**Notes for INFO116 lecture, 1.10.15, Rune J. Falch**

*Please note: Since these are lecture notes, and not a scholarly paper, I have not included references in the standard scholarly way. You need to do that in your reports, so don’t go by the format I’ve used!*

The Wittgenstein Archives, or WAB for short, is a small research infrastructure part of the department of philosophy here at the University of Bergen. [For an overview of our resources, please see ppt slides 2 & 3 and refer to the first page of the assignment document.]

Ludwig Wittgenstein is generally considered one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. You will be working on one of his own texts as well as some papers by other people discussing Wittgenstein’s text, the Lecture on Ethics. Many of you are either taking or have taken the Examen philosophicum, which gives you a small headstart in that you already know some philosophy and the tradition that Wittgenstein is a more recent critic of. In order for the rest of this document to make sense you ought to read the assignment first as well as the texts you have to work on.

Wittgenstein is a difficult philosopher to read. Not in the sense that he uses a lot of technical vocabulary, but in the way that he sort of reacts to the entire philosophical tradition before him. And sometimes this reaction can be hard to spot precisely because he does not always use the same terminology as the philosophers before him whom he discusses explicitly or implicitly. So I should say from the start that you are going to find this assignment challenging – but like Csaba wrote, this is good practice, because in the future you will often be confronted with domains you can’t be expected to have intimate knowledge of, but which you will still have to relate to and work on. But I’ll try to give you some background here, which will hopefully make you understand the main drift of both the primary and secondary source texts.

[slide 5] It has been said that after Wittgenstein, all philosophy is philosophy of language. What does this mean? Wittgenstein had a central role in what is called “the linguistic turn” in philosophy. What is this linguistic turn? It took place at the start of the 20th century, and we can say that it marks a shift in how philosophers relate to their questions. Roughly we can say that before the linguistic turn, philosophers took for granted that their questions and answers made sense, and that it took place within a stable medium – language, that is – which wasn’t questioned itself. This is a curious phenomenon. For why take it for granted that language works in a certain way, when philosophy is about asking all kinds of weird questions about everything? These days the realization that language works in very different ways is a truism and non-controversial; which is a result of the work that these philosophers did. On the surface questions like “What time is it?” and “What is time?” may seem to have the same structure. But this is a superficial similarity. Similarly, if I say “There are 6 billion people in the world” and “All men are equal” or “This is the best movie I’ve ever seen”, you can’t take for granted that language works in the same way here.

Consequently, the philosophers representing the linguistic turn saw it as their primary task to explain what language is. How is it that we are able to say something about something? How does language relate to the world which it talks about?

[slide 6] The story goes that Wittgenstein came upon his fundamental idea one day when reading about a trial about a traffic accident. The newspaper article was accompanied by an image of a model of the traffic accident situation. Thus it struck Wittgenstein: The relation between language and the world is the same as the relation between the picture of the traffic accident and the actual accident. So the model tells us what happened in the actual accident by being a picture – a 1:1 representation – of the accident. And this is also how language works: The way we can *say* something about the world is because language pictures reality: the structure of the world is the same as the logic in language.

Now we arrive at a very important point in Wittgenstein’s philosophy and that has to deal with what language can do, what it can *say* – and consequently what we *cannot* say in language. For how does language picture the world? Well, think back to the model of the traffic accident. This model represents a situation in the world because it represents an aggregation of facts, a sum total of several individual facts. This car was at this place at that point in time, another car was there, they were going at this and that speed, they hit each other at a certain time and so on. These are statements of facts, something which is either true or false. The sequence and combination of these facts gives us a “picture” of the situation, a picture which is either correct or not, a true or false representation of a small part of the world.

If you think back to the Examen philosophicum you will remember from the textbook on language and argumentation theory (Gunnar Karlsen’s *Språk og argumentasjon*) the distinction between descriptive and normative statements. The facts I’ve mentioned are such descriptive statements, they describe some thing or situation in the world. On the other hand we have socalled normative statements, sentences which say something about what is good or bad, or beautiful or ugly, in short, statements that have to do with value in some way. This normative dimension is of course the domain of ethics and we could also say of aesthetics and, in a loose sense, religious or perhaps better existential thinking.

