WITTGENSTEIN'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL APPROACH

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1. *The ethnological approach*

In July, 1940 Wittgenstein wrote 'If we use the ethnological approach, does that mean we are saying that philosophy is ethnology? No, it only means that we are taking up our position far outside, in order to see things *more objectively*' (MS 162b, 67v; CV 2.7.1940). This remark, written at a time when Wittgenstein's later views were largely formed, is of considerable interest and worth reflecting on.

In his first masterwork, the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had conceived of philosophy as an investigation into the essence of the world and the nature of things. Logic, he later wrote in the *Investigations*,

> seemed to have a peculiar depth – a universal significance. Logic lay, it seemed, at the foundation of all the sciences. – For logical investigation explores the essence of all things. It seeks to see to the foundation of things, and shouldn't concern itself whether things actually happen in this or that way. — It arises neither from an interest in the facts of nature, nor from a need to grasp causal connections, but from an urge to understand the foundations, or essence, of everything empirical. (PI §89)

He had thought that logic showed the scaffolding of the world, and that the essential nature of things *had to be* reflected in the forms of analysed propositions with a sense. It was only in the 1930s that he gradually came to realize that what had appeared to be the scaffolding *of* the world was actually the scaffolding *from which we describe the world*. Again, as he wrote in the *Investigations*,

> We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena: yet our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. What that means is that we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena. . . .
> Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one. And this inquiry sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, brought about, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of our language. (PI §90)

What had seemed to be the logico-metaphysical forms of things that *had to be* mirrored in the logical syntax of any possible language were no more than the shadow cast by grammar upon the world. What seemed to be metalogical[1] connections between language and reality, that pinned names to the

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[1] This is Wittgenstein's idiosyncratic use of the expression 'metalogical'.

objects that are their meanings, and ensured a pre-established harmony between thought, language and reality, were actually no more than instruments of language, and connections within grammar. For what appeared to be sempiternal objects constituting the substance of the world are actually samples, employed in ostensive definitions as explanations of word-meaning and standards for the correct application of words. And what had looked like a metalogical agreement between the proposition that *p* and the fact that *p* that makes it true, is no more than an intra-grammatical rule that allows one to replace the phrase 'the proposition that *p*' by the phrase 'the proposition that is made true by the fact that *p*'. So too, the metaphysical statement that the world consists of facts not things, *correctly understood*, amounts to no more than the grammatical proposition that a true description of (some features of) the world consists of a statement of facts, not of a list of things. And this grammatical proposition is itself a statement of a linguistic rule concerning the use of the phrases 'true description', 'list of things', and 'statement of facts'.

This transformation of philosophical vision that occurred between 1929 and 1931 was, of course, accompanied by a complete reorientation in Wittgenstein's vision of philosophy itself. He had thought that philosophy must investigate

the a priori order of the world, that is, the order of *possibilities*, which the world and thinking must have in common. But this order, it seems, must be *utterly simple*. It is *prior* to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty may attach to it. — It must rather be of the purest crystal. But this crystal does not appear as an abstraction, but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the *hardest* thing there is (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.5563). (PI §97)

This, he now saw, was an illusion. This change in his conception of the method of doing philosophy was *perhaps* what he referred to in 1929 as 'my way of philosophizing' and characterized it as being 'still new for me'. He described it thus: 'This method is essentially the transition from the question of truth to the question of sense' (MS 106, 46). What he meant by this remark is unclear and contentious. But the change in his general conception is surely what he referred to in his lectures in 1930-31 as 'a new method' that had been found. It was a method that made it possible for the first time for there to be *skilful* philosophers, rather than great ones, as in the past (M 113). Great philosophers have achieved a sublime vision of the world and of man's place in it, have erected grand systems to articulate their vision. And each such grand system, tormented by questions that brought itself in question (PI §133), collapsed under its own weight. Skilful philosophers are local cartographers, not

meta-physicists or meta-physical cosmologists. They have the journeyman's skill to map the terrain where people lose their way, to track their footsteps and to identify the place where they took the wrong turning, and to explain why they ended in bogs and quicksands. This is why Wittgenstein said that philosophy had *lost its nimbus*. For the *Pathos* of the sublime is cast back upon the illusions to which we are subject.

