

Logic – Grammar – Logic

Niklas Forsberg

Centre for Ethics, University of Pardubice

Abstract

One of the most commonly shared views when it comes to Wittgenstein’s philosophy, was that one of the main focuses of the early Wittgenstein’s work was the concept of logic; and that the turn away from logic towards the concept of grammar and “grammatical investigations” of “ordinary language” is the defining characteristic of “later Wittgenstein.” There are, of course, many different ways of spelling out differences and similarities here. What has gone more or less unnoticed though, is that when Wittgenstein writes the remarks collected as *On Certainty*, there are very few mentions of “grammar,” and the few mentions there are shows that this concept now does very little philosophical work. Interestingly, though, the concept of logic is much more frequently employed, and it is also a concept Wittgenstein is really *working* on. This paper asks the question why the concept of logic again seems to have taken on a larger role in Wittgenstein’s latest period.

The Dramatic Curve (Logic – Grammar – Logic)

We normally, and somewhat leisurely, talk about “the *Tractatus*.” (Wittgenstein 2001) This way of referring to Wittgenstein’s first work hides an important fact about the work: It is a *logico-philosophical* tractate. Now, this hyphenation ties philosophy and logic together. We can either read that hyphenation as suggesting that these (logic and philosophy) are two distinct entities, and that something is gained by binding them together. Alternatively, we could also read it as suggesting that the whole idea of making distinction between philosophy and logic is somewhat confused. I think the latter suggestion is true; or at least not as misleading as the first. Either way, logic was central to him. So central, that not only did he put it in the title, but he also did so, by identifying it (to some degree at least) with philosophy.

Another thing that should be clear and uncontested, is that when Wittgenstein resurfaces on the philosophical scene after his “I have solved all problems episode,” the concept “logic” does *not* appear in any titles, and it *may appear* to play a decreasing role for his thinking. The texts drafted in this period, for example, are *Philosophische Betrachtungen*,

Philosophische Bemerkungen, and, notably, *Philosophische Grammatik* and *Bemerkungen zur Philosophischen Grammatik* – and a large portion of the texts from the 30s, have been collected in the volume published in English, under the name *Philosophical Grammar*. (Wittgenstein 1974)

This is normally considered to show us that Wittgenstein made a move *from* a focus on logic, *to* a focus on grammar and ordinary language. This is a view that suggests that Wittgenstein’s interests have shifted, and that the turn of his thinking includes a shift of object of interest too. Here is that thought clearly expressed by Biletzki and Matar in their 2021 entry to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

The move from the realm of logic to that of the grammar of ordinary language as the center of the philosopher’s attention; from an emphasis on definition and analysis to ‘family resemblance’ and ‘language-games’; and from systematic philosophical writing to an aphoristic style—all have to do with this transition towards anti-dogmatism in its extreme. (Biletzki and Matar 2021)

It is of course not without reason that formulations such as this one keep being repeated. I think it is correct to say that Wittgenstein sought, as I guess all serious thinkers do, to be nondogmatic in his thinking. And I also think there’s some truth in their claim that Wittgenstein, in his earlier work, employs a systematic style; whereas, in his later work, his method consists of grammatical investigations, and the style is aphoristic. But I do not think that the *object of interest* has changed in the way Biletzki and Matar describes it. I want to suggest that the mere fact that Wittgenstein doesn’t use the word “logic” as much as before and that he started talking about grammar instead, doesn’t entail that we have left “the realm of logic” behind. Likewise, the mere fact that the author of the *Tractatus* didn’t use the phrase “ordinary language” much in his earlier work, does not mean that he thought that logic and ordinary language existed in, as it were, different realms. Biletzki and Matar seem to suggest that when you study logic, you are doing something very different from exploring (the grammar of) ordinary language; and I find that to be a problematical view, and a view that Wittgenstein never held. It is also worth noting that “family-resemblance” and “language games” are presented by them as specific *things* that need to be analyzed.

