

Making the unconscious conscious in Wittgenstein and Freud

First draft

1. Intro

Wittgenstein's remarks on Freud present us with an apparent contradiction: while characterising himself as a "disciple" and "follower" of Freud (L&C, p. 41), in his explicit discussions of psychoanalysis Wittgenstein is overwhelmingly critical of Freud's "mythological" way of thinking (L&C, p. 43, 52 and passim), which he claims is shot through with confusion about the difference between causes and reasons, false claims to have explained things where only more or less persuasive similes and pictures have been offered, and a tendency to obscure important differences in the interest of finding (in fact, reading into the data) the essential, i.e. necessary and universal, nature of dreams and other mental phenomena.

Most of the literature on Wittgenstein's relation to Freud has concentrated on these criticisms of psychoanalysis, which are indeed important and forceful.¹ My paper, by contrast, will focus on the affinities – no less important, it seems to me – between Wittgenstein and Freud. My question is: in what sense might Wittgenstein be said to be a "follower" of Freud? The affinities between the two thinkers are not, that much is pretty obvious, to be sought by looking at Freud's specific theories about the unconscious workings of the mind; on these points of theory Wittgenstein is generally very critical of Freud. What we have to look for instead is a general *methodological* affinity, and some more specific analogies, between Freud's approach to the kind of problems his neurotic patients suffer from, and Wittgenstein's approach to philosophical problems, his own and those of others. As Jonathan Lear says, "if we stick with [Wittgenstein's] explicit criticisms [of Freud], we remain at the conscious surface. But if we look at what Freud and Wittgenstein are *doing*, we can see deep, unconscious affinities between the two thinkers" (Lear 1998, p. 11–12).

These affinities were not altogether unconscious, however. In texts from the early 1930'ies, Wittgenstein himself gave a number of hints about where he saw them. As Gordon Baker, who devoted some late essays to this question, points out, "there was a definite phase of Wittgenstein's thinking in which close comparison with Freud's methods informed his own

¹ The well-known work of Bouveresse (1995) and Cioffi (1998), for instance.

conception of philosophical investigation” (Baker 2004, p. 155). As Baker rightly cautions, however, the analogy with psychoanalysis “is not developed very far or at all systematically in these or other texts, and this makes it impossible to establish exactly what Wittgenstein had in view in drawing it” (p. 145). Nonetheless he suggests that thinking about the analogy may help to clarify “the *spirit* that informs” Wittgenstein’s grammatical investigations (p. 155).

I believe Baker is right about this; developing the analogy with psychoanalysis will, I think, allow us – or force us – to see in a fresh light the distinctive character of Wittgenstein’s anti-theoretical and “therapeutic” approach to philosophy, in particular to see the sense in which philosophical problems are, as Wittgenstein always emphasised, *difficult* in quite a different way from merely intellectual problems. As Stanley Cavell says, “the *difficulty* of philosophizing, and especially of the fruitful *criticism* of philosophy, is one of Wittgenstein’s great themes” (Cavell 1976, p. 45) – another theme being, as Cavell also notes, “the nature of self-knowledge” (p. 68). These two themes are intimately connected, it seems to me, for the difficulty in question is essentially the difficulty of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is difficult not primarily because human beings are such intricately complex creatures, but rather because we do not *want* to know ourselves. This is what I think pursuing the analogy with psychoanalysis helps bring out. More specifically, it helps us to see the similarity between, indeed the mutual implication of, philosophical and moral difficulties; the way in which both are marked by an unwillingness on our part to acknowledge the real character of our own involvement in the world and with each other. In Freudian terms, we see the essential part played in both philosophical and moral difficulties by the unconscious work of repression, projection and wishful fantasy.

2. The strangeness of philosophy

As everyone knows, but very few seem fully to be able to accept, Wittgenstein that in philosophising he is not advancing any theories or substantial doctrines about reality, and that it is part of the whole point of his enterprise that he not do so. He is not contributing to theory-building, but rather trying to make us see that our very wish for theories is shot through with illusion, and that the theories we build are really only buildings *in theory*, mere “houses of cards” (PI §118).² In trying to make us see that this is indeed so, Wittgenstein’s interest does not lie in revealing incoherence and logical flaws in explicitly formulated

² Wittgenstein does not, of course, object to proper scientific theories, but to theorising in philosophy, and to the metaphysical use made of scientific theories.

philosophical theories, which is the way those who believe in *theorising* – which include most philosophers, at least in the analytic world – criticise specific theories they find fault with.

Wittgenstein, by contrast, is engaged in bringing to light the “theorising” we engage in *without realising it*; the analogies and associations we make – with regard to our conception of consciousness or morality or language, for instance – long before we come to theorise consciously; when we come *that* far, our theories will be more like *symptoms* of this first, unconscious associative activity than the independent and independently assessable claims about reality they purport to be. When in philosophical discussions we take things to be self-evident, or claim that they “must” or “cannot” be in a certain way, we have simply projected our preferred pictures, in other words our own prejudices, onto the world and taken the little this allows us to see for the world itself.

This way of looking at philosophical problems may shed some light on the notorious inability of philosophers to reach rational agreement, their self-understanding as paradigmatically rational inquirers notwithstanding: each is arguing within his preferred picture, and within those limited parameters each is indeed “right”. The absurdity of this state of things can hardly be exaggerated. The problem is not that there is disagreement as such, of course, but that philosophers should act as though they still expected to be able to reach agreement on which theories or doctrines or philosophical systems are true, although this will clearly never happen. And of course, no one would actually predict an end to philosophical disagreements. What we as philosophers do, however, is to go on *in practice* as though we still believed in the prospect of such agreement; we constantly do philosophy as though arguments, proofs, refutations and counter-examples could ever settle anything of any importance. Thus we behave like those (and there are many) who, when asked a straight question, say that “of course” they don’t “really” believe in superstition, and yet they would never pass under a ladder and get slightly nervous every time a black cat crosses their path. We philosophers are superstitious about the power of reason in philosophy; “of course” we don’t “really” believe in it, and yet we go on as though we did.

