Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy

Paul Horwich

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Review by Kirsten Dierolf

Paul Horwich is professor of philosophy at New York University and has taught at many prestigious universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology , UCLA, the École Normale Superieure and the University of Tokyo. In his latest book on "Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy", he suggests:

1. that Wittgenstein's ideas may be formulated clearly and that decent arguments may be given in support of them.

2. that the foundation of his treatments of specific issues concerning language, the mind, and so on, is his deflationary *meta*philosophical point of view – his anti-theoretical conception of what philosophy is – and not his claims about rule following and meaning.

Horwich's first suggestion gives the reader a lot of hope: "finally, clearly!" and his accounts of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy, Wittgenstein's critique of theory-based philosophy ("T-philosophy") and the description of "meaning as use" show that he keeps his promise. There are many reasons why an SF practitioner should read the book, it is very readable, clear and does without philosophical jargon whenever possible. Of course, there are chapters that are more technically philosophical and less relevant for SF practitioners, but those that are relevant are simple and clear. The book also provides us with a very clear picture of a possible defence of SF practice against many current misunderstandings. Horwich also describes the process of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical "deflation" of many of "T-philosophy's" pseudo-problems, for understanding which is also very useful the differences between traditional psychotherapeutic / coaching practices and what we do as SF practitioners.

Horwich describes the structure of philosophical problems as follows:

(1)   Scientistic explanation
(2)   Linguistic analogies
(3)   Generalisation
(4)   Linguistic idiosyncracies
(5)   Paradoxical tension
(6)   Philosophical bewilderment
(7)   Philosophical theorisation
(8)   Therapeutic dissolution.

Rather than using the philosophical examples Horwich gives, let me try and walk you through this process of Horwich's Wittgensteinian "deflation" of philosophical problems by using Steve de Shazer & Yvonne Dolan et al.'s example from "More than Miracles" (2007, p.143 ff.) of how SF practice deals with emotions. It is a special case of Wittgenstein's treatment of sensations, so all the arguments put forth in Horwich's chapter on "the mystery of consciousness" (Horwich, 2012, p. 170-211) apply. Horwich's book strengthened my conviction that SF is very much in tune with the philosophical avant-garde of our time, and using his process can do much to clarify the misunderstanding that "SF ignores emotions" (de Shazer & Dolan, 2007, p. 143). So here is the argumentation of how the confusion around "dealing with emotions" can arise and how it can be clarified philosophically:

(1)   *Background scientism* (Horwich, 2013, p. 192 ff.). We tend to think that the messy array of somewhat similar phenomena can be conceptualised best by finding one basic explanation or structure that is common to them. In the natural sciences, for example, the different behaviours of chemical substances can be explained by looking at their atomic structure, and the atomic structure can in turn be explained by the quantum structure etc. Scientists first theorise about the structure and then start looking to

find evidence that it actually exists (for example by inventing stronger and stronger microscopes which then were actually able to produce a photograph of a molecule). Ergo: "The aspirations and methodology of traditional philosophical theorizing encourage our attribution of simple, common structures to different conceptual practices – especially when they somewhat resemble one another (Horwich, 2012, p. 192)."

(2) *Linguistic analogies*. When we say: "I see something red", we refer to something "outside" ourselves. The sentence looks very similar to a sentence like: "I feel sadness". Both seem to be a description of some "thing". De Shazer & Dolan et al. state: "This leads us to treating emotions like things (2007, p. 151)."

(3) *Generalisation*. We assume that when we say: "I am sad", we refer to "a sadness inside" which we can then, for example, describe, analyse and treat in a therapeutic conversation. We can also attribute this sadness to other people when they are behaving in a similar way as we do when we are sad. So the basis of our understanding of the emotion sadness is: There is a private sadness in me, it causes me to cry. When someone else cries, they must have a similar sadness inside. This, in turn, leads to many philosophical problems: "Is her sadness the same as my sadness? Are there really other feeling people in this world? Does an earthworm have feelings?"

