sup>3</sup> „Sokrates, der den Sophisten immer zum Schweigen bringt — bringt er ihn mit Recht zum Schweigen? — Ja, der Sophist weiß nicht, was er zu wissen glaubte; aber das ist kein Triumph für Sokrates.“ Ms. 133, 95r

Sophists is almost inescapable once he is understood as opting out of a socratico-platonic inquiry into essences. Family resemblances are a good fit with the context-sensitive and interest-dependent accounts of our environment offered by the migrant teachers Socrates confronted.

I can only hint at some undecided issues here. An instructive way to check on the anti-platonic trend evident in many readings concerns Wittgenstein's phrase „form of life“ (PI §19). In quoting this passage the singular is inadvertently replaced by the plural „forms of life“ by prominent authors as Newton Garver observed in an influential paper[GARVER(1994)]. Such is the predisposition to regard Wittgenstein as a pluralist. Wittgenstein actually uses *both* the singular *and* the plural version in relevant contexts. I cannot elaborate<sup>4</sup>, but only briefly state a thesis and hint at its justification here. There is an important sense in which the later Wittgenstein keeps talking about forms and consequently has to have *some* understanding of form *simpliciter*. He uses terms like „Lebensform“, „Lebensmuster“ (Ms 137, 59b; Ms 232, 759), „Lebensschablone“ (Ms 137, 99a) and „Lebensteppich“ (Ms 169, 68). There must be *some* principle of order involved here. A relativistic assessment would hold that „forms“ themselves are only resembling each other like members of a family. It is an easy consequence of the reading just discussed. But then: *what family?* We need some explanation of the working of „patterns“ and paradigms.

The problem can nicely be captured by referring to the second reference of „Socrates“ discussed above, namely to the historical agent. In this case Wittgenstein's criticism of Plato puts him on a par with Socrates. I hope that my previous remarks have convinced you that this is at least a feasible interpretation. It amounts to the claim that *both* philosophers were genuinely concerned with the *kind* of question that turned out to become one of essences, without, however, following Plato's path. Philosophy which, after Plato, has acquired the habit of defining constitutive structures governing the world, would find itself back at square one, responding to Socrates' puzzles.

Are there Wittgensteinian answers to the issues raised in those scenarios? Can one regard Wittgenstein's attempts at what Saul Kripke appropriately called „sceptical solutions“ as alternative options within the framework delineated by the Socrates-Plato tradition? To put it in very specific terms: What kind of answer *is* Wittgenstein's talk about family resemblance if it does not reduce to relativism? This is not the place to elaborate how Wittgenstein on many occasions resists the drift to arbitrariness. He points out that one needs to put one's feet firmly on the ground in moving something and that one cannot start learning by questioning every input. „Wenn ich will, daß die Türe sich drehe, müssen die Angeln feststehen.“ (*On Certainty*, § 343) My restricted aim here is to highlight the fact that the considerations presented offer a succinct way to describe the issue. If it is indeed possible to draw a parallel between Socrates and Wittgenstein the questions indicated can be paraphrased the following way: Does Wittgenstein offer solutions to Socratic questions or do his remarks belong to some entirely different realm? If the first

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<sup>4</sup> An extensive debate has ensued around the issues raised by Newton Garver: [LÜTTERFELDS(1999)]; [LUETTERFELDS(2000)]; [HRACHOVEC(2009)]; [HALLER(1988)]; [GLOCK(2000)]; [FERBER(1992)]

case applies one might express this by saying that Wittgenstein, starting like Socrates, came up with a valid *alternative* answer to Plato's treatment of the issue.<sup>5</sup>