Thus philosophical theories are argued about endlessly – realists vs. anti-realists, naturalists vs. anti-naturalists, consequentialists vs. Kantians, and so on – with each side coming up with scores of, to their mind, “decisive” arguments, while the debate in essence moves nowhere. The spectacle in such cases is rather like a car-manufacturer and a boat-manufacturer arguing about whose product is better: both point to the decisive improvements in their latest sophisticated model as compared with the earlier ones, and both are astonished that there are still people who continue buying boats when there are so excellent cars

available (or vice versa) – especially after the latest study has proven, this time in an absolutely irrefutable manner, that cars are no match to boats out at sea (or that boats will stand no chance to cars on the high-way). Frank Ramsey was right about us: “we realize too little how often our arguments are of the form: –A.: ‘I went to Grantchester this afternoon.’ – B: ‘No, I didn’t.’” (Ramsey 1990, p. 247).

This is no joke. It is an exact statement of how things stand in philosophy – as you all know, *of course*. We all know, and yet it seems to make no difference. This is the mark of what might well be called a collective unconscious mythology: everyone “knows” that things are not as our practice seems to presuppose they are, and yet this “knowledge” makes no practical difference to what we do and how we think. But of course it would be quite useless to suggest that this paradoxical state of philosophical discussion could be easily fixed if we all just admitted that we are really only arguing for (or more precisely praising and marketing) our own pet-theories, those which best suit our temperament or our preferred “pictures” of things. No philosopher will ever admit this, because the whole point is that we feel we are saying, or at least trying to say, something about How Things Really Are. That is why it is just as false to say that the disagreements in philosophy are merely a matter of preferences as it is to say that they are due to mistakes or stupidity, to a lack of rationality.

Wittgenstein is fully aware of this, he knows from personal experience, that keeping oneself from pressing certain philosophical ideas about how things must or cannot be can be “as difficult as holding back tears or containing an explosion of anger” (PO 160). Wittgenstein took seriously this our strange predicament as philosophers; he realised that he, and we, are in it, that it is hopeless and that yet we have no obvious way of getting out of it. Therefore, all he could do was to try to find a place from which to engage with philosophy *in quite another way* than usually happens. His aim was not to win arguments (he knew *that* was useless), nor just to ignore them (being a thinker at heart, he *could* not do that), but to understand the ground from which the arguments arise. On his conception, this crucially involves “pointing to an analogy according to which one had been thinking, but which one did not recognize as an analogy” (BT, §87), and it is at this point that he explicitly compares his method with psychoanalysis. He says:

Our method resembles psychoanalysis in a certain sense. To use its way of putting things, we could say that a simile at work in the unconscious is made harmless by being articulated. And this comparison with psychoanalysis can be developed even further. (And this analogy is certainly no accident.) (VW, p. 69–71)

3. Self-estrangement and the unconscious

We will return to the notion of unconscious similes. What I want to stress now is the fundamental affinity between Freud and Wittgenstein, which is that both hear what is being said – by the neurotic patient or the philosopher, or anyone who thinks in some ways like a neurotic or philosopher – primarily as *symptoms*, in other words as calling for a questioning of the possible motives *why* these things are said, of the unconscious purposes served by saying them, rather than taking them naively at face value as assertions about an independent reality. Put differently: both Freud and Wittgenstein turn the attention from the object the neurotic or philosophical talk is ostensibly about to the subject talking. Thus self-knowledge, and more precisely the failures, and the obstacles in the path, of self-knowledge move to centre-stage: *that* is where the difficulty lies, rather than in the difficulty of the subject-matter talked about as such.

In this sense Freud and Wittgenstein share a common Socratic inspiration, for as anyone who talked to Socrates would realise, before very long the talk, which might have started with any subject – the nature of perception or courage or justice, perhaps – had turned around and was now concerned with, or shall we say *pointing at*, the speaker himself and the way he led his life; pointing with a finger that might be felt as questioning, demanding or accusing, depending on who you were and what you felt you suddenly had to answer for.³

A focus on unconscious motivation is clearly not without its dangers; when abused it makes real discussions impossible, because instead of talking together about a common reality on an equal footing, some people – the self-styled philosophical or psychoanalytic “therapists” – give themselves licence to produce interpretations of what the “real” meaning of our utterances are with reference to a hidden fantasy world that only the therapists have access to. Such impositions are common enough, but they are indeed impositions, abuses of something in itself valid. In the same way, the remark “You only say that because you’re jealous!” may often be used fraudulently to dismiss a valid objection, but it may also often be true; if it were not, it could not be used fraudulently to any effect.

Here is a very simple example of unconscious motivation at work: someone shouts, very angrily, “I’m not angry!”. Will anyone take the apparent meaning of his words, his denial that he is angry, at face value, and discount the obvious fact, showed in his whole demeanour, that he is very angry indeed? Clearly not; that would be absurd, and certainly no

³ Cf. the *Laches*.

sign of respect for “his first-person authority”. To focus on the anger he unconsciously shows is not a sign that one doesn’t care about what he’s saying; on the contrary, it is to focus on what he *is actually* saying, what he is expressing and communicating, rather than just what he presents himself as or takes himself to be saying.