It may indeed seem as if “logic,” in the *Investigations*, most prominently serves as a name for a metaphysical impulse that he has now given up on – so that the turn towards

grammar and the ordinary and language games etc., can be seen as an effort to avoid what he, in §38 of the *Investigations* called the “tendency to sublime the logic of our language.” (Wittgenstein 1997, §38) “Logic” is presented as thought’s “halo,” the image of thought’s essence that “must be “a priori order of the world”; and as such: “It is *prior* to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it.” (Wittgenstein 1997, §97). For Wittgenstein, this image of logic turns it into a “super-concept” (Wittgenstein 1997, §97), and it is this ideal image, this fantasy, that becomes an “unshakeable ideal.” (Wittgenstein 1997, §107). Wittgenstein’s work in and after the *Investigations* may thus come across as efforts to put the new method – *grammatical investigations* – to work on a number of new different topics such certainty, psychology, colors, mathematics, logic, and “culture and value.” Central to this method is, not only the dispelling of illusions, but also the emphasis on the “grammatical” over all “empirical cloudiness.”

So, it may indeed look like Wittgenstein first put his faith in logic, and then, in his later writings, turned around and shifted focus to a critique of logic by means of various ways of analyzing “ordinary language.” But there is something that is not entirely right with this idea of a linear development in which logic is becoming less and less central to Wittgenstein.

In this paper, I want to focus on one small fact (that I think hasn’t been sufficiently attended to in “the literature”): If one reads the text of collected remarks that has been compiled by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright under the name *On Certainty*, it is quite striking that Wittgenstein talks very little about grammar or grammatical investigations. Instead, the concept of logic is again given a prominent place. And this leads me to the question I want to address: *why has the concept of logic been resurrected, and why is there so little talk about “grammar”?*

Statistics says very little on its own, but it gives us at least some facts to think *about*: In *On Certainty*, the concept “grammar” or “grammatical” surfaces only in approximately 10 paragraphs. (E.g. Wittgenstein 1969, §§ 57, 58, 313, 393, 415, 433, 468.) So we can safely say that it is not a central notion that he uses frequently. It is also clear that he rarely uses the concept of grammar in any obviously positive sense. What I mean with “positive” here is not really a matter of feeling. Rather, the notion does not seem to do any critical work, it seems to carry little philosophical weight. On several occasions, Wittgenstein is best described as pointing out some limitations of that notion.

The concept of logic (or logical), on the contrary, is discussed in at least in at least 27 paragraphs (Wittgenstein 1969, §§ 21, 26, 36, 48, 51, 53, 59, 60, 67, 82, 98, 110, 136, 155, 194,

308, 319, 342, 350, 353, 375, 401, 447, 454, 475, 501, 620.) What is more, in each and every one of them, Wittgenstein is really working with, thinking about, the sense of that concept. So already at a brief glance at the roles played by these concepts, it is clear that “grammar” seems surprisingly unimportant and one that he often talks about in terms of its limitations; whereas the concept of logic is brought back, problematized, introduced in new contexts and, clearly, of great importance to him.

A Brief History of (Wittgenstein’s Notion of) Logic

One small reminder about the concept of logic that I think is in place here, is that it had its birth with Aristotle inserting a separation into the core of language: *form* was divorced from *substance*. The idea of logic being formal, or the form of thinking, is precisely the idea that it doesn’t matter so much what our reasoning is *about*. It should be possible to study “reasoning as such,” the *form* of thought, quite regardless of its content. It shouldn’t matter if we use “Socrates” or “Ondřej” as names when we teach our students their first syllogism; the form of the argument is the same in all our efforts to explicate it. Reason has to work the same way for all people, at all times, in all situations. This is the reason why philosophers started to think that it makes sense to reason about variables rather than persons and things.

But how do the formal features of our reasoning come into view? I don’t think it is insignificant that we actually *don’t* start with variables (x’s, and y’s, or a’s and b’s) when we teach our students their very first syllogism. I mean, what does a simple syllogism, such Modus Barbara, mean in the first encounter, if we *only* see it, in its formalized form?

MaP

SaM

SaP

Without substance removed, however, it’s rather easy to explain, or should we say *show*, how it works:

All men are mortal

All Swedes are men

All Swedes are mortal

Similarly, I don’t think we would introduce Modus Ponens to the philosophical child in its formalized form either, even if it may be a bit easier follow:

$$\begin{array}{l} P \rightarrow Q \\ \underline{P} \\ Q \end{array}$$

Put it this way: P’s and Q’s need some meaning for them to become sensible as variables, and not merely letters. In order to move from a reasoning that is “merely formally correct” to “correct,” we need sense, meaning, and the point of the utterance; that is, we need context.