Far from investigating language-independent essences of things, the task of philosophy is to investigate the uses of words that are the source of conceptual problems and confusions. It sketches the logical geography of those parts of the conceptual landscape in which we are prone to lose our way, not for its own sake, but in order that we should know our way around. It is not a metaphysical investigation (there are none such), but a conceptual or grammatical one. It reminds us how we use the words of our language, invites us to bring to mind features of usage in order to get us to realise the way in which we are inadvertently misusing words, crossing different uses of words, drawing inferences from one use that can actually be drawn only from another. It draws our attention to conceptual differences, where we were misled by conceptual similarities. These differences are ones which we may well not have noted, since the mastery of the use of a word does not require mastery of *comparative* use. (How many competent English speakers could, off the cuff, spell out the differences in use between 'nearly' and 'almost'? – Yet no one would ever say 'There is not almost enough sugar in the pudding' as opposed to 'There isn't nearly enough sugar in the pudding'). But when the differences are carefully pointed out, we recognize them.[2] And when we recognize them, the philosophical knots we have tied in our understanding start to disentangle. So, for example, when we are reminded that one can speak quickly or slowly, but cannot mean something quickly or slowly, that one may speak better than one writes, but cannot mean something better than one writes, that one may begin to say something but cannot begin to mean something by what one says, and so forth, it may dawn on us that meaning something by one's words is not an activity of the mind. Philosophy, then, is a conceptual investigation the twofold purposes of which are the dissolution of philosophical problems and the disentangling of conceptual confusions, on the one hand, and the description of the logical geography of our concepts, on the other.

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[2] This is not a case of tacit as opposed to explicit knowledge, as these notions have been deployed in recent decades by philosophical theorists of meaning. It is rather a matter of explicit knowledge of correct use (meaning) but lack of a synoptic comparative view.

That human beings use language, engage in language-games, perform acts of speech in the context of their activities – these are anthropological facts about the natural history of man. What warrants using the epithets 'ethnological approach' or 'anthropological approach' in describing Wittgenstein's later philosophy is the perspective from which he views conceptual matters. Unlike Frege, Wittgenstein treats concepts not as entities to be discovered, but as techniques of using words. To have mastered a certain concept is to have mastered the technique of the use of a certain word in some language or other. To possess a concept is to be able to use a word or phrase correctly, to explain what one means by it in a given context, and to respond with understanding to its use. Concepts are human creations, made not found. They are comparable to instruments made for human purposes, and their acquisition is comparable to the mastery of the technique of using an instrument. They are rule-governed *techniques* of word use. They are given by explanations of word meaning, and their techniques of application are exhibited in the use of words in practice. The use of words is integrated into the activities of human beings in the stream of life. These activities are part of human natural history. Wittgenstein found it fruitful to view them anthropologically or ethnologically. This comes out in two aspects of his approach to the characterization of concepts and conceptual networks: first, the primacy of action and practice, and second, the historicism.

Wittgenstein liked to quote Goethe's remark in *Faust*: 'Im Anfang war die Tat' – not 'In the beginning was the Word', but rather: 'In the beginning was the Deed'. For, as he observed, 'Words are deeds'. To learn to speak is to learn to act. 'Ordering, questioning, recounting, chatting', he wrote, 'are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing (PI §25). What children learn is not how to translate their thoughts and wishes into words, but how to request, demand, beg, nag, ask and answer questions, call people and to respond to calls, tell people things and to listen to what others tell; in short, *they learn to be human* – not *homo sapiens*, but *homo loquens*. As the linguistic behavioural repertoire of the child grows, so too the horizon of possible thought, feeling and volition expands. The child becomes able to think things he could not conceivably have thought, to feel things he could not possibly have felt, and to want things that no non-language using animal could intelligibly be said to want. For the limits of thought, feeling and volition are the limits of the behavioural *expression* of thinking, feeling and volition.

