

In one of his several different statements about metaphysics, Wittgenstein says: "Philosophical investigations: conceptual investigations. The essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations" (*Zettel*: 458).

I take it that one is justified in assuming that the colons in these two sentences in effect replace "are," in the first, or "is that," in the second. But if this yields a correct interpretation of his meaning, Wittgenstein's statement is, in reality, what Stephen Toulmin perceptively identifies as a "disguised comparison"—in fact, two disguised comparisons (cf. *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*: 190-193).

"Philosophical investigations *are* conceptual investigations." That philosophical investigations are, in an important respect, *like* conceptual investigations seems clear enough. For whether or not a philosophical statement is true is to be decided purely conceptually, by conceptual, or logical, analysis. In this respect, philosophical statements are significantly like merely analytic or tautological statements, whose truth is similarly not a factual, but a self-answering, question. But *are like* merely analytic statements is one thing, simply *are* analytic statements, something else, so the comparison that Wittgenstein's first sentence invites one to make is not open but disguised, and the statement it expresses, insofar apt to be misleading.

The same is true of his second sentence: "The essential thing about metaphysics *is that* it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations." What is it, exactly, to "obliterate" a distinction? Considering the special force of "obliterate" in comparison with synonyms such as "abolish," "exterminate," "extinguish," "eradicate," or "extirpate," one would presumably say that to obliterate is to destroy, or to do away with, *so as to leave no trace of*. But what does metaphysics actually do with "the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations"? Arguably, it does not destroy the distinction without a trace, but simply denies that it is exhaustive. The distinction between "factual" and "conceptual" remains as intact as it ever was because, although metaphysical statements are, in different respects, significantly *like* both of these other kinds of statements, they are, in reality, of neither kind but are *sui generis*.

Like factual statements, they are meaningful, if at all, only because they refer to reality beyond themselves. But their referent is not "fact," in the literal sense of something made or produced, and therefore merely contingent, but rather "factuality," in the sense of the utterly abstract structure belonging to any even conceivable fact, and therefore something never made or produced but strictly necessary. And this, of course, is why metaphysical statements are also significantly like conceptual statements that are merely analytic, and so true, not contingently, but necessarily. But, again, their likeness to conceptual statements in this respect in no way entails that they simply are conceptual statements. For whereas merely analytic statements are properly analyzed as hypothetical because necessarily true only conditionally, metaphysical statements are necessarily true *unconditionally* and so are not even meaningful unless they are categorical, their reference to reality being successful.

One final point: although Wittgenstein's comparisons *as disguised* are only too apt to mislead, *as comparisons*—and so *a fortiori* as *open* comparisons!—they can be importantly illuminating.

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