Nonetheless, the angry person meant his denial of anger quite sincerely; we are not dealing here with pretence, but with a real blindness to oneself, as shown by the fact that the angry person could not believe that anyone else would be taken in by his absurd claim unless he was taken in by it himself. He comes to realise that what he says isn’t true only *in* saying it (if even then; he may persist in denying, ever more angrily, that he is angry). This simple example shows how alienated we may be from ourselves: we are taken aback, perhaps appalled, when we suddenly become aware of the alienation. The notion of the unconscious as Freud uses it, points precisely to such phenomena of *self-estrangement*. In many cases it is quite clear that this is my voice (rather than a noise or someone else’s voice), that *this* is what I wanted to say (I said “Hi!” not “Bye!”). But at other times this clear contrast breaks down, as in the case of the angry man, or when words that are in one sense undeniably *mine* say something that I am surprised or horrified at hearing myself say. There is no denying that I said it, and yet I may also ask “Where did that come from?” or protest that I did not mean it. To say, as Freud and his followers are sometimes tempted to do, that in such cases it is ‘The Unconscious’ talking is very misleading, for that eliminates precisely the most striking feature of such situations, namely their *ambivalence*, that this is not someone else (John or Jill or ‘The Unconscious’) talking, but *me* – but I cannot *recognise myself* in my own speech.

The fact that one may not recognise as one’s own what comes out of one’s mouth shows that the concept of ‘one’s *own* voice’ is very far from clear – and the same goes for the concept of ‘one’s own gestures’, ‘one’s own words’, ‘one’s own body’ or ‘one’s own thoughts’. It indicates, as we may also put it, that one’s own voice – just like a thinking to call one’s own – is not something one somehow automatically “has”, but in important ways something one has to find and make one’s own, and which one may also lose or never come into contact with.

In the case of the angry man who denies his anger we see unconscious motivation at work in the contradiction between what he says and how he says it, between the apparent sense of his words and his whole demeanour in saying them. In other cases, the contradiction is not as blatant as that, there may rather be a general sense of ambiguity or vagueness, a sudden or pervasive inability to remember certain things, an inexplicable tendency for the same pattern of useless conflict to be repeated over and over again, strange pitches of

intensity, excessive emotion, or again an emotional detachment, a kind of numb lifelessness,. There are endless possibilities, but they all show us *that something important is going on which is not acknowledged by the people in whom and between whom it is going on*. Freud's writings are full of examples of such strangeness, often quite bizarre and clearly pathologic, but just as often readily recognisable from everyday life. These are, in essence, *descriptions* of what happens, not hypotheses premised on theoretical postulates. Freud certainly also has a whole "metapsychological" theory (as he calls it) about the workings of the unconscious, and there is much that can be criticised in it. The essential point for our purposes, however, is that the theory starts from plain facts of observation. As Freud says, he set himself the task of "bringing to light what human beings keep hidden within them ... *by observing what they say and what they show*" – and he did so convinced from experience that "no mortal can keep a secret": "If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" (SE 7:77).

4. Displaying your contradictions

This talk of finding out people's secrets may be taken, and may also mislead, in many ways. Here, however, what needs stressing is that Freud is not like a private detective who finds out people's secrets by watching them when they think they're alone or getting his hands on their secret diaries. Rather, the only secrets Freud finds out about you are those that you reveal to him; he will (ideally) only tell you what you yourself have told him – without realising you did so. Freud the therapist, although *not* Freud the theoretical psychologist, is a Socratic thinker also in that he, like Wittgenstein, renounces any claim to offer positive theory or opinion of his own about how the problems others face are to be solved, about what is true or false, right or wrong. Like Socrates, Freud and Wittgenstein see themselves essentially as *midwives* helping give birth to self-understanding in others.

Thus Wittgenstein says that his aspiration is "to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right" (CV, p. 18), and this is exactly what Freud, in his capacity as analyst/therapist, also aspires to. Psychoanalysis doesn't aim to interfere with what the patient does or how she thinks, it renounces hypnotic suggestion and other means of manipulation and "correction"; it simply tries to help the patient into a position in which she is able to see and acknowledge and "work through" the ways in which she *in fact, but unbeknownst to herself*, reacts and thinks and acts. In particular, it allows her to see the self-contradictions manifested in her reactions.

It does not try to remove these contradictions, it rather tries to help the patient understand how they arise, how she continuously gets entangled in her own reactions, and thus to come into a position to do something about them.⁴

Wittgenstein says exactly the same thing about the aim of his philosophical analyses:

It is the business of philosophy, not to resolve a contradiction by means of [some new] discovery, but to make it possible for us to get a clear view of the state of [affairs] that troubles us: the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved. (And this does not mean that one is sidestepping a difficulty.)
The fundamental fact here is that ... we are as it were entangled in our own rules.
This entangled in our own rules is what we want to understand (i.e. get a clear view of).
It throws light on our concept of *meaning* something. For ... we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: 'I didn't mean it like that'. (PI §125)