We are not inducted into a human community by learning, let alone by being taught, the depth grammar of our native tongue; nor even by being taught its ordinary (surface) grammar – but rather by being trained to imitate, drilled to repeat, and later: learning and being taught *how to do things with words*, how to engage in innumerable *language-games* in the human community of family and friends, and later strangers too. The words with which we learn to do things are, of course, rule-governed. Their rule-governed employment is manifest in a regularity *that presupposes recognition of a uniformity* (RFM 348). The normative practices of using words are surrounded by normative activities of correcting mistakes, explaining what is meant, appropriate responses to correct use, manifestations of understanding, misunderstanding, and not understanding. And it is the normative practices of the speech community that fix and hold firm the internal relations between a word and its application, between explanation of meaning and what *counts,* in the practice of using the word, as correct use, as well as what is determined as *following from* its use in an utterance.

Side by side with the primacy of action and practice we find in Wittgenstein's approach a powerful *historicist* point of view. But, in a sense that I shall explain, it is historicism *without history*. The concepts employed by different linguistic and social groups are the product of social interaction, responses to shared needs, inventiveness and discovery, common interests called forth by the varying circumstances of social life, that evolve in idiosyncratic ways in different societies at different times and places. It was not for nothing that Wittgenstein cited Spengler as one of the important influences on his thought. Chapter 2 of *The Decline of the West* is dedicated to a survey of the different mathematics of different cultures. For Spengler viewed mathematics as a historical phenomenon and historical creation – not as something that has been progressively *discovered* in the course of human history, but as a motley of techniques and concepts that have been progressively *created*, and one might add, progressively unified, throughout human history. This, it seems to me, is an important legacy which Wittgenstein seized. 'Mathematics', he wrote, 'is after all an anthropological phenomenon' (RFM 399). Of course, mathematical propositions are not anthropological propositions describing how men infer and calculate, any more than a penal code is a work of anthropology describing how people in a given society deal with criminals (RFM 192). It is a system of norms that determine what is called 'calculating', 'inferring', 'working out' magnitudes and quantities of countables and measurables, just as the penal code is a system of norms of behaviour and of penalties

for transgression of those norms. But *that* these norms determine these concepts and therefore these ways of *doing* things, is an anthropological phenomenon.

The young Wittgenstein, when he wrote the *Tractatus* was virtually oblivious to the history of concepts – as oblivious as Frege and Russell. The conception he had of language and of our conceptual scheme was of a timeless logical structure. The essential forms of any possible scheme of representation *must,* he thought, mirror the essential forms, the logico-metaphysical scaffolding, of any possible world. Only simple names can represent simple objects, only relations can represent relations and only facts can represent facts. And the representation of whatever is represented *must* be isomorphic with what it represents. That is a metalogical requirement for the possibility of true or false representation. This sublime, static, picture collapsed (slowly) after 1929 – and was replaced by a thorough-going dynamic historicist conception of language and of conceptual forms. But it is a historicism without history.

It is remarkable that someone who had arrived at such a historicist conception should have been so indifferent to the actual history of arithmetic and geometry, the history of our different concepts of the *psuche*, *nephesh*, *anima*, *mind*, *Geist*, *l'esprit*, the history of the varying geometries of colour in different societies and languages. This lack of interest is, biographically speaking, surprising.[3] But philosophically speaking it need occasion no surprise. For instead of investigating empirical facts about Egyptian, Babylonian or Mayan arithmetical systems, or Chinese and Japanese colour grammar, Wittgenstein has no compunction about *inventing* different forms of representation. He made this point forcefully apropos the dependency of our concepts on general facts of nature – but his observations are readily applicable to particular facts of the history of human societies. This is what he wrote:

If concept-formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn't we be interested not in grammar, but rather in what is its basis in nature? — We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But

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[3] For a discussion of Wittgenstein's attitude to history and to the history of philosophy, see H.-J. Glock, 'Wittgenstein and History', in A. Pichler and S. Säätelä eds., *Wittgenstein: the Philosopher and his Works* (The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, Bergen, 2005), pp. 236-62.