(4) *Linguistic ideosyncracies*. The questions arise out of the idea that private sensations are things in our private arena. Horwich writes: "The sole form of access others have to this private arena is indirect – via inference from the person's behaviour and circumstances. It is rather like the difference between watching a movie from inside the cinema, and trying from the outside to figure out what is happening on the screen from hearing the audience's reactions (Horwich 2012, p. 176)". Figuring out "what is happening on the screen" in the case of emotions has been traditionally viewed as a necessary prerequisite of successful psycho-therapy. All efforts to

"really deal with the emotions", "deal with the real emotions" etc. only make sense if you espouse the "*inflated*-private-arena" model (ibid., p. 176).

(5) *Paradoxical tensions*. In the "*inflated*-private-arena" model, you are presumed to have exclusive access to your own emotions. You cannot judge what anyone else is feeling – you need a description to be able to understand. A therapist or coach therefore needs the client to describe in detail "the sadness inside" to understand the issue at hand (or possibly, if it is a progress (not explanation) focused therapist or coach, they would have to have a description of "the happiness" which would be there instead).

(6) *Bewilderment*. Consequently, emotions seem to be very difficult things: elusive, non-communicable, hard to focus on and change. You need to try to access and influence them via elaborate techniques (e.g. interpreting body language, association tests, etc.). The therapist or coach becomes an artist at doing this and takes pride in "understanding what is really going on".

(7) *Philosophical theorisation*. In the SF practitioner's case, it is probably more "psychological" theorisation, because our question is not: "How can we understand emotions", but: "How can we influence emotions?" Emotions understood as describable things are categorised and classified, some are taken as more valid than others: "the sadness you are feeling is really anger". Prescribed sequences of emotions are posited (mourning curve, change curve, etc.). The philosophical theories to solve the (self-produced) riddles mentioned by Horwich are: sceptical eliminativism (pain is an illusion), revisionary solipsism (there are no pains other than mine), mysterianistic dualism (pains are composed from an immaterial form of stuff), and conservative systematisation (the nature of pain is fixed by the collection of basic *a priori* platitudes about it) (ibid., pp. 192–194).

(8) *Therapeutic dissolution*. Horwich writes: "We must come to appreciate the distinctive usage of pain attribu-

tions, thereby demolishing the inflated-private-arena picture, removing the worry that other people's pains might be different from our own, and undercutting arguments for dualism" (ibid., p. 194). Instead of assuming a private arena in which emotions occur and are described, emotions should be taken as immediate. When we say: "I am sad", we are not describing "a sadness thing" inside. Rather we have learned to substitute our wailing and weeping when our mother leaves the room by saying: "I am sad that you are leaving". If an individual says "I feel depressed", this is an expression of his emotional feeling or state and is similar to an exclamation such as "ouch". It is not an empirical statement. It is not a statement of knowledge. (...) It is just an exclamation (de Shazer & Dolan et al., 2007, p. 144).

If you reject the inflated-private-arena picture and assume a wholeness of human experience, of course that does not mean you cannot try and describe your experience (what it is like) to another person. However, "talking about emotions as if they existed independent of actions, behaviors, and relationships with other people mystifies emotions – setting an arbitrary boundary between inner and outer worlds that violates the wholeness of our experience (de Shazer & Dolan et al., 2007, p. 154)." Therefore, instead of starting a change process by having the individual describe (or deal with) the emotions, thereby in a way, accepting a mind-body dualism, an SF practitioner will include the context of the emotion. "Emotion arises as the client needs or wants it to arise and the SFBT therapist acknowledges it but typically does not try to elicit a more detailed description of what the feeling is nor what the client attributes it to (de Shazer & Dolan et al., 2007, pp. 154)." He or she will ask about exceptions and resources: "When you were feeling a little bit better, what were you doing differently?" and about "When you will feel happy, what will you be doing? What will other people notice?"

After taking Horwich's 8 steps it also becomes clear that SF

is not a "behaviourist" approach as is sometimes concluded when people observe the above mentioned conversations. It is not that SF practitioners ignore emotions, we just don't think that they are some "thing" inside and can be usefully described as such without changing them. They always happen within a context, just like any other sensation.

I hope that this short glimpse of the interesting connections in "Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy" will make you want to read the book – there are many other interesting connections to be explored!

References

de Shazer, S., & Dolan, Y. et. al. (2007). *More than Miracles*. Binghampton: The Haworth Press.

Horwich, P. (2012). *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.