If my watch is correct, the train won’t reach Stockholm on time.
My watch *is* correct.

The train won’t reach Stockholm on time.

This deduction may be amusing to a commuting Swede (struggling with a derailed train-network) with a thing for logic, but as a “form of reasoning” this non-formal rendition of the deduction is not something that obviously tells us something true about the world. No matter how useful it is in certain contexts, formal reasoning on its own, doesn’t get us all the way.

Obviously, I am not trying to teach anyone anything here; there’s no new information added here. But I nevertheless think this is a relevant reminder, for the point I am gesturing at is absolutely central to the ways of thinking about logic that Wittgenstein, so clearly, inherited from Frege: Logic resides in, and can only be brought into the light, if we look at language in use! In fact, I want to say that what may be called Frege’s *a priorism* would have been impossible without this recognition. Logic would “rest on” something else, and not be the foundation of thought, if this reminder wasn’t true.

What do I mean by saying that?

It is well known that, according Frege, “ordinary words” are “not really appropriate for scientific purposes, because they are not precise enough and fluctuate in their use.”¹ Therefore,

¹ The relevant passage in full reads: “In the first stage of any discipline we cannot avoid the use of ordinary words. But these words are, for the most part, not really appropriate for scientific purposes, because they are not precise

he thought, we need to come up with a tool that helps us in our scientific endeavors, where the need for precision is heightened. His development of a formal symbolism is a response to the conviction that ordinary language is not precise enough. However, that ordinary language is not precise enough *for scientific purposes*, does not entail, that it is not precise enough for other purposes. And it does *not* follow that logic is not already present in ordinary discourse. Formalization, for Frege, was not called for in order to *bring* logic to the world, or to set ordinary language straight, but to bring into view something that was already there, even if it was not visible, hidden by misleading forms of writing and speaking. (See Diamond 1991) The symbolism is not the logic.

Since logic, for Frege, is *not* to be identified with a formal representation, it can only come into view if we study the *use* of ordinary language. This is the reason Frege is so critical of Hilbert’s idea that the terms of logic should be *defined*. (Frege 1984b, 300) Definitions are *man-made* restrictions, delimitations, impositions – a way to plot the land rather than unearth it and map it.

Thus, as one ventures upon the task, as Frege did, to explicate logic, the place to start is in *how we talk to each another*. Think, for example, about Frege’s well known distinction between concepts and objects. (Frege 1984a) “The concept ‘horse’ is not a horse.” This was, for Frege, a *logical* discovery. The *difference* between a concept and instances of that concept, things, is a *logical* difference. But the *difference* itself is not a thing! Or to be more precise, it is not in itself anything; it only comes into being, in the particular form it takes, due to features of the of the objects it is, as it were, in between. One may say that it describes a relation, but a relation wouldn’t be anything without the two things “between” which it holds. So, there’s no reason to assume, either, that he postulated, or defined, anything; or that he discovered some mysterious kind of “entity” hitherto unseen. Thus, without us conversing with each other, without us describing the two things differently, there would be no point in marking out the difference. Without that difference, there’s no logical “thing” to think about. To formulate this differently, and in a somewhat more radical tone, one may say that this distinction would be *nothing*, absolutely zilch, without human beings talking to one another. Remove discourse, and the conditions of discourse are removed too.

enough and fluctuate in their use. Science needs technical terms that have precise and fixed meanings, and in order to come to an understanding about these meanings and exclude possible misunderstanding, we give elucidations [*Erläuterungen*] of their use.” (Frege 1979, 207)

Thus, if one now feels tempted to say that “logic is inexpressible,” it is so precisely because it already resides in our utterances, or ways of being together in language. Therefore, the right way to understand the idea that a full explication of logic is impossible (like Frege argued (see e.g. Frege 1984b)), is not to claim that logic exists *prior* to our conversations, but only *in* them. Logic becomes mysterious and experienced as something beyond human intellect by being *turned into an object*, an “entity” of its own, that has its own peculiar kind of being independent on human language and interaction. If we objectify logic in this way – turning the difference between a concept and a thing, for example, into a third kind of object (“the difference itself”), we are transforming logic into something we reason *about* rather than that which we reason through. If one objectifies Frege’s view of logic, and indeed numbers), one can easily see why Frege has been accused of being a Platonist. (See e.g. Hale 1984; Weiner 2018)