our interest is not thereby thrown back onto these possible causes of concept-formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes. (PPF §335)

In the same way, it is not necessary to describe Egyptian or Greek arithmetic in order to make it clear that different arithmetical concepts are perfectly intelligible – for one can *invent* different ways of counting, calculating distances, speeds, weights, lengths, heights, and volumes. In 1940 he wrote: 'One of my most important methods is to imagine a historical development of our ideas different from what has actually occurred. If we do that the problem shows us a quite new side' (MS 162b, 68v). It is in this sense that Wittgenstein invokes a historicism without history for philosophical purposes.

2. *The autonomy of grammar*

Given Wittgenstein's anthropological approach to the nature of concepts and conceptual networks, it should not be *very* surprising to find him insisting upon the *autonomy of grammar*. There is no such thing as 'absolutely correct' concepts any more than there are 'absolutely correct' instruments – only more or less useful ones, and more or less important, or even indispensable, ones – indispensable ones *given our natures and purposes*, and *given the nature of the world around us*. It is a cardinal thought in Wittgenstein's later philosophy that grammar owes no homage to reality. Grammar is not answerable to the facts for correctness – it is, in an important sense, *arbitrary*.[4] The arbitrariness of the rules of grammar does not mean that they are capricious, discretionary, unimportant, a matter for individual choice, easily changed, or that other rules would do just as well. Rather, it means that they cannot be said to be right or wrong, correct or incorrect relative to how things are in reality. It means that they are constitutive rules, not means-ends rules. They determine meanings of words, and are not answerable to the meanings of words. Unlike means-ends rules, they are not contingent on natural regularities, as rules of cooking are, and are not answerable to the laws of nature. They are not justified by reference to the facts, since they are neither justified nor unjustified. They are, it might be

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[4] For detailed discussion, see P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will,* vol. 4 of *An Analytic Commentary on the* Philosophical Investigations (Blackwell, Oxford, 1996), in the essay 'The arbitrariness of grammar and the bounds of sense'.

said, an ethnological phenomenon. Human beings, living together in communities, use signs in these-and-these ways, and exclude using these signs in those-and-those other ways. Using signs thus, they do such-and-such things – give orders, ask questions, describe things, reason. The signs, thus used, determine the way they conceive of things, determine the logical space within which their thought moves – and are an integral part of their form of life.

With what is this ethnological approach to be contrasted? Why should we conceive things thus? How will distancing ourselves in this way help us attain a greater degree of objectivity? Because this way of looking at things will *help* to rid us of a pervasive array of illusions that have dogged philosophy since its beginnings. These are the illusions of metaphysics conceived as a description of the sempiternal and rigid scaffolding of the world. It *seems* that grammatical propositions such as 'substances are bearers of properties', 'all events are temporally related to all other events', or 'causes cannot follow their effects' are correct if they truly describe the nature of things. So, it is correct that nothing can be red all over and green all over simultaneously, since it lies in the nature of colour that one colour excludes any other colour. It is correct that red is darker than pink, because it is part of the essence of red to be darker than pink. That is not just how things are, it is how they *necessarily* are. These truths are not physical, but meta-physical.

It is against this conception of meta-physical facts that Wittgenstein wars. The proposition that red is darker than pink is a grammatical one – it is a rule for the use of the colour words, 'red' and 'pink' and for the relational term 'darker than'. *This* colour is red, and *that* colour is pink, and *this* colour does not *count* as *that* colour. So, if anything is *this* colour all over, it cannot also be described as being *that* colour all over. Moreover, any such ordered pair of colour samples serves us as a sample of the relation *darker than*. So, if any object A is red, we can infer *without looking* that it is darker than a pink object. The grammatical proposition is an inference license, not a description of a 'necessary fact'.