To many of Wittgenstein’s contemporaries, his philosophy was taken to mean that all use of language which was not scientific or empirical in nature would be nonsensical or meaningsless. At best, normative statements (sentences about value in some way) could be analyzed into simpler descriptive statements (that is sentences about facts). The whole of metaphysics (that is everything else than physics or empirical science), including ethics, was thus meaningless and should not be considered seriously.

Wittgenstein would agree, but only partly so. He would agree that trying to say something normative in the same way we say descriptive things is nonsense. But that which we try to say something about, but fail to meaningfully talk of, he actually held to be the most important. Ethics, aesthetics, religious thinking, everything which has to do with value or meaning in the existential sense, these he called “the mystical”, and this is in a sense “outside the world” (in a trivial sense they are at least not part of the empirical world; but we probably still don’t need to posit a second world in the sense that Plato did in his theory of ideas).

So Wittgenstein holds these to be the most important for human life, but he still says we cannot speak about them? Well, remember that when we say “talk about” here we mean formulating sentences which express something which is either true or false. But if ethics and so on are the most important, then how are we to communicate anything of importance? Wittgenstein’s answer is that language works in two ways: It *says* something (in the descriptive sense), but it can also *show* us something. For example, in sentences which say something, i.e. empirical propositions, logic shows itself. We can’t describe logic itself, but the logic which the world and language share are shown “between the lines” so to speak in what we say.

And the same goes for ethics. We cannot state ethical propositions, but ethics *shows* itself in for example great works of art. To Wittgenstein, ethics was something which was better shown through great literature, e.g. Dostoyevsky’s novels, than in philosophical theories. So even if there are many things language cannot say explicitly, they can still be shown through our creative, non-scientific use of language or other modes of representation. (Here it can also be mentioned that Wittgenstein found much valuable ethics in western movies or detective stories, funnily enough. So the media in which the valuable is communicated need not necessarily be “deep” or “great art”; the important thing is how they *show* something.) So, in short, Wittgenstein is not out to say that there is no such thing as ethics; but that the way to communicate ethical insights cannot be the same as that of communicating scientific insight or empirical points. There can be no such thing as a science of ethics. We can’t meaningfully construct an ethical theory along the lines of scientific theory. If we try to construct ethical proofs, we do so by trying to emulate empirical use of language. And this we cannot do because there are no ethical facts in the world.

After Wittgenstein published his book on the logic of language, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he actually retired from philosophy, believing himself to have solved all philosophical problems. He did return to philosophy, though, and mainly still held this position at the time of writing his Lecture on Ethics. [slide 7]

From what I’ve said so far, and even upon your first reading of the Lecture on Ethics [LE], it should be clear that Wittgenstein’s thinking about ethics is also at the same time philosophy of language. Remember what we said about what can be said in language and what can only be shown. Much of LE is about how we misuse our language when we try to define what ethics is or when we try to say something essential about it. One strategy of Wittgenstein’s is evident when he talks about words “good” or “right”. He makes an important point of distinguishing between what he calls “relative” and “absolute” senses of these words. In other words, there are different concepts at play here using the same words. In some uses of the word we could simply analyze the sentence into alternative descriptive sentences, so that “good” means no more than referring to an empirical standard of some kind. But the properly ethical sense of “good” would be an absolute sense. So for example I could say “this is a good chair” and that would be analyzed into the properties of a chair making it more suitable physiologically for sitting than another chair; but saying “He led a good life” or “She is a good human being” would be essentially normative and thus can’t really be phrased in empirical language.

Wittgenstein gives many examples of how we use language, how we try to say things, and he shows how much of what we say is confused and nonsensical because we do not understand what ethics properly is or how language works. So in a way we could say that the LE is not primarily concerned with telling us what ethics is, but showing us what it is not. Again, there can be no science of ethics, and so we misuse language when trying to make it so. So Wittgenstein is not out to deny the ethical, but he wants through his philosophy of language to show us that much of our thinking about it is wrong-headed. That does not mean that we are not or cannot be ethical; and Wittgenstein does not even mean we shouldn’t try to communicate ethics; but he believes that in our age and cultural way of life, we stand constantly in danger of reducing everything to science, and thus miss what is essential to ethics and human values. So to end on Wittgenstein’s own note: [slide 8, bottom of last page of Ts-207]:

“My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or religion was to run against the boundaries of language. […] But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.”