Frege’s way of thinking about logic, and the resistance to objectify logic in the above mentioned way, is clearly guiding Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, when he states that “Logic is transcendental.” (Wittgenstein 2001, 6.13) For him, this means that logic concerns the conditions of thought, but is not a thought itself. Again, this may sound utterly mysterious. It seems, so clearly, to be pointing toward “the other side of language.” Again, this “*aprioristic*” (within scare quotes) view of logic, may lead one to think that since logic is transcendental, it must be transcendent, refereeing to a (Platonic) form, outside and before all human interaction. (See e.g. Poręba 2021)

In reality, it is actually quite simple:

I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining. (Wittgenstein 2001, 4.461)

To know whether it’s raining or not raining is not to know anything *about* the weather. But it is to know *weather* and the importance of different weathers, and this is all we need to understand what a disjunction is. Just like the distinction between concept and object is *nothing* without the practice of talking about horses in general and particular horses – which also, clearly, is nothing without horses, owning horses, trading horses, caring for horses, living with horses (or whatever animal or thing we would talk about) – the law of the excluded middle, would be nothing, as it were, without rain – which, clearly, would be nothing without communities where rain matters; for crops, clothes, draughts, people in need of umbrellas. Put

differently, we do not first learn what a disjunction is, and then, at a second stage, learn to see differences between cats and dogs, pills a drops, real diamonds and props.

But, what then, does *a priori* mean? Why is logic something that resists expression, something that we cannot *say* but can only be *shown*? One difficulty here is that it is very easy to make too much of the spatio-temporal order that the philosophical terminology (*a priori*) may suggest. We are easily led to think that logic, in a sense, must *precede* expression. “It” *has to be there* for us to be able to discern these differences. Thus, it seems to be prior to thought, come before it. If it is what makes something possible, a condition for “it,” then it has to be there before! But, are we not then again pushed to say that there is an “it” – one which is neither spatial nor temporal – that we can know something about, existing outside space and time? In other words, we seem to be led to think about logic in two different ways now: On the one hand, we can’t see a logical difference, for example, without the two different “things.” On the other hand, it seems right to say that that it is the “logical difference” itself that marks out the difference between these two things. These two ways of describing logic seems to come with two ontologies that are in tension; and it may seem as if we have to make a choice here.

It seems to me clear that this was a temptation Frege struggled with.² It seems to me less obvious that Wittgenstein was dithering between views here. The author of the *Tractatus* is clear about how logic is nothing outside our conversational scenes. It only exists *in* these scenes, and come into view only as that which makes us “sort things out” as it were. What we *say* – “it’s raining, you’d better bring your umbrella” – *shows* that there’s an “either/or” that we do, and have to, rely on. But if we remove the language lived, there’s nothing there; no “work” for logic to describe, and hence no logical “entity” for the philosopher to describe, explicate or elucidate.

I think it is correct to say that this Wittgensteinian understanding of logic is one that is not shared by most philosophers today. One of the reasons why this is so, is that it does not sit comfortably together with the idea that logic is form without substance, and it does makes it hard to maintain the thought that logic as a field that is *formal* through and through. Think for example about how philosophers often describe logic as something we can apply; as a *tool* that we can apply to just about anything. A sorting mechanism. This is, I want to suggest, not a view that we can ascribe to either Frege or Wittgenstein (early, middle and late). For both of them are quite clear about the fact that logic *cannot* come into view, without describing meaningful

² I also think that this is linked to James Conant claim that Frege was dithering between two conceptions concepts (a substantial and an austere) of nonsense. (See e.g. Conant 2004; 2002)

uses of language. And one of the most central issues here is that logic becomes something mystical, something unsayable, at the very moment that we start to conceive it as a *thing*. And it is this objectifying tendency, which in itself builds on the inherited view that logic *just* is mere form; form divorced from substance. The moment we try to turn it into an object that we can reason about, logic becomes mysterious, mystical, a metaphysical “entity” placed outside language, precisely at the moment when we have objectified it, ascribed a thing-like status.³ The temptation to perceive logical form as a “thing” that exists before any uses of language, is exactly the form of “realism” that leads to spurious forms of Platonism. And it is this objectification of form that does not happen in Wittgenstein, early or late. Thus, the *apriorism* we can see at work in the *Tractatus* must be approached carefully. For the form of language can only come into being, and then be elucidated, once language is in place, i.e. in use. Or, to put it in a somewhat paradoxical manner: Logic is not to be captured in words, precisely because it does not exist outside them.