Does this 'arbitrariness' mean that we can change our grammar? That we can decide that henceforth red should be lighter than pink? Yes and No. No, as we use the words 'red', 'pink' and 'lighter than' it is nonsense (not false) to say that red is lighter than pink. The proposition that red is lighter than pink is neither an empirical truth or falsehood, nor the expression of a grammatical rule for the use of these words. Yes, we can change the rules for the use of our words. But were we to

change our grammar thus, we would be changing the meanings of the terms 'red', 'pink', and 'lighter than'. That is what is meant by saying that grammatical propositions are *constitutive rules* for the use of their constituent words. They determine meanings and are not answerable to them.

3. *Concept formation and shared concepts*

Wittgenstein views conceptual forms and networks as the creation of human beings. Concept-formation is dependent in various ways upon the empirical nature of the world around us and upon *our* empirical nature. That dependence, however, is a dependence for use and for usefulness, not for truth or correctness.

Human beings have, by and large, similar perceptual capacities. They have much the same discriminatory powers, comparable mnemonic abilities, similar natural reactive propensities, common basic needs and shared forms of natural behavioural disposition. They share natural forms of expressive behaviour – of pain, disgust, pleasure, amusement, fear and anger. To be sure, these forms of expression are duly moulded by acculturation. Nevertheless, they retain their roots in natural behaviour. Other forms of expressive behaviour are primarily linguistic, in as much as the form they take is linguistic and what they express is an attribute that can qualify only a language-using animal.

The world in which human social groups form concepts, in which children acquire concepts and in which human beings use concepts is by and large a *regular* world of material objects distributed in space and time and subject to causal regularity, and of living creatures exhibiting regular patterns of teleological activity and life cycle. The persistence of such regularities is a condition for the usability and usefulness of the concepts we possess.

These very general facts of nature are background conditions for concept-formation, concept-possession, concept-application and concept-utility. They could be otherwise. Were they to change, many of our common concepts would cease to be useful, and some would even cease to be usable. We would have to introduce different concepts, or be left without the conceptual apparatus that makes us human. Of course, that is an empirical hypothesis. As such, it is of little interest to Wittgenstein. The reason he draws our attention to such pervasive general facts about ourselves and the world we inhabit is that

if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him. (PPF 366)

Facts about human beings and human natural behaviour to which Wittgenstein draws our attention in the course of his grammatical clarifications of concept formation concern natural expressive and responsive behaviour. They also concern primitive linguistic behaviour and the more sophisticated forms of linguistic behaviour that grow out of these primitive roots. These are not recherché or arcane. On the contrary:

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; not curiosities, however, but facts that no one has doubted, which have escaped notice only because they are always before our eyes. (PI §415)

So, for example, natural pain behaviour is the root onto which we graft acculturated linguistic pain behaviour. Without pain behaviour, there would be no pain-language, without common pain behaviour no shared pain-language. Looked at anthropologically, one might say, human animals injure themselves and cry out, they contort their faces *thus*, assuage the injured limb *thus*, favour the uninjured limb *thus*. Unlike other animals, they also use words and do things with the words they use. They exclaim, cry out, ask for help, describe their pain, point at the pain location – and other human beings help them. For others view such pain behaviour as a reason for assisting the injured and as a reason for commiseration.

Why are such anthropological facts illuminating? Not because they resolve any philosophical questions. After all, no empirical discovery, let alone such empirical commonplaces, *could* resolve a philosophical question, any more than a discovery in physics, let alone commonplaces about the physical behaviour of things, could confirm or disconfirm a mathematical theorem. Rather they position us in such a manner that we can see the problem in a new light. In the case of problems pertaining to the concept of pain, or, more generally concepts of the 'inner', of subjective experience, this anthropological viewpoint helps to rid us of an obsessive preoccupation with introspection, privileged access, epistemic privacy and private ownership of experience. For *that* is the typical position from which philosophers, psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists view the phenomena and the concepts that bewilder us. And the change of viewpoint makes us more receptive to the idea, which Wittgenstein advances, that the possibility of groundless verbal expression and report of

experience is *grammatically* bound up with the behavioural criteria, including verbal expression and report, in appropriate circumstances, for other-ascription of experience.

