

Narrative identity and the case for wittgensteinian metaphysics

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The debate as to what kind of philosophy – if any at all – is possible after Wittgenstein seems very much alive today. Many are facing up to the interpretational issues his methodological remarks present. Taken literally, these seem to imply that the philosopher true to the spirit of Wittgenstein should in fact stop doing philosophy altogether, or at least content himself with a description of everyday expressions. ‘New Wittgensteinians’ consequently insist that proper philosophy is therapeutic. They take Wittgenstein to show that a philosopher must not try and answer questions like: “What constitutes personal identity?” but should free us from the urge to ask such questions in the first place.

I myself do not think this reading does justice to the insights we find in Wittgenstein’s work. Having always studied his writings next to those of philosophers like Heidegger and Levinas, I cannot help but see Wittgenstein as also contributing to an understanding of, e.g., self and subjectivity. But how can that be reconciled with Wittgenstein’s blatantly anti-metaphysical statements? I prefer to follow Stephen Mulhall’s advice and take (some of) Wittgenstein’s methodological remarks rhetorically instead of literally. According to Mulhall, sections 108(b)-133 of the *Investigations* demonstrate the exact fallacy Wittgenstein is combating in other parts of the book: the idealization of phenomena like mind and meaning. Here, however, philosophy itself is presented in an overly purified form. These paragraphs should therefore be taken with a pinch of salt; they are not directed at metaphysics *per se*, i.e., at “a concern with essence as such”, but only at “a particular fantasy of what such a concern must be.” (Mulhall 2004, p. 76)

If Mulhall is right, Wittgenstein differs from his predecessors with respect to method but not with respect to goal. This reading holds the promise of a philosophy that still has significant things to say about matters metaphysical; that does not reify phenomena such as mind and identity, but does not remain silent about them either; that does not look for the wrong kinds of essences, but dares to ask fundamental questions nonetheless. Yet although such a philosophy would differ from both traditional metaphysics and an elimination of that tradition, it is not obvious how Wittgenstein’s work can be said to exemplify it. For when he is not ridiculing one position or other, he is simply posing questions, often without answering them, or discussing examples, mostly without stating the conclusions he is driving at. One might wonder how *that* can be considered a genuine form of metaphysics.

In this paper I wish to elaborate upon Mulhall’s suggestion by arguing that - despite his anti-metaphysical remarks and his seemingly superficial treatment of philosophical issues –Wittgenstein’s oeuvre contains substantial ideas on matters such as mind and personal identity. I will focus on this latter topic. Now Wittgenstein does not discuss personal identity extensively, and the passages where it is mentioned (BB p. 61-74, PI § 404-413) indeed seem mere descriptions of our use of the pronoun ‘I’. However, when we consult the writings that have a more personal or ethical flavour, we can see that Wittgenstein actually has more to say about what it means to be a person. Identity, moreover, is discussed extensively by an author who is not often associated with Wittgenstein, but whose work can certainly be said to illustrate the type of philosophy described above: Paul Ricoeur. He offers an account in which the self is not reified, but its existence is not denied either. And Wittgenstein’s ideas turn out to be surprisingly similar to Ricoeur’s. By thus focussing on an unusual topic and bringing Wittgenstein *tête-à-tête* with an unusual interlocutor, I hope to make plausible that there is such a thing as wittgensteinian metaphysics. But I will turn to Ricoeur first. His treatment of personal identity is more accessible than that of Wittgenstein, so an exploration of Ricoeur’s ideas will pave the way for an exploration of Wittgenstein’s. Though the bringing together of

thinkers from such different backgrounds may be controversial, I think that the work of the one will shed light on that of the other.

For the moment I will restrict myself to two of Ricoeur's shorter pieces: *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator* and *Narrative Identity*. Ricoeur here asks what reasons we have for saying that a person remains the same over the years, and wonders whether the similarities between life and narrative are of any help. In a Wittgensteinian vein he immediately advises the reader of *Life [etc.]* not to ignore the differences between lives and stories, and begins *Narrative Identity* with a description of the many ways in which the term 'identity' is used. Some of these grammatical differences, Ricoeur continues, bespeak an ontological distinction between (in Heideggerian terms) *vorhanden* things and *daseinsmäßige* beings. It is therefore vital to distinguish between identity in the sense of sameness and identity in the sense of self: the identity of a person cannot be understood in the same way as the permanence of a thing over time.