This is not to say that Wittgenstein has freed us – or even himself – from the temptation of talking about logic as something outside language, as something that guides and controls thought and thought’s expression, and which thereby, somehow, stands outside of, and has its own essence, quite regardless of our lives in language. The temptation to think that logic is a pre-configured order that has a unique form of existence comes into view again in the *Investigations* where he reacts to his *own* tendencies of thought by asking, in §89 “In what way is logic something sublime?” (Wittgenstein 2009, §89) Here, Wittgenstein is again returning to the temptation to think that logic has “a peculiar depth – a universal significance.” (Wittgenstein 2009, §89) So the attraction is still felt. And the same temptation comes back a few paragraphs further on, in relation to the idea that “a proposition” – one of those tools that philosophers have invented, an abstraction, that they then mistake for the reality itself⁴ – is something very strange:

“Remarkable things, propositions!” Here we already have the sublimation of our whole account of logic. The tendency to assume a pure intermediary between the propositional *sign* and the facts. Or even to try to purify, to sublimate, the sign itself. – For our forms of expression, which send us in pursuit of chimeras, prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing extraordinary is involved. (Wittgenstein 2009, §94)

³ My thinking is here heavily indebted to (Stenlund 1980).

⁴ I have discussed this thought movement in more detail in (Forsberg 2022 see e.g. ch. 2 and 6)

Thus, the tendency to “sublimate” thought’s condition travels with Wittgenstein, through what some people like to call the middle period of *Philosophical Grammar* over, at least to *Philosophical Investigations*, where logic is not a “theme” heavily discussed and where the concept of grammar appears to have taken its place (probably in response to the risk of “the sublimation” of logic). Obviously, the notion of “grammar” and “grammatical investigations” plays the most prominent role during the time of writing *Philosophical Grammar*. But it is a notion that is still in play, and plays a crucial role, in the *Investigations*.

Being More Relaxed about Logic?

However, and as I already said, something seems to have changed in Wittgenstein’s thinking (or, at least writing) during his final years. When we get to the remarks collected as *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein does not seem afraid to talk about logic anymore; and the temptation to “sublimate” it does not appear to be as strong any longer. This indicates that the concept is not turned a bit differently, is broadened. However, I also think it is fair to say that he wrestles with it. But there is one central thought here that has traveled with Wittgenstein from the writing of the *Tractatus* to writing the remarks that were collected in *On Certainty*, albeit in slightly different form: a central logical role is ascribed to descriptions of linguistic situations. Describing various significant contexts of use, in all areas of life, is, here, (or now, explicitly) a *logical* (not a grammatical) work.

Wittgenstein’s very serious engagement with Moore’s common-sense truisms, I am suggesting, made it clear to Wittgenstein that the idea of logic as something discernable only in expressive functions, had, by himself, been too narrowly construed. And the narrowness in his own conception is rooted in the idea that all things logical must be conceptual, and not empirical; must be atemporal and not historical. These are the prime discoveries, as I see it, that Wittgenstein attained through his dialogues with Moore’s not so common “common sense.” I am not suggesting a radical break here, and I have little interest in inventing a “New Third Wittgenstein.” Thus, by saying that Wittgenstein seems to now think that his earlier view – where the notion “grammatical” played a crucial role, and in which it was important for Wittgenstein to stress that philosophy is primarily “conceptual” work (and not empirical) – is too narrow, I am suggesting that his way of thinking developed further, was deepened; not that his conception of logic has changed *fundamentally*.