Animals generally display conative behaviour. They have wants and felt needs and strive to get what they want or need. On such natural conative behaviour of infants, such as *reaching for* and *crying out for* a desired object, human beings graft the use of such words as 'want', 'give me', and in due course, 'I want', and even later 'May I have'. And from these humble beginnings of conative language humans extend their conative behaviour to begging for, asking for, demanding the object of their desire, and, in the fulness of time, to describing the object of their desire as well as requesting it from others.

This humdrum anthropological observation encourages us to look upon expressions and reports of wants not as descriptions of an inner phenomenon, accessible only to the subject, but rather as acculturated extensions of conative behaviour. And that in turn helps to shake the grip of the idea that desires and wants are inner states or objects perceived by the subject of desires and wants. Wanting something is no more a private *experience* than reaching for something. Saying that one wants something and specifying what it is that one wants is not a report of a private observation. Knowing what one wants is not a cognitive achievement consequent on peering into one's breast and apprehending there a want or a state of wanting, but the upshot of a *decision* consequent on thinking about or examining the options available to one.

Animals display not only conative behaviour, but more generally, teleological, goal-directed, behaviour. Wittgenstein goes so far as to identify the behaviour of a cat stalking a bird as a primitive manifestation of intention. That is perhaps questionable (and was questioned by Stuart Hampshire[5]). But his suggestion about the roots of the language-games human beings play with *expressions* of intention is illuminating. Here we do not graft a piece of linguistic behaviour onto natural expressive behaviour, rather we introduce a piece of linguistic behaviour that *heralds* an action. We say 'I'm going to V (throw the ball, give you the ball)' and immediately *go on to V*. The child's initial use of 'I'm going to' is to herald an action. And from this primitive beginning, long term intentions and their expression grow, and the nexus with immediate performance weakens.

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[5] S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1959), pp. 97f.

Further examples could easily be added. But instead of doing so, I should like to expand the focus of this discussion a little. For one can discern a similarly anthropological strand in Wittgenstein's reflections on the conditions for shared concepts, and hence for shared language-games. Here his emphasis is upon a shared form of life, common human discriminatory and mnemonic powers, agreement in definitions, or more generally explanations of word meaning, and broad consensus in judgements. A shared form of life is presupposed by logic, i.e. by what we call 'inferring', 'concluding', 'affirming', 'denying', 'contradicting oneself'. This is not an agreement in opinions, let alone an agreement in opinions on questions of logic (RFM 353). Rather, it is an agreement in behaviour and response, in *what counts* as understanding, misunderstanding and not understanding.

Common human discriminatory powers are presupposed for the possibility of shared concepts of perceptual qualities that are standardly explained, and sometimes applied, by reference to perceptible samples. For our concepts of colours, sounds, tastes, smells, as well as our concepts of thermal and tactile qualities are determined by the samples we use in explaining the meaning of predicates of perceptual qualities, and the ways in which we use them as standards of correct application. Unless we can see and discriminate colour samples in the same way, we shall not have a common colour grammar. The blind and the colour blind cannot master the use of our colour grammar precisely because they cannot use our colour samples – and they cannot use them because they cannot see them, or because they cannot distinguish them as we do. They cannot *do* something that we can. If general agreement in the samples we use to explain what 'red', 'magneta' or 'Brunswick green', etc. vanished, our colour language would disintegrate and confusion would supervene. As Wittgenstein noted,

. . . The phenomenon of language is based on regularity, on agreement in action.

Here it is of the greatest importance that all, or the enormous majority of us agree in certain things. I can, for example, be quite sure that the colour of this object will be called 'green' by far the most of the human beings who see it . . . .

We say that, in order to communicate, people must agree with one another about the meanings of words. But the criterion for this agreement is not just agreement with reference to definitions, e.g. ostensive

definitions – but *also* an agreement in judgements. It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgements. (RFM 342f.)