The famous remark "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. ... It leaves everything as it is" (PI §124), precedes the one I just quoted. As should now be evident, contrary to what people often think, it's point is not at all to declare something called ordinary language in perfect order, an object for philosophers to describe rather than try to tamper with, as though everything would be fine if everyone just said ordinary things in ordinary English. No, what Wittgenstein is saying is that when you have got entangled in a philosophical puzzle, which shows plainly enough that everything is *not* fine with *your* language (i.e. your thinking), since you find it impossible to say what you want to say, and instead of making sense you make a mess, then it's idle to wish that something from outside, some new discovery or philosophically decreed change of the rules of the game, will interfere to save you. Being "saved" in *that* way would only amount, as it were, to changing the subject in the way one might do when faced with an awkward question one doesn't know how to answer; such a change means leaving your mess behind you, in the hope that you will not have to deal with it again. But as Freud noted, such moves are of no avail; "the repressed returns", your unresolved mess will indeed *stay right behind you*, like your shadow. Wittgenstein knows this, too, and so he urges that all you can do when you find yourself in thought-trouble is to retrace the steps of your thought, to become conscious of the moves *you make* that got you into the mess and prevent you from getting out. In doing so, you are doing philosophy in Wittgenstein's sense, you are describing not 'Language As Such' or 'ordinary language', whatever those may be, but those aspects of *your* language (i.e. your thinking) that create trouble for you. The aim of this description is to gain self-knowledge, and while it "leaves everything as it is" in the sense of trying to describe the actual pattern of

⁴ Here and elsewhere in my text, there are far too few quotes from and references to Freud; the defect will be made good in future versions. I believe my characterisations of his position are correct, nonetheless.

your inner dialogue without adding or changing anything, the real point is that it makes you *see* your thinking as it is. It does not reveal any new facts you were not already aware of, rather it puts the old facts in a new light, so that the whole shows a new aspect: “I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently” (*PI II*, p. 193).

Such aspect-change or seeing of a pattern is also crucial in psychoanalysis. In the popular imagination there’s a notion – suggested perhaps by Freud’s frequent use of the metaphor of archaeological excavation – that analysis works largely through making discreet items that were “buried in the unconscious” conscious; an unconscious wish here, a repressed childhood-memory there. The idea is that these “things” cause our problems, but they can do so only as long as they remain unconscious, and once they are dug out and exposed, they lose their power to work evil, while the making-conscious of them is pictured on analogy with exhibiting a number of facts or “items” from the mental underground. Against this, I should rather say that the point is, and that Freud takes it to be, to recognise *the unresolved existential conflict*, the tangles in one’s emotional life and way of relating to others, that have, as it were, crystallised around particular memories. It is not the repressed memory that causes one’s problems, rather the problems cause the memories associated with them to be repressed – and here ‘caused’ is just short form for pointing to a difficulty with certain *meanings*. What one needs to recognise and acknowledge are not new facts, but the destructive patterns in the facts one already knew.

That one then *also* comes to learn new ‘facts’ of a sort, in the sense of remembering things one had long forgotten, for example, follows from the liberating change of aspect. Thus, if I come to see the relation to my brother in a new way, for instance realising that I have always been allowing him to be the person in charge in our relationship, this will no doubt make me remember details of our life together I had forgotten and open me to feelings for him (both positive and negative) I didn’t know I had in me. I don’t deny that the new way of seeing our relationship may dawn on me in connexion with a certain memory, for instance; the point is not about temporal order (first the change in aspect, *then* the new facts), but about meaning; the facts can impress themselves on me in a new way only as details in a new picture. In the same way, when one is freed from the grip of a preconceived philosophical idea, one comes to notice, to “remember”, all sorts of things that the grip of the idea had blinded one to.

In this work of trying to make someone conscious of the ‘pictures’ and ‘analogies’, the patterns of thinking and reacting, that have shaped their thought and life without their being aware of it, the issue of acknowledgment is, of course, absolutely crucial – and this is so

whether the someone who is to be made conscious is yourself or another. Freud makes this very clear, and so does Wittgenstein, and in so doing he again refers explicitly to the analogy with psychoanalysis. He writes:

One of the most important tasks [in philosophy] is to express all false lines of thought so characteristically that the reader says, "Yes, that's exactly the way I meant it". To the trace the physiognomy of every error.
For we can only convince the other person that he has made a mistake if he acknowledges that this really expresses his feeling.
For only if he acknowledges it as such *is* it the correct expression. (Psychoanalysis.)
What the other person acknowledges is the analogy I am offering him as the source of his thought.
(BT, §87, tr. mine)

Acknowledgment is essential, then, not only because a lack or refusal of it obviously means that the person Wittgenstein is trying to help out of her trouble will not be helped, since what he offers her as help either makes no impression on her or else is rejected by her. Acknowledgment is also essential because one can't know whether what one suggests as the source of the trouble *is* really the source unless there is acknowledgment; the person's acknowledgment is the *criterion* of truth or correctness of an interpretation (and this goes for oneself, too). This is not to say, of course, that unless a person explicitly agrees that an interpretation is right, there is no way to know whether it is, for acknowledgment comes in many forms, some of which are precisely expressions of refusal, rejection, denial.⁵ If I say "You were thinking about him now, weren't you?" and you respond by blushing and hysterical denials that you had ever given him a thought, this is a clear case of *de facto* acknowledgment, as we might call it. And this kind of thing happens constantly in philosophical debates; thus one may often know from the way the topic is rapidly changed and the topic carefully avoided – and also from the general sense of awkwardness suddenly filling the room – that one has actually said something that hit the mark. In such cases, the point is proven by the fact that no-one wants to admit it.

Of course, this is not to say that each time you say something others disagree with, this is proof that you are right; it all depends on the *particular, concrete way* – including gestures, tone of voice, and so on – in which the disagreement or denial is voiced or enacted. As Freud said, we must be careful not to "under-value small signs", for "under certain conditions and at certain times ... very important things ... betray themselves in very slight indications?" (IP, p. 31). All these 'small signs', signs of unconscious motivation, of unacknowledged tension at

⁵ Freud makes excellent points about this in his writings on negation and denial in analysis. My remarks in the following develop some of these.

work, are *essential* to look at if one really is interested in “the use of words” – a point would-be Wittgensteinians often seem to ignore.