But I do not think that this is insignificant either. Someone might perhaps be inclined to think that he was simply “more relaxed” about the concept “logic” by the time of writing the remarks of *On Certainty* than he was when writing the *Investigations*, and that it is merely for that reason that he talked more about logic and less about grammar. But that, so it seems to me, begs the question. For the important question remains in such a case: *why* was he now “more relaxed,” and what does “more relaxed” in such a case mean? Furthermore, to say that *nothing* has changed (and that it is merely a terminological difference) downplays the importance of all the passages where Wittgenstein so clearly (on my reading) is *working* with, wrestling with, the concept of logic, in the light of the resistance offered to it by his engagement with Moore.

Quite early in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein remarks

If “I know etc.” is conceived as a grammatical proposition, of course the “I” cannot be important. And it properly means “There is no such thing as a doubt in this case” or “The expression” ‘I do not know’ makes no sense in this case”. And of course it follows from this that “I know” makes no sense either. (Wittgenstein 1969, § 58)

Strikingly, Wittgenstein’s encounter with Moore’s “truisms” here leads him to say that we are not helped at all if we say that “I know etc.” is “conceived as a grammatical proposition.” Instead, Wittgenstein is drawn to say that “‘I know’ is here a logical insight. Only realism can’t be proved by means of it.” (Wittgenstein 1969, § 59) §57 leads us into this discussion by saying:

Now might not “I know, I am not just surmising, that here is my hand” be conceived as a proposition of grammar? Hence not temporally.–

But in that case isn't it like this one: “I know, I am not just surmising, that I am seeing red”?

And isn’t the consequence “So there are physical objects” like: “So there are colours”? (Wittgenstein 1969, § 57)

One central feature of the notion of grammar, that he is now in the midst of questioning, is that it is a-temporal. Perceived *as* an atemporal measuring rod (a grammatical rule), it seems clear that propositions like “I know this is a hand” or “There are physical objects” are nonsense. But as we move into registers of language use, where utterances that are *like* these (but certainly not

identical) actually play a role, it seems clear that sentences like “I know I am seeing red” actually may make perfect sense (in, say, a situation in which we disagree about a shade of color in a painting, or someone is struggling with an eye-issue at his or her optician). So, the nonsensicality of statements like “I know there are physical objects” is not due to violations of grammar: it is that there’s no life in them (yet). In other words: certainties about things play a logical role, but there’s nothing really atemporal about them, and they are not merely filling a “grammatical” function. These kinds of certainties are not dissociated from experience.

Let us look at one of the most commonly referred to passages: Wittgenstein’s riverbed metaphor. This discussion starts by Wittgenstein saying that one may say that the kinds of propositions that stand fast for us, make up something like a mythology or picture of the world; which he also describes as “the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.” (Wittgenstein 1969, §94) I think we should take note of the fact that even before the riverbed is introduced properly, it is linked to questions about true and false. But the question is not if the *riverbed* is true or false, or if our “picture of the world” is so. Rather, he is describing this as the “background to our thinking” as something against which truth and falsity *can* be distinguished. In other words, it plays an enabling role, it sets the conditions for our reasoning. But the riverbed is certainly not outside the world; it’s what we swim in. A few pages earlier, he has already been pointing us in that direction, saying that

What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language game. (Wittgenstein 1969, §82)

and, that

The *truth* of an empirical proposition belongs to our frame of reference. (Wittgenstein 1969, §83)

Something peculiar is happening to the notion of logic here. First of all, the role that the “background of our thinking” plays, according to Wittgenstein, is like a condition for truth and falsity. That is, the background plays a logical role. But how are we to understand his idea that “what counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic”? One thing I think we must conclude, is that that which *decides* “what counts as an adequate test of a statement” is not itself a true or false proposition, but the background to our reasoning. That is, the background of our

thinking, the mythology (this is, of course, a metaphor), the picture of our world, is, in some peculiar sense, the locus of logic; logic’s home. And the truth of *empirical propositions* belongs to that frame too, which means that true empirical propositions have a place in logic, play a logical role in language. Indeed, at one point he even goes so far as to say that “everything that describes a language-game belongs to logic” (Wittgenstein 1969, §56).⁵ And this is a fairly large change in the concept of logic that he wrestled with preciously, when he was tempted to think about it as a crystalline purity, of ideal nature, not at all dependent upon experience: “no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it.” (Wittgenstein 2009, §97)

I think we can safely say that we now have left the idea of logic as pure platonic forms (form without substance) behind. And there seems to be no reason for us to talk about this conception of logic as a number of formal rules, or laws, that we have to follow to reason properly. And the background to our thinking can most certainly not be seen as a tool that we can apply. It’s like a backdrop, a horizon; *not* a tool in our hands.