I think that a good case can be made for such a claim. Suppose Wittgenstein's philosophical innovations e.g. his „family resemblance“ fall entirely *outside* the Platonic spectrum and are – furthermore – not just pragmatically flexible ad hoc devices. How *do we* position them within a comprehensible scheme of philosophical endeavours? It strikes me that Wittgenstein's numerous puzzles and paradoxes, dealing with toothaches, intentions, meanings and rule-following are strangely *pointless* outside the frame of thinking philosophers commonly defend. This does not mean that they can be easily assimilated into such a frame, but this is precisely the point. Splitting the historical Socrates from Plato's spokesperson allows us to consider a significant deviation *within* this tradition. The case for Wittgenstein being an original thinker is not served well by separating him from the background that allows us to notice his unique approach. Wittgenstein, I would like to submit, is neither a trivializer of, nor a dropout from Plato-inspired philosophy. It is, however, true that this claim has to be defended against a third reading, not yet discussed.

According to it Wittgenstein is simply *not* a Plato-inspired philosopher. We have been considering two possible readings of this negation, both establishing some logical co-dependence between affirmation and negation. According to the first one philosophy divides into the Platonic tradition and its complement, the Sophists. The second option was to split the Platonic corpus and introduce an internal negation, separating the historical Socrates from his most influential successor. A third meaning of „not Plato-inspired“ is the following one: there is no common ground. Like, for example, „Albert Camus was not Plato-inspired.“ This assessment puts Wittgenstein *outside* one particular thread of European philosophy. He does not share its basic concerns and stops, in a way, short of even relating to Socrates. As I indicated a moment ago, I consider this an unconvincing view. But there is *one* angle looking from which it does make sense.

It is very difficult to describe what is commonly called „philosophy“ without setting it off against ordinary science. Its *raison d'être* is widely held to be that there are questions to be asked that do not fit the format of investigations mainly directed towards empirical facts. This is the discipline that started with the „Socratic kick“, i.e. with a strange demand to answer what-is-questions. Ignoring this approach is clearly evidence of being untouched by the Platonic tradition. Now, quite often Wittgenstein *is very much concerned* with (fighting) precisely those questions. Yet, in some prominent remarks he indicates his preference to simply abandon the whole enterprise. This is his version of altogether „overcoming philosophy“.

No more torments, no more attempts to dismantle unfunctional wheels and achieve friction where free-floating verbal associations ran unchecked. Stop being lured into Socratic

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<sup>5</sup> This is how the problem is presented in the key passage to consider (from the *Diktat to Schlick*): „Ich kann meinen Standpunkt nicht besser charakterisieren, als indem ich sage, daß er der entgegengesetzte Standpunkt dessen ist, welchen Sokrates in den platonischen Dialogen vertritt. Denn würde ich gefragt, was Erkenntnis sei, so würde ich Erkenntnisse aufzählen und die Worte „und Ähnliches“ hinzufügen. Es ist kein gemeinsamer Bestandteil in ihnen allen zu finden, weil es keinen gibt.“ Ms 302, 14

investigations. Imagine Athens without Socrates ever making his appearance. Its everyday life unfolds without someone poking holes into its citizen's fleeting convictions and aspirations. Imagine that the Platonic challenge would *not even have to be rejected*. You'll arrive at everyday language not encumbered by someone „making things difficult“. In order to do so you have to master everyday language and this is all there is to it. Or is there? We have just climbed the penultimate step of Wittgenstein's ladder, version 2. The “real discovery”, as PI §133 puts it, is to be able to stop philosophizing. You have to leave behind the promptings of philosophy as a condition of having a correct view of the world. Having arrived at this conclusion we are called upon to abandon any argument leading this way.

It is a well-known tune to which I will just add one concluding thought. Everyday language as the ultimate frame of reference is a version of „anything goes“<sup>6</sup>. An awful lot of language is produced every day. Something strange is going on here, as ordinary people, formerly thought of as being in need of enlightenment are regarded as ultimate arbiters of conceptual correctness. There is no one in sight to pierce their self-contentment. And this is one more thing Wittgenstein forgot to mention about Socrates.

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<sup>6</sup> Alternatively one might also call it „everything is well just as it is“ hyper-Platonism.

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