A further, important point about acknowledgment, is that it is a category that is different *both* from *discovery* of truths or facts and from *persuasion* in the usual sense of this words. This is especially important in view of the fact that LW himself seems to operate with a quite crude and contrast between discovery and persuasion, in many of his comments on Freud, and in many of his characterisations of his own method as well, which touch precisely on acknowledgment. Thus he writes: “If you are led by psychoanalysis to say that really your motive was so and so, this is not a matter of discovery, but of persuasion. In a different way you could have been persuaded of something different” (L&C, p. 27). About his own philosophical activity, LW says, “I very often draw your attention to certain differences, e.g., in these classes I try to show you that Infinity is not so mysterious as it looks. What I’m doing is also [like what Freud is doing] persuasion. If someone says: ‘There is not a difference,’ and I say: ‘There is a difference,’ I am persuading, I am saying, ‘I don’t want you to look at it like that’” (L&C, p. 27).

That we should be careful not to treat this contrast as exhaustive and think that we can only be *persuaded* of the truth of that which cannot be discovered, should be apparent from the fact that ordinary conscious motivation, intention and thought cannot be “discovered” in LW’s sense, meaning something that can be verified independently of what a subject avows, any more than their unconscious relatives. That acknowledgment has to do with what a subject avows, or could avow if he didn’t refuse to, is clear. To see the difference between acknowledgment and mere persuasion, let’s consider an example. Suppose you come across a very angry letter you wrote to a friend a long time ago, but which you have totally forgotten about; you can only conclude from the handwriting and the signature that you wrote it. Then you may say: “I must have been very angry at the time”. You are *persuaded* by the evidence to think so, or again (if the evidence is not so clear) someone who has a way with words may have *persuaded* you in the sense of convincing you to think it, but in any case what you say will be as it were spoken from a third-person-perspective. But suppose now that the situation comes back to you: you remember the quarrel and also how you behaved terribly towards your friend. Perhaps you are struck by remorse, even now, about the way you behaved – or again you may become angry at your friend all over again, when how he acted towards you comes back to you. These reactions are not *interpretations*, in their very *movingness* they are true in a way that the mere judgment “I must have been very angry at the time” is not. You are not now merely persuaded by something to believe you were angry, you *know* it.

Note that I'm not saying that there is in some general way an "emotional truth", a truth of the emotions. Emotions do show that something is going on, on a personal level, that something grips you, and so there is nothing hypothetical in them. Nonetheless, emotions may be false in a moral/existential sense, they may be shot through with self-deception and deformed by repression. Thus, the anger which bubbles up in you again when you reread the old letter and remember your friend's actions may express your small-mindedness, your inability, let's say, to forgive your friend for having made you look the idiot you in fact were. It's true that you do react in this way, and to deny it, as you are probably tempted to do, would be a lie. Nonetheless, the reaction itself is false – not, to be sure, in the way a statement is false to the facts, but more, perhaps, in the way a note is false (a bank-note *or* a musical note, both analogies might have their uses here), or the way someone may be sent down a false track, one not leading anywhere. By contrast, if you came to see and acknowledge the falseness, the small-mindedness, of your anger, then your reaction might be said to mark a moment of existential truth, in the way remorse or forgiveness do.

My point, with regard to LW's seeming assimilation of his own and Freud's work of clarification to mere persuasion, is that this will not do. To be sure, what LW is doing in, for instance, presenting an alternative way of picturing infinity, in order to get someone to see that infinity does not have to be conceived the way he thinks it must, might in one sense be described as persuading; he is trying to present the picture he proposes in such a way that it can strike the other, that it can tell him something. But what happens if the other is able to see things as LW tried to make him see them, then the result can nevertheless not be described as his having merely been persuaded of something. For what happens is that he opens up or is opened up to a new way of seeing things, which at the same time shows him that he was indeed *blind* to things before. This is more like being struck by remorse than like being persuaded that one could *also* look at things in some other way than one previously did, for the possibilities LW tries to make us see are not mere "interesting possibilities", they are *real* possibilities, where the emphasis comes from our having previously *refused* to see them.

5. Curing headaches or unveiling reality?

As the above discussion has indicated, as Wittgenstein sees it, *there are no third person questions in philosophy*. The philosophical question is quite personal: "Why am I so strongly drawn to engage in a game I know leads nowhere? How does this fascination arise?" In other words, it's a question of self-knowledge, and Wittgenstein's writing constitutes a kind of

extended self-analysis.⁶ As he once wrote: “Nearly all my writings are private conversations with myself. Things that I say to myself *tete-à-tete*” (CV, p. 77). This does not imply, of course, that we cannot learn much from Wittgenstein’s conversations with himself. That would be true only if Wittgenstein’s life and his philosophical troubles had nothing in common with our lives and troubles. If that were the case he would be like the lion whose speech we could not understand (PI II, p. 223) – but he isn’t like that, of course, at least not for the most part. That is why there is nothing paradoxical in Wittgenstein’s affirming at the same time that he is talking to himself, as we just heard, and that he aspires to be, as we heard earlier, “a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities” (CV, p. 18). For communication, for agreement and disagreement, the first and the second person suffice, there is no need for the third person.