However, there are some clear and important remains of aspects of the *Tractarian* conception of logic in play too. Logic is not exactly explicable in our utterances, but that which enables our utterances and thoughts to take the form they do. In that sense, logic is still *a priori*, or perhaps even *transcendental* (meaning, “make up the conditions of thought”). But there is not much left of the “halo” surrounding the word, the “Platonic” (with scare quotes) temptation to say that logic is outside the world, otherworldly, in another “realm” or sphere. In fact, logic is in the riverbed, in our water and in our soil – as worldly as anything can be.

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (Wittgenstein 1969, §97)

Trying to unpack this, we could say that this means that our certainties, our ways of acting and thinking, flow like a river. And this is a thought that may, I guess, sound somewhat alarming to anyone who is afraid of relativism. But the first thing one needs to keep in mind here, is that

⁵ I have amended the translation. In the published text, the sentence is “And everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic,” which presents it as if there are parts of language-games that are “descriptive” and these belongs to logic; which makes it possible to think that there are other, “non-descriptive” parts of language-games that do not belong to logic. That thought is not possible to draw from the German sentence “Und zur Logik gehört alles, was ein Sprachspiel beschreibt.”

even though riverbeds change, they do it slowly, over a long period of time, and not without external pressure. The riverbed metaphor notably contains a distinction between the bed itself and the movements of the water.

But, and this is important, there’s no sharp distinction between the bed and the thoughts that flow in it. This means, as far as I can see, that we are wrong if we assume that what at one point is called “hinge propositions” are atemporal, rules, or eternal “objects of comparison.” But it also means that if we are inclined to say that some propositions (say, logical or grammatical) belong to the riverbed and that empirical propositions are part of the moving water, we are mistaken. If we do, we have simplified too much. There are not two static kinds of things here; the one can turn into the other. Whether or not a proposition belong to the background of thought, works as a logical condition for truth and falsity, depends on the *role* it plays, its use if you wish; or the function it has. And I think we can see the gist of this line of thought if we read these two paragraphs together:

When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions. (Wittgenstein 1969, § 136)

But wouldn't one have to say then, that there is no sharp boundary between propositions of logic and empirical propositions? The lack of sharpness *is* that of the boundary between *rule* and empirical proposition. (Wittgenstein 1969, §319)

Now, the very last sentence is, I think, a bit hard to get one’s head around. Wittgenstein says that the lack of a sharp boundary between empirical and conceptual *is* that of the boundary between rule and empirical proposition. OK. First, we learn that it is too simplified to say that there’s a sharp distinction between empirical and logical propositions. Then we learn that that lack itself constitutes another boundary: that between rule and empirical proposition. Now, the only way I can make sense of this is to say that we are again forced back to the notion of use, to function, to the role each and every proposition may play for us, in contexts of use, in situations. This does not really mean that it is “up to us” as it were, which is why I stressed that changes of the riverbed, or reorganizations of the “background of our thinking” are not willed;

linguistic actions we perform by means of a rational choice. It is better to say that they become placed there by historical circumstance.

This is why Wittgenstein’s “I have never been to the moon” example actually is spot on, no matter how ridiculed it has been by people who have triumphantly declared that humans walked the moon, not long after Wittgenstein used that as an example of a certainty that plays a logical role. That *used to be* an empirical phrase that played a logical role, in the sense that it set the frames for what was possible to think, and to think of as true or false. Indeed, we may even say that it formed part of the background of our thinking, which means that it also guided our uses of a great number of concepts; that of what a human being is, for example. And now, that has changed. And it is not accidental that the discovery of such changes makes talk about how “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is” (Wittgenstein 1997, §373) seem out of place. What works as rules for us, is something transient. And that means, that what “stands fast for us” is not something outside history. “When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change” (Wittgenstein 1969, §65). I think it is evident that these kinds changes, are not well captured in the phrase “features of ‘grammar’.” Concepts change because our practices change. It’s in our ‘games’. This is, however, not a one-directional shift. As our concepts change, the games we (can) play changes too: “a language-game does change with time.” (Wittgenstein 1969, §256)