Let us now turn to what you may want to look for when building your own ontologies. Here is a rough, general outline of the Wittgenstein ontology we have developed at the Wittgenstein Archives: [slide 9] Please keep in mind that this ontology was made for the entire collection of Wittgenstein’s writings, not just for the LE in particular; so you may very well end up with a different ontology, where perhaps the superclasses are not as general as here and hopefully with more subclasses than are shown here. Don’t worry about “getting it right”. There are always several ways of modelling a domain and as long as you end up with a somewhat reasonable model, and you explain your thinking, you’ll be allright.

We won’t bother with the very top superclass, “thing”. The first main class is “Source”. Obviously, the lecture itself is a source. In being by Wittgenstein himself it is also the primary source. The other papers you read which deal with the LE are then considered secondary sources, since they discuss a primary source. But we also find other primary sources mentioned in the LE. Should we also consider *Hamlet* a primary source here? Well, we can certainly make this more explicit by saying that there are different primary sources here: those by Wittgenstein himself and those he mentions or discusses or uses as an example. (What you want to call what he is doing here will at the same time give you properties or relations for your ontology.) Another “external” primary source would be G.E. Moore’s book *Principia Ethica* which is also mentioned as a point of departure. And there would also be other works mentioned in the secondary sources. And so on.

These works were obviously written by someone, so we also have a superclass of persons. G.E. Moore is another person. But Wittgenstein is the author of this particular text. So should we introduce “Author” as a subclass of “Person”; or would you rather define a property/relation “isAuthorof” or something like that? It’s up to you. Also, there are other persons mentioned in the LE. Hamlet is mentioned. But he’s a fictional character, so obviously a person in a different sense than Wittgenstein and Moore. We also know that *Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare, but Shakespeare’s name is not explicitly mentioned in the LE, so we might require subclasses allowing us to distinguish between both real and fictional persons as well as explicitly and implicitly mentioned persons. (Again, this all depends on what you want the ontology to do. For the philosopher it might not be the most important thing to be able to search for Shakespeare; for the literary scientist it would be of the utmost importance.) – For Persons and Sources you could perhaps also include subclasses for further biographical and bibliographical information, using e.g. schema.org or DublinCore, etc.

Finally, the “Subject” class is perhaps the one you would want to populate the most and deepest; but having said that this is maybe also where you would want to organize your ontology differently to ours. Here we have developed several subclasses “Field”, “Point”, “Issue” and “Perspective” which allow us to categorize the different topics Wittgenstein deals with in different ways in his different writings. But again, you may not need as many for dealing with the LE. We already know that the field is both philosophy of language and ethics, so that would probably be instructive to include. But should ethics be considered a subclass of the subclass philosophy of language, or should they both be direct subclasses of the superclass “Field”? Here you should ask yourself both what difference this would make in the practical use of your ontology, and perhaps also look at already existing ontologies of philosophy (to see what is a “best practice”, or if you want to keep yoRur ontology in line with other ontologies). It is also possible to refine the concept of ethics into different branches. Here’s how that looks in the Indiana Philosophy Ontology: [slide 10]

The next subclasses of “Subject” are “Issue”, “Point” and “Perspective”. I’m not going to go into the differences between these (you can read more about it in one of the linked texts in the assignment) but only say that they are different ways of sorting what Wittgenstein discusses at a more specific level than that of “Field”. For example “relative value” and “absolute value”, or the concept of the good, or more linguistic or philosophy of language topics like meaning, sense, giving definitions, giving examples, using analogies and similes, things that both Wittgenstein and his commentators talk about in their texts, and which could perhaps belong to different fields at the same time. We have decided to do it like that because we need a lot of different specifications of contents for the different works of W and the different ways in which he discusses them. You may decide to introduce other classes for the contents of the texts, or even as subclasses of the field instead.

You need of course also to decide on which properties or relations to include in your ontology. Here the possibilities are “endless”. Does for instance Wittgenstein just “mention” something or does he “discuss” it or even “argue against” it, does he “define” something? Is the text “writtenBy” Wittgenstein, or is Wittgenstein “authorOf” the text and so on. Do the secondary texts “commentOn” Wittgenstein’s text or “discuss” it or “present” it, and so on. Only your imagination sets the limits here. Just remember there is no right or wrong answer here. We want you to experiment and think for yourselves. As long as what you end up with makes sense or is reasonable it’s all allright. Good luck!