Definitions, explanations of the meanings of words, are rules. The understanding of a rule and hence too the *common* understanding of a *shared* rule, is exhibited in *two* ways: in formulating the rule, for example in giving an ostensive definition, and in applying the rule, for example in making empirical judgements. Whether different people understand a rule for the use of a word in the same way is manifest in their generally reaching the same verdict on its application. Agreement in judgements is *not independent* of agreement in definitions, for agreement in applying a definition in judgement is a criterion of shared understanding. This does not mean that the truth of our empirical judgements depends upon the agreement of other speakers. Rather the meaningfulness of our judgements, and hence the *possibility* of their being either true *or* false, depends on widespread agreement.

4. *A comparison with alternative methods and conceptions*

To conclude this discussion, I should like briefly to compare Wittgenstein's ethnological approach with three other currently common approaches, rooted in different conceptions of the subject, which he rejected or would surely have rejected.

First, one might cite Platonism – a perennially tempting conception that cleaves to apriori essentialism regarding concepts and real definitions, and realism regarding logical possibility. Accordingly, philosophy is conceived to be a cognitive discipline the task of which is to reveal the nature of things and the objective language-independent structure of all possible worlds. For things of different kinds are conceived to have an essential nature, which is given by a real definition specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a thing of the kind in question. Logical possibility is conceived to be language independent – circumscribing the limits of all possible worlds. And the propositions of logic are held to be boundary stones set in eternal foundations, which our thought may overflow but never displace (Frege). Clearly Wittgenstein set his face against this conception of philosophy and philosophical investigation. It is a misconception to suppose that all words are defined, or indeed are definable in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of application.

Numerous terms are quite differently explained, e.g. by ostensive definition in terms of a sample, by a series of examples together with a similarity rider, by paraphrase or contrastive paraphrase, and so on.

Furthermore, it is misguided to suppose, as Frege did, that all concepts must be sharply defined. Numerous expressions in our language are vague, and they are none the worse for that. If this undermines our Platonist conception of logic, then it is high time it was undermined. We must *look and see* how we use words and how we explain our concepts. Not only are most of our concepts not sharply defined, we very often *do not want* sharply defined concepts. As Wittgenstein remarked, 'I asked him for a bread knife, and he gives me a razor blade because it is sharper'.

Far from logical possibility constituting the language-independent limits of all possible worlds, it is merely the limits of language, as determined by our conventions for the uses of words. We labour under an illusion if we think that logical possibility corresponds to something in reality – as if a logical possibility were more real than a logical impossibility. But nothing corresponds to a logical possibility – and there cannot be less than nothing to correspond to a logical impossibility. A logical impossibility is not a possibility that is impossible, and a logical possibility is not a shadow of an actuality. For if something is merely logically possible then it does not exist – and how can something that does not exist cast a shadow. If a logical possibility is a shadow, then it is a shadow of any form of words that makes sense.

A second, quite different approach that enjoys current popularity is a posteriori essentialism – with roots in Aristotle and Locke, and flowering branches today in Putnam and Kripke. On such a view there are a posteriori necessary truths to be discovered. So, for example, it is an empirical truth, but a 'metaphysically necessary' one, that water is H_2O, or that lightening is electrical discharge. Of course, the discovery of such truths is not the task of philosophy. The task of philosophy, it seems, is to demonstrate that they are necessary, and then to employ them in resolving certain philosophical problems.

It is obvious that Wittgenstein would hold this to be confused. For he showed that what we deem to be necessary truths are, with the exception of the tautologies of logic, norms of representation. And there is no such thing as *discovering* norms of representation in reality. For something is a rule only in so far as it used as a rule. Nature is the realm of *phusis* not of *nomos*. Rules are human creations, and their existence is exhibited in human practices. Rules for the use of words

are exhibited in human discourse, in explanations of meaning, in corrections of errors, in what counts as accepted usage. It was a chemical *discovery* that pure water consists of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen in chemical combination. If chemists since then have transformed this discovery into a rule for the use of the expression 'pure water', that is *a decision*, namely to deny the epithet 'pure water' of anything that does not consist of H_2O. They did not find an unused and hitherto unknown rule in nature and they did not discover a language-independent metaphysical necessity. They simply hardened what was an empirical discovery into a rule for the use of the phrase 'pure water'.

