

Essay Units 1-3 Number 6

'The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of the language which I alone understand) mean the limits of my world' (Tractatus 5.62). Do you agree with this statement?

Wittgenstein's account of language in the *Tractatus* led him to a radical solipsistic interpretation of reality, epitomised in this quote about the limits of 'my world'. As he himself later came to realise this interpretation is undermined by the flaws in the theory itself. Language users do more with language than simply make logical statements about facts, and his later and broader account of language articulated in the argument that 'meaning is use' clearly undermines a solipsistic world view. Although debatable, a possible conclusion based on his later views could be that 'the limits of our language are the limits of our world'.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein attempts to give an account of how the logical structure of language mirrors or pictures the world as we experience it (and arguably what reality really is). He argued that the world is made up of atomic facts (2.04), and that the world could only be clearly described by a logical language based on those facts. Logical propositions created pictures of possible states of affairs (2.202), each proposition had a truth function and the statements that accurately mirrored reality were true (2.222).

Wittgenstein drew several fundamental philosophical conclusions from this account of the interaction of language with the world (including conclusions about causality, mysticism, and the role of logic in philosophy). In terms of its solipsistic implications the important aspect of his account is that the world as it appears to me can only be in terms of logical propositions, which are either true or false, and that everything that I can say or even think sensibly about the world is limited by the necessity to use language in a way that conformed with this logical structure. Our ability to know and describe meaningfully the reality outside of ourselves is limited by the limits of what we can accurately do with language.

I would argue that there are at least two problems with the solipsistic conclusion which he drew from this account.

The first, and less definitive, issue lies in the *Tractatus* itself. He accepts in the *Tractatus* that there is 'something' outside of what can be expressed using propositions, but that there is nothing to be 'said' about these things, they can only be 'shown' (6.522). This is the 'mystical' and 'transcendental'. It appears to also include (at least) ethics and aesthetics (6.421), and logic itself (4.12). These aspects of the *Tractatus* are controversial. For the sake of this argument I would at least put forward this suggestion. That the admission of these possible entities presents the possibility of a metaphysical reality outside of language itself. The fact that they can be 'shown' presents the possibility that they can either be perceived sensibly or perceived by the mind (Wittgenstein himself at least seems to appreciate their existence), even if they cannot be discussed or thought of accurately in language. But if they 'exist' and can be perceived then they certainly challenge the notion that 'my world', my reality, is limited by 'my language'. How is it possible that I can be 'shown' something that doesn't exist in 'my world'? If those entities 'exist' how can solipsism coincide with pure realism? (5.64)

The more definitive problem with the *Tractatus*' conclusion about solipsism (as Wittgenstein himself recognised later) is that the basis of his account about language was not a full description of what language users do with language. In his later work Wittgenstein discussed the huge range of uses of language, many of which have little to do with logical statements. He saw language more as a 'game' with rules that were agreed upon and shared by language users (not necessarily explicitly). More importantly in the powerful 'private language argument' he realised that it is not possible for a person to be using a language meaningfully with themselves only, since that person would be subscribing meaning to their words and statements that are unverifiable by any other language user. He came to the conclusion that 'meaning is use'.

The idea that 'meaning is use' has several powerful implications. In response to the solipsism of the *Tractatus*, it clearly implies that if our language has meaning then it is dependent on the existence of multiple language users (at least more than one). The *Tractatus* presents a world where the individual subject can make logical statements about reality, but the private language argument would imply that in the absence of other language users this is only possible if the statements made are essentially babble. In essence the implication of Wittgenstein's later work is that we live in a world of a community of language users, clearly denying that 'solipsism coincides with pure realism' (5.64). In fact, what the private language argument really implies is that even our very thoughts are dependent on the existence of a community of other language users to give meaning to the words we use in our thoughts.

Based on Wittgenstein's later views I would argue that it is possible that the limits of what we can say meaningfully about the world is limited by the limits of the languages we use as a community. The implication of the private language argument is that to think or speak meaningfully outside of a shared language is not a conceivable prospect. Is, therefore, the limit of *our* language the limit of *my* world? Not entirely. Each subject can still have a unique sensory input from the external world, unique internal emotional sensations, unique perceptions. The private language argument does not deny this possibility. I don't have a word for every sensation I have. But those unique experiences of the world are not communicable, and certainly we cannot meaningfully 'think' about them, since thought is limited by language.

What about the prospect that the limits of *our* language are the limits of *our* world? In my opinion whether this is true or false depends upon a metaphysical stance in regards to reality. If there is a 'real' world outside of our sensory input that we share then

our experience of it, irrespective of language, may be shared, and we may even interact with one another within the bounds of this world and communicate using non linguistic forms of communication. Perhaps this is what animals are doing. This view depends on a realism about truth and experience. But belief in the existence of this world, while the sane position, is logically less philosophically concrete than the belief that as a bare minimum that other language users exist. Our senses may deceive us but we cannot have a language without other language users. That is what the private language argument gives us.

If we do not trust our senses then to argue that the limits of our language are the limits of our world might be true in a minimalist metaphysics. If we do trust our senses then the limits of our language might be the limits of our 'meaningful' world, since meaning 'for us' in our reality is provided by language.