
Practical Understanding in Wittgenstein's Later Work

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Preliminary

This is the first in a series of three intensive seminars that will be given in 2014 – 2015, under the overall title ‘Understanding, Meaning, Interpretation: Three seminars’.

The common theme of the series is that of understanding: how does understanding of language and action come about? What kinds of understanding are at stake here? What role does linguistic meaning play? What should a proper theory of natural semantics look like? How does the historical and cultural background shape our understanding and evaluation of language and action? What is needed for radical interpretation to succeed?

The three seminars explore different aspects of this common theme: the first seminar focusses on the type of practical understanding that is explored in Wittgenstein’s later work, in particular in connection with ethics and religious belief, rituals, and aesthetic experience. The second seminar investigates some of the basic philosophical and methodological assumptions of modern formal semantics, in order to give a critical appraisal of what formal semantics can and can not contribute to an overall theory of understanding. The third and last seminar explores the central philosophical thought-experiment of radical interpretation, and brings together insights from both the analytic as well as the continental traditions in modern Western philosophy.

1 Goals and contents

The central topic of the first seminar is the epistemological status of ethical values, religious beliefs and aesthetic experience in Wittgenstein’s later work.

This has a double meaning. First of all, there is the question of the *contents* of these values and beliefs. In his early work (*Tractatus*; *Notebooks*) Wittgenstein

proposed a concise, but relatively accessible picture of what ethical values are. In the main works of the later period, the *Philosophical Investigations*, *On Certainty*; the topic of ethical values and religious beliefs does not occur, at least not explicitly. There are, however, a number of minor texts which do treat of these subjects, and they allow us to investigate to what extent Wittgenstein changed his views on the contents of ethics and religion over the years.

Secondly, there is the question of the *place* occupied by religious beliefs and ethical convictions in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Again, in the *Tractatus* period Wittgenstein gave a clear picture of how ordinary beliefs about the world relate to religious beliefs. As Wittgenstein's views on epistemology and ontology and on the role of logic and philosophical analysis changed over the years, the question is whether and if so how this also affects the place attributed to religious beliefs and ethical convictions.

2 Approach

Since Wittgenstein's thought of the *Tractatus* period in many ways serves as a reference point for understanding his later views, we will start with an overview of Wittgenstein's early views on ethics, drawing on the *Tractatus*; various passages in the *Notebooks* and the 'Lecture on Ethics'.

After that we turn to Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty*; in which he discusses extensively various epistemological issues, concerning knowledge and belief, doubt and scepticism, proof and certainty, form of life and 'Weltanschauung', and their relation with action, our biological nature and the external world. From this work, we will derive something which we call the 'three tiers picture', which provides a framework in which we can then try to position Wittgenstein's views on religious beliefs, ethical values, and aesthetic experience.

The contents of Wittgenstein's views on religious beliefs and ethical values form the central topic of the seminar. Here we will look in detail at the 'Lectures on Religious Belief', the 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', and the notes collected in *Culture and Value*. We will also look at Wittgenstein's views on the work of Freud, which are highly relevant for the present topic, since according to Wittgenstein the freudian approach to the human psyche is much more akin to ethics and religion than it is to science. Finally, we also look at the 'Lectures on Aesthetics', which will give us a clearer perspective on the kind of understanding that Wittgenstein thinks is at stake in this realm.

3 Course material

Students are assumed to have access to a copy of *On Certainty* and of the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. All other reading materials will be made available electronically.

4 Schedule

The seminar runs for two weeks, with four sessions of three hours per week, Monday to Thursday (but cf., below).

Each session will consist of a two hour lecture, followed by one hour of questions and discussions. Students are asked to prepare questions for each session and email them to the lecturer the evening before. Use this email address: m.j.b.stokhof@uva.nl

For the last session, all students are requested to prepare a short (approx. 2 pages) position statement. In order to give students enough time to prepare their statements the last session will be held, not on Thursday, but on Friday.

Session 1, Monday, November 3:

Topic: Ethics in the early work

Material: Tractatus 5.54–5.641; 6.37–7; Notebooks, entries dd. 14/07/1916 – 10/01/1917; ‘A Lecture on Ethics’.

Sessions 2–3, Tuesday, November 4 – Wednesday, November 5:

Topic: The background of certainty

Material: On Certainty (selections); Philosophical Investigations (selections).

Session 4, Thursday, November 6

Topic: Ethics and religious belief in the later work

Material: Lectures on Religious Belief; Culture and Value (selections).

Session 5, – Monday, November 10

Topic: Ritual, practical and scientific understanding

Material: Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*; Conversations on Freud.

Session 6, Tuesday, November 11

Topic: Aesthetic experience

Material: Lectures on Aesthetics.

Session 7, Wednesday, November 12:

Topic: Practical understanding in the framework of certainties

Material: Kober (1997, 2007); Cioffi (1998, chapter 3).

Session 8, Friday, November 14

Topic: Discussion, and further directions

Material: Short position statements by the participants.

References

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