A deep aversion to acknowledging this very fact runs through philosophy, however, sustaining an interminable, barren debate between ‘objectivists’ and ‘subjectivists’ in various fields, along with the concomitant blindness to crucial dimensions of experience. Thus, in ethics, the notion is that unless there are third-person, objective norms or standards of some sort, there *can only* be subjective whim, which seems quite unacceptable – and on the other hand, there *must* be something subjective in morality, for the claim and urgency that it has for us seems inexplicable given only impersonal norms. That whole “debate” is premised, however, on excluding *conscience* from consideration, or admitting only the misrepresentation of it allowed by the subjective/objective-schema, which the experience of conscience does not fit. Conscience addresses *me*, not I it, and it is authoritative for me, so it is not subjective in the way my inclinations or preferences. But conscience always addresses only *me* – that is, each one of us singly – so it is not objective, either, it cannot be “verified” in any objective way. I would suggest that it is precisely the prospect of outlawing, as it were defining out of existence, conscience and the strange and frightfully demanding experiences associated with it, that may be the unconscious wish driving our attachment to the subjective/objective-dichotomy. But I merely suggest this, I won’t develop it here.

In discussions about so-called “therapeutic readings” of the later Wittgenstein, of which this paper gives one, perhaps idiosyncratic version, one meets with the subjective/objective-dichotomy in the guise of the idea that *if* Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy really were, as the therapeutic readings suggest, essentially an exercise in self-knowing, the sole point of

⁶ Perhaps it shows a significant difference between his conception of coming to know one’s motivations and that of Freud, that Freud’s famous “self-analysis” is spoken of, by himself and others, as something he undertook at a particular point in his life, and was then done with? But Freud was of course divided over the question whether, or in what sense, analysis was “terminable or interminable”.

which is to help an individual (be it Wittgenstein or his reader or someone else) clear up the philosophical difficulties *he* in fact experiences, then it could carry no general interest.⁷ However unusual Wittgenstein's approach to philosophical problems, his handling of them must surely leave some substantial yield of general understanding of the world. If it really is Wittgenstein's view, as Ramsey suggested (1990, p. 246), that his philosophy, "instead of answering questions ... aims merely at curing headaches", it would be merely a kind of intellectual aspirin, or perhaps laxative, and lose any claim to philosophical interest.

It seems to me that the worry is quite misguided, although it is indeed true that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy is solely focused on self-knowledge and makes no positive contributions in terms of theories, doctrines or substantial "views" about anything, nor even in terms of providing "perspicuous representations" of the grammar of our concepts, *if* that is understood to mean a kind of "mapping of the logical geography of concepts"⁸ which would have some fixed validity and value. This latter notion is the way in which Wittgenstein-commentators who take his strictures against theories and theses seriously can still allow his philosophy, as they read it, to fulfil the traditional ambition of philosophers to give us a "birds-eye view of things", if only in the form of giving such a (non-theoretical, non-hypothetical, but still substantial) view of grammar.⁹

As I see it, to insist that Wittgenstein does not merely "cure headaches" (although he does that too), but also "answers questions" through his sketches of the logical landscape of our language, is to miss the main point of his radical reorientation towards self-understanding. His crucial insight is that the notion that philosophy should aim to provide any kind of general explanation *or* description of reality *or* of our language, is itself an illusion, that our confusions result precisely from our wish for such a general view of things – and here it should be noted that *one* such general view is that there is "nothing general to be said" about some range of phenomena; thus, some might want to say, in ethics, that "there is no unity of the good, there are just different virtues and values". That is a completely *general* statement, and as metaphysical ("there *really* is no unity here") as anything Plato might have said;

⁷ O. K. Bouwsma said of Wittgenstein: "His problem is always someone, an individual in trouble" (1982, p. 30). And Baker says, of Wittgenstein as understood by or through Waismann: "This conception is *exclusively* therapeutic. In the absence of a particular person with a particular complaint, there is literally nothing constructive for a philosopher to do" (2004, p. 152). – For a statement of the therapeutic "position" in the contemporary debate, and a survey of the way in which a number of recent contributions fare in relation to it, see Read & Hutchinson (2005).

⁸ This is how the later Baker describes the conception of grammatical remarks which he finds confused (see, i.e., 2004, p. 145).

⁹ Peter Hacker gives a clear statement of this view: "[D]espite his own pronouncements, Wittgenstein's philosophy also has a complementary constructive aspect to it, which he himself acknowledged. Side by side with his demolition of philosophical illusion in logic, mathematics, and philosophy of psychology, he gives us numerous overviews of the logical grammar of problematic concepts, painstakingly tracing conceptual connections that we are all too prone to overlook. The conceptual geology of the *Tractatus* gave way to the conceptual topography of the *Investigations*" (Hacker 2001, p. 37).

relativism is just a particular form of universalism. However, when Wittgenstein says: “Don’t say ‘There *must* be something common, or they would not be called “games” [or: god actions]’ – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all” (PI §66), this is not a rhetorical way of asserting that games and other concepts have no common essence, it is not an endorsement of some kind of pluralism. No, as Wittgenstein said: “I don’t try to make you *believe* something you don’t believe, but to make you *do* something you won’t *do*.”¹⁰ He means what he says: he is not saying that things really are like this or like that, he is urging us to *look for ourselves* – where the implication is not that when one has looked, one can then come back with a theory about reality that is true because one has “checked” it against the facts, but rather that we should fighting our wish for having a *position* on “what reality is like”.