I think it is fair to say that many of the “wittgensteinian” dogmas are called into question here. First of all, and perhaps most dramatically, the distinction between grammatical and empirical comes apart. It’s not that we can’t *make* any distinction, it’s just that there are no sharp boundaries. So, to say that philosophy should be conceptual through and through, and that it should never rely on empirical investigations, is a view that here crumbles. And that has some consequences:

But if someone were to say “So logic too is an empirical science” he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (Wittgenstein 1969, § 98)

That the empirical/conceptual distinction comes apart, or is revealed to be less rigid or strict than he previously thought, does not mean that logic itself becomes an empirical science; as if we could test our logic against our world, to see if our representation of it is correct, or as if we

could unearth another logic if we only dug deep enough. That would, again, be an objectification of logic.

In a way, I think we are still conversing with Frege now. That we can reason about differences between things and concepts (that is, that we can and do talk about one unique horse and that we can and do talk about the concept “horse” is because we live with horses). It’s not more complicated than that. A central thought here is that “...the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting.” (Wittgenstein 1969, § 110) And as our ungrounded ways of acting change – for they do, and they will do again – as life alters, our concepts and ways of reasoning will change too. The idea that logic has to be atemporal and a-historical, asocial if you wish, here evaporates. But it does not disqualify its force.

So, I think that the return of logic, and the diminished role of “grammar” is not accidental or the result of Wittgenstein merely becoming “more relaxed” (or less neurotic) about the concept (of logic); it is that he has begun to see the value and necessary role played by empirical propositions, *together* with the recognition that these are fluctuating, historically changing. For these reasons – that is, because Wittgenstein realized the importance of historicity, the relevance of empirical propositions that “stood fast” for us; and thus of conceptual change – that idea of “merely” looking at grammar, started to appear misguided. “Grammar” now appears too “linguistic,” if you want, too static and too regular, to account for all things necessary. So, somewhat paradoxically: it’s precisely the newly acknowledged relevance of historicity and conceptual change that leads him to abandon the notion of “grammar” and the idea of philosophy as “grammatical investigations” – and return to a new and broadened notion of logic. And this is, I think, a rather radical development; that still, nevertheless, carries traces of the view of logic expressed in the *Tractatus*.

Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it.
(Wittgenstein 1969, § 501)

References

- Biletzki, Anat, and Anat Matar. 2021. “Ludwig Wittgenstein.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2021. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/wittgenstein/>.
- Conant, James. 2002. “The Method of the Tractatus.” In *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Edited by Erich H. Reck, 0. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195133269.003.0015>.
- . 2004. “Why Worry About the Tractatus?” In *Post-Analytic Tractatus*, edited by Barry Stocker, 167–92. Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Routledge.
- Diamond, Cora. 1991. “What Does a Concept-Script Do?” In *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, 115–44. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Forsberg, Niklas. 2022. *Lectures on a Philosophy Less Ordinary: Language and Morality in J. L. Austin’s Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1979. *Posthumous Writings*. Edited by Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, and Friedrich Kaulbach. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1984a. “On Concepts and Objects.” In *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, edited by Brian McGuinness, 182–94. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- . 1984b. “On the Foundations of Geometry: Second Series (1906).” In *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, edited by Brian McGuinness, 293–340. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hale, Bob. 1984. “Frege’s Platonism.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-) 34 (136): 225–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2218758>.
- Poreba, Marcin. 2021. “Gödel, Wittgenstein and the Sensibility of Platonism.” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 5 (1): 108–25. <https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0007>.
- Stenlund, Sören. 1980. *Det Osägbara*. Stockholm: Norstedt.
- Weiner, Joan. 2018. “Platonism, Fregean and UnFregean.” In *Frege in Perspective*, 176–224. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501714955-010>.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Translated by Denis Paul. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 1974. *Philosophical Grammar: Part I, the Proposition, and Its Sense, Part II, On Logic and Mathematics*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

———. 1997. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. 2nd Edition. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

———. 2001. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 2 edition. London & New York: Routledge.

———. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Edited by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. 4 edition. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.