Ricoeur illustrates what may result from overlooking this difference by discussing the work of Derek Parfit. As Ricoeur explains, Parfit presupposes that, since I am not my body or my experiences, the self must be some further fact. Parfit then considers some thought-experiments, each supposedly indicating the impossibility of deciding whether there is such a 'thing' as personal identity. He takes this to mean that the concept of identity is empty, and concludes that we should renounce all talk of the self. Ricoeur does not think this is the right conclusion to draw. In his view Parfit's puzzles only show that - to paraphrase Wittgenstein - personal identity conceived of as an *object* "drops out of consideration as irrelevant." (PI § 293) This does not mean that identity is an illusion; it means that we need an alternative account of the self.

According to Ricoeur personal identity does not reside in a pre-given substrate, but forms an "ambition" (Blamey 1995, p. 583) that has to take shape in the course of a lifetime. Identity consequently is more akin to a story than to any kind of substance, and recourse to narratological concepts is more helpful in explaining the self than talking in terms of facts and objects. Ricoeur thinks Aristotle's concept of plot is especially informative. Analogous to an operation of emplotment, the process of self-formation can be seen as the making into a meaningful whole of an uninterpreted sequence of disparate and sometimes conflicting events. Thus understanding a human life as a narrative unity enables us, Ricoeur believes, to incorporate both change and permanence without change threatening permanence, and *vice versa*. On this account identity is "neither an incoherent succession of occurrences nor an immutable substance incapable of becoming." (Ricoeur 1986, p. 131) Both elimination and sublimation are avoided: "In the place of an ego enchanted by itself a *self* is born, taught by cultural symbols, first among which are the stories received in the literary tradition. These stories give unity - not unity of substance but of narrative wholeness." (Ricoeur 1986, p. 132)

Obviously this exposé cannot answer all questions concerning personal identity or Ricoeur's conception of it. I will concentrate on the question that is most urgent in the current context: what has Ricoeur's theory got to do with Wittgensteinian metaphysics? At first glance Wittgenstein says little about the topic Ricoeur investigates so thoroughly. Only a few sections of the *Investigations* concern the pronoun 'I', culminating in the scornful remark that an account of the self may say more about "the state of a philosopher's attention when he says the word 'self' to himself" (PI § 413) than about identity. In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein is more elaborate. He reminds us that 'I' generally is not used to denote a body. This may lead one to state that the I is of a mental nature, creating "the illusion that we use this word to refer to something bodiless, which, however, has its seat in our body." (BB p. 69) That is no improvement, Wittgenstein thinks, for then it is still assumed that words like 'I' and 'self' function as labels for objects. And there are

important differences between the grammar of a statement about psychological phenomena and “the grammar of an outwardly similar statement about physical objects.” (BB p. 70)

Wittgenstein’s reflections abound with references to the way relevant concepts are used. But, on my reading, he does not claim that all problems surrounding the self are thereby (dis)solved. Although he clearly disapproves of several identity theories, Wittgenstein does not present his remarks as a remedy for all philosophical activity. He simply argues that theorizing is useless when guided by the wrong expectations. His diagnosis is similar to Ricoeur’s: philosophers who assume that only a fact or object can explain personal identity, go astray even before they have started speculating. Subjects cannot be approached in the same way as objects.

So the upshot of Wittgenstein’s discussion of the pronoun ‘I’ resembles the first step in Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity; both question the foundations of certain theories on identity. But Ricoeur does not leave it at that, and also tries to provide an alternative to these theories. Since I am investigating the possibility of wittgensteinian metaphysics, it is interesting to examine whether an alternative can be formulated on the basis of Wittgenstein’s work as well. For is the dismantling of philosophical creations his only goal, or does he also contribute to understanding the self in a more constructive way? The *Blue Book* and the *Investigations* do not contain an answer to this, but more can be learned from Wittgenstein’s work on ethics and religion.