Wittgenstein reminds us that “a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language game of giving information” (Z §160), and this may equally be said about Wittgenstein’s grammatical remarks and perspicuous presentations: although they seem to be giving, and in one sense really do give, factual information about the grammar of our concepts, that is not their *point*.¹¹ When Wittgenstein offers descriptions of grammar, as he often does, the descriptions, as he himself stresses, “[get their] light, that is to say [their] purpose, from the philosophical problems” (PI §109). The descriptions, juts like the questions, analogies, and thought-experiments, are offered as “reminders for a particular purpose” (PI §127) in the discussion of a particular problem, with the aim of revealing or countering a temptation to think in a certain way, and their value consists solely in whatever clarificatory effect they can achieve in that context; *in themselves* they have no value.

This is, I take it, what Wittgenstein means when he says that “the solution of philosophical problems can be compared with a gift in a fairy tale: in the magic castle it appears enchanted and if you look at it outside in daylight it is nothing but an ordinary bit of iron” (CV, p. 11). In other words: if you take the philosophical remark out of the context of discussion, it loses not just its value but its sense; it may appear as a mere platitude, or again as patently false. Of course, the same remark may find good use in another context, another discussion, but its value there will be equally contingent, relative to what clarificatory work it can accomplish there. Thus, Wittgenstein’s remarks might be compared to sticks of dynamite; their worth lies not in themselves, but in the effect they may have, in the way they manage to blow holes in the walls of our self-constructed prisons of thought (the power of a stick of

¹⁰ From MS 155 (c. 1931), p. 83. Quoted in Hilmy 1987, p. 5.

¹¹ Here I borrow, and develop, a point from Debra Aidun (1982, p. 110).

dynamite is not seen by admiring it, but by blowing it up). Or, in a less violent simile which is perhaps more appropriate to the impression many of his remarks make, they might be compared to keys which unlock the prison door; then, when you're outside, you can just throw the key away, in itself it has no value even to you, although it was the thing you most needed just a minute ago, when you were still locked up.

It is actually quite remarkable that anyone should come upon the notion that *if* Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy really leaves no room for constructing positive theories of reality or logical mappings of the grammar of our concepts, the implication would be that Wittgenstein was uninterested in reality, and just settled for curing headaches. This is remarkable because he consistently rejects theorising precisely *because* it obstructs our view of reality. "Don't say 'There *must* be something common' – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all". This is not a suggestion to go out and do some empirical research, of course, but it is a summons to *get real* in the sense of asking yourself how things really are, how you really understand them and what you really know, rather than making up a wishful fantasy of what it's like. This is the sense of Wittgenstein's dictum: "don't think, but look!" (PI §66).

I have used the word 'really', for instance I said Wittgenstein's point is that we should ask ourselves how things really are. Here, however, the word does not carry its metaphysical sense, denoting something like The Real Account of Things, but rather its *ethical* or *existential* sense, denoting what you see when you are completely honest – or completely open – with yourself. This, I think, is the sense Wittgenstein has in mind when he says that his philosophy aims to place things "right in front of our eyes, not covered by any veil" (CV, p. 6). So the point is not just to "cure headaches" but to see how things are, only this is not to be understood as coming to hold true beliefs or true theories about them. Beliefs and theories are *veils*. When you see how things really are in the existential sense, what you see will not be anything that can be put, or that you would think of putting, in the form of a theory or any kind of general description of how things are (or of what the grammar of our concepts is like). It rather manifest itself rather in a freedom from prejudice.

Wittgenstein once said that "the principal difficulty of philosophy" is "facing concepts *without prejudice*" (RPP II, §87), and his philosophical practice *is* simply aimed at liberation from prejudice – the point being that this is no simple thing to achieve. Freedom from prejudice is, formally, a negative characterisation; positively speaking it manifests itself in the openness with which one faces things, ideas, experience, other people and oneself; an openness which may appear in various guises, as it were: as humility, courage, imagination,

or wonder, for instance, but also as fierceness and a vitality and freshness of vision. According to Waismann, Wittgenstein himself had “the great gift of always seeing things as if for the first time”.¹²

It may seem that we have lost the unconscious from view altogether in our discussion, but that is not really so, for the prejudices Wittgenstein sees it as the business of philosophy to free us from are unconscious; prejudice always is (this is so whether one takes the word in a more narrowly moral or a broader sense). One can certainly express one’s prejudice, but one will not be aware that it *is* prejudice, one sees it as a natural reaction to the character of the people or the things one is reacting to. In other words one expresses one’s prejudice unconsciously. Making a prejudice conscious means revealing it to be a confusion and so making it disappear. This is what Wittgenstein tries to do with regard to philosophical prejudice and confusion.

This is a liberation, but as I said it cannot be expressed in terms of coming to particular new beliefs about the world. To see how this might be so, consider what happens if one is liberated from prejudice in the everyday, moral sense of the word. If I am prejudiced against a particular category of people and then come to realise the folly of this, this will certainly enable me to see all manner of good things in them that in my prejudice I could not see, but the change is *in me* rather than in them, and it cannot be described as my coming to hold new beliefs (a new “theory”) *about* them. If the change in me remains on the level of beliefs, so that whereas I used to think *they* were disgusting, now I think *they* are wonderful, I have learnt nothing, I have merely exchanged one prejudice for another. In this sense, it is impossible to express in a general way, in propositional form, the new “truth” I seem to have learned regarding the people I was prejudiced towards. Even a platitude such as “they are normal human beings, just like anyone” will not really do, even aside from its emptiness, for who but the prejudiced would doubt that they are? My liberation from prejudice consists in my realising that there *is* no particular “them” to have beliefs about, that that was all a projection of my prejudice.