The very idea that there might be a posteriori necessities would, I believe, have struck Wittgenstein as utterly misguided. For to say that a proposition is a necessary truth is to say something about its role in inferences and in the rule-governed transformation of propositions. But to present chemical and physical *discoveries* as necessary truths is to say nothing at all about their role or function, and explains *nothing* concerning the differences in role between such propositions and those propositions of natural science that are contingently true.

A third current strategy that would not have found favour with Wittgenstein is Quinean and neo-Quinean naturalism. This eschews all distinctions between analytic and synthetic propositions, a priori and a posteriori ones, and necessary and contingent ones. The only acceptable distinctions are between logical and non-logical sentences, and between sentences that are deeply embedded in our total theory of the world, those that are less deeply embedded and can therefore be relinquished at less cost, and observation sentences that lie on the periphery of the web of our beliefs.

This homogeneity, Wittgenstein might have argued, is purchased at the cost of obscuring and indeed obliterating differences, in particular differences in role and function of sentences of our language. In particular, it conflates the normative net of grammar with the empirical fish that we catch with it.

Wittgenstein eschewed the terminology of analytic/synthetic, invoking instead his own quite different distinction between grammatical and empirical propositions – grammatical propositions being norms of representation. He thought that our distinction between necessary and contingent propositions was not a useful classificatory instrument, but a knot that needed unravelling. He unravelled it not in terms of deeply embedded truths, but in terms of deeply entrenched norms for description. He thought that the traditional conception of the a priori rested on profound

misconceptions[6] – which he strove to undermine in his elucidations of the various kinds of so called necessary propositions.

Quinean naturalism certainly has an anthropological methodology. But the conception of human nature, and of explanation and understanding of human thought, feeling and behaviour is sorely defective. In Quine's case, it is wedded to crude Skinnerian behaviourism, and in the case of his followers, it is committed to reduction of reasons to causes, and the analysis of teleological explanation as a form of nomological explanation or as replaceable by nomological explanation. Wittgenstein by contrast held explanation in terms of reasons and motives to be irreducible, and altogether distinct from nomological explanation.

Wittgenstein's ethnological point of view is not a commitment to construing philosophy as a branch of anthropology. Although mathematics is an anthropological phenomenon, propositions of mathematics are not anthropological propositions saying how men calculate and infer (RFM 192) – they are expressions of rules, not statements to the effect that certain rules exist. Although it is an anthropological phenomenon that human beings have chromatic vision, and an ethnological fact that they construct different colour grammars and describe visibilia in terms of their colours, the propositions of colour grammar, such as 'red is darker than pink', 'red is more like orange than like yellow', 'nothing can be white and transparent', are not anthropological propositions. They are norms of representation.

The problems of philosophy arise primarily (but not only) as a result of entanglements in the net of grammar. The ethnological approach helps to distance one from the phenomena that bewilder us in our philosophical reflections and confusions. It helps one to view the normative grammatical structures that inform a language as a net, to see it as a human artefact that could have been woven differently, to realize its normative role in the natural history of a human language-using community, to understand that its purpose is to catch fish, and to avoid confusing the net with the fish. But the

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[6] 'It was characteristic of theorists of the past cultural period to want to find the a priori where it isn't. Or should I say a characteristic of the past cultural era was to form//to create// the concept or non-concept of the "a priori". For it would never have created the concept if, from the start, it had seen things// the situation// as we do. (Then the world would have lost a great – I mean significant – error.' (MS 183, 81)

philosophical task is to disentangle the knots we have tied in the net. For that purpose, we have to describe the net and its reticulations – and that is not an ethnological task. It is a logico-grammatical one, in which familiar rules of the uses of expressions have to be carefully selected and properly marshalled in order to exhibit the sources of confusion and misunderstanding. For that we require, as it were, an 'internal point of view', not an ethnological or anthropological one.[7]

[6,944 words]   *St John's College, Oxford*

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