Of all his writings on these matters, I find the *Lectures on Religious Belief* most revealing. Here Wittgenstein looks for a way to distinguish the believer from the non-believer, for instance with regard to Judgement Day. One cannot simply state, he explains, that both take a different stance towards the same state of affairs, for a religious dispute strictly speaking never concerns facts. It seems more appropriate to say that the believer *always* thinks about Last Judgement, whereas the non-believer *never* has such thoughts: “Here, an enormous difference would be between those people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just didn’t use it at all.” (LRB p. 56) Wittgenstein suggests that the believer is characterized by the thoughts he has or pictures he uses. This suggestion should not be misunderstood. Wittgenstein is not claiming that a list of convictions inside a person’s head makes him or her religious. That would contradict both his writings on the soul (which he thinks is not some private inner realm) as well as his other writings on religion (where he argues that being religious does not amount to having a theory). Fortunately the *Lectures* support a different reading.

Religious belief is not portrayed as something internal to the believer, but rather as something that “will show [...] by regulating for in all his life.” (LRB p. 54) The pictures Wittgenstein talks about therefore play a different role than simply floating before the believer’s inner eye. That the religious person constantly thinks of Judgement Day means that he has made this picture into the “guidance for his life” (LRB p. 53). This picture moreover cannot be seen as something detached from or preceding the believer’s living his life. For although terms with a theoretical connotation (like ‘belief’ and ‘picture’) are used as regards religion, Wittgenstein explains elsewhere, “it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life” (CV p. 64). The difference between the believer and the non-believer, then, is existential rather than epistemological. The non-believer is characterized by a lack of a direction in life. The believer in contrast judges – to use Ricoeur’s words – all his “doing[s] and undergoing[s]” (Ricoeur 1986, p. 127) in view of a certain picture and consequently makes his life into a meaningful whole.

This description of religious belief certainly is debatable. To Wittgenstein however one thing in these notes seems beyond doubt: life is a task one should take very seriously. His *Lectures* can thus be said to deal, not with religion narrowly defined, but with what it means to be a human being and lead a human life. If this is the right reading, these notes respond to questions akin to those Ricoeur investigates. And this means that there is not

just fierce criticism on certain identity theories, but also an alternative to be found in Wittgenstein's work, even though it is not presented as such. This wittgensteinian alternative, moreover, is strikingly similar to Ricoeur's. Remember that Ricoeur refuses to assign personal identity to an immutable substance; likewise Wittgenstein does not reduce someone's life-view to a static internal state. Ricoeur maintains that identity is formed out of numerous heterogeneous elements; similarly Wittgenstein claims that a person's convictions show themselves in all the different things he undertakes and undergoes. Ricoeur states that life is but a biological phenomenon before it is narrated; likewise Wittgenstein feels that the good life constitutes a meaningful whole instead of a mere succession of events. Where Ricoeur argues that a story warrants the unity of a human life, Wittgenstein believes that a figure or pattern can be seen in the existence of someone who takes his humanity seriously.

Now I do not claim that Wittgenstein has hereby definitively answered the question: "What constitutes personal identity?" and has done so in exactly the same way as Ricoeur. That is not the case nor is it what I intended to show. I merely hope to have demonstrated that Wittgenstein's contribution to philosophy is not a purely destructive one. Despite his negative remarks and his reluctance to make conclusions explicit, Wittgenstein cannot be said to embody the very end of metaphysics. From his writings views on, e.g., self and subjectivity can be extracted – though admittedly in a sometimes roundabout way – that he may not have articulated himself, but that do not run counter to his philosophical convictions either. There is philosophical life after Wittgenstein after all.

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Abstract

This paper defends the possibility of wittgensteinian metaphysics. Though Wittgenstein seems to have nothing substantial to say on, e.g., personal identity, a comparison of his work to that of Ricoeur shows that Wittgenstein actually offers some constructive insights concerning the self. He and Ricoeur not only criticize the same kind of theories on identity, they also provide similar alternatives to these theories. This indicates that there can indeed be metaphysics after, and on the basis of, Wittgenstein.