In this sense, the moral prejudice dissolves, comes undone, just as do philosophical confusions; one realises not that one had given the wrong answer to a particular question, but, as it were, that one had answered a question that cannot be put. Thus, if someone insists that there must be something in the brain that answers to the thoughts we think, the point is not that I should decide on *my* answer to the implicit question “Is there something there or not?”,

¹² Quoted in Baker 1979, p. 256.

but rather I should question the question itself; if I do, I will probably realise that it is hopelessly vague; to begin with, how is one to individuate “*the* thoughts” that are to have correlates in the brain? *Thus the problem is not to find the right answer to the question, but that it turns out we cannot find the question to go with the “answer”*. And in the same way, if I am prejudiced against a particular group of people, I tacitly suppose that I have settled the question about what *they* are like (answer: lazy, thieving, and so on). If I am liberated from this prejudice, I do not change my answer to the question, rather I see that there was no question there to be asked in the first place. As Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus*, “The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem” – and he added a suggestion: “Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense?” (TLP 6.521)¹³

6. Tempted by language

Why do we get into philosophical confusions? For most Wittgenstein-commentators, the answer seems obvious enough. The problem is with our language, or more exactly with the misleading expressions in it. These may be similes that have been, as Wittgenstein says, “absorbed into the forms of our language”; they produce “false appearances” which “disquiet us”: “‘But *this* isn’t how it is!’ – we say. ‘Yet *this* is how it has to be!’” (PI §112). Or again we may be misled by “certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language” (PI §90), or by the fact that “our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook” certain important distinctions (PI §108). Stephen Hilmy may thus seem merely to be stating the obvious when he says that Wittgenstein saw “the ultimate source of ... metaphysics ... as lying in language itself, in so much as language itself lures us, tempts us, tricks us into confusing conceptual and factual matters” and into various other misunderstandings (1987, p. 226).

But doesn’t this talk of ‘Language Itself’ sound suspiciously metaphysical – and also, as it happens, a little too *convenient*, from a moral-existential point of view? Might it not be that we are tempted by the notion of language itself as the tempter because we don’t want to assume responsibility for our own confusions (“It wasn’t me, it was language!”)? And is there not in fact a close analogy between the way ‘Language Itself’ gets introduced in these

¹³ This whole discussion of course related to the much debated question about how to understand the concept of *nonsense* in Wittgenstein.

discussions and the way that Freud and his followers often appear to conceive of a personified agent called ‘The Unconscious’ as the subject creating our symptoms or slips or awkward behaviour as it were behind our backs. When the concept is used in *this* way, Frank Cioffi’s remark that “Whenever there is a danger of genuine self-revelation the Freudian unconscious comes to the rescue” (1998, p. 297) holds true – and the same may be said about the purportedly Wittgensteinian notion of ‘The Language That Misleads’.

There is, however, also another conception of the unconscious in Freud, and to my mind his great contribution lies in having stressed and elaborated it. On this conception, which is also highly relevant for understanding the relation between language and philosophical confusion, aspects of our inner and outer lives *become* unconscious because we *make* them so; ‘the unconscious’ is simply a label for the *repressed aspects of our own activity*, those conflicts in our thinking and feeling that we are unwilling or unable to deal with, and therefore anxiously push away from consciousness, with the result that ambiguities and contradictions appear in our behaviour and inner lives. Freud speaks of these manifest signs of unresolved conflict as the “return of the repressed”. This concept of the unconscious points to the fact that our *agency*, and so our responsibility and our knowledge, often stretch much further than we like to admit, so that, for instance, what we present to ourselves as passive experience or suffering is often a highly significant result of our own (disowned) attempts to arrange things to suit us. Thus, when I really would not want to go to the concert with you, I suddenly remember that there are other things I must do tonight, or I misremember the time and arrive too late for the show, or I suddenly feel so tired. These are not cases of deliberate pretence; I really do misremember the time or feel tired, but nonetheless my own agency is instrumental in bringing this about, as I may later come to acknowledge myself, and as may be clearly seen in the pattern of my behaviour (thus, I may *systematically* get tired in situations where particular demands would otherwise be made on me, and “miraculously” feel better if the demands are lifted).

Now my point about the notion that language misleads us would be that this notion itself is something we come up with in order to disguise our own, none-too-flattering *activity* (not wanting to see certain things and *therefore* landing in philosophical confusions) as passive suffering (“language misleads us”). Wittgenstein himself does say that “language sets the same traps for everyone”, but there is nothing objectionable in that way of putting it, if it is taken as a simple reminder of the fact that we move along “this immense network of well-kept false paths” of philosophical confusion, as Wittgenstein calls it, in disappointingly similar ways, so that one can often guess at which point the next false turn will occur, once

the first one has been taken (BT §90, tr. mine). This does not mean that language is some kind of super-agent leading people astray, however, for as Wittgenstein notes in the remark preceding the one I just quoted, the language we speak has become what it is “because people had – and have – the inclination to think in [just] *these* ways”; the “herd” (Wittgenstein uses this very Nietzschean word here) “has created this language as its *proper* expression” (PO, p. 185). It is not as though there were language, this system of pathways, on the one hand, and then on the other hand the people moving in it; it would be better to say that language *is* the pattern of people’s movements in the world. And it’s not surprising that these herd-animals that most of us to a great extent are, should all walk on unthinkingly in the same old paths that have been trodden so well before us, indeed often anxiously taking care not to stray from the path. It’s not surprising, but neither is it by any means necessary. Not everyone moves in the same ways, and there is a “heard” only because most of us instinctively move with it.

It seems to me that unless we take seriously the idea that *repression* is partly *constitutive* of the language we have, of the way we move in our talk and thinking, we will in fact land in the radically relativistic view of meaning that has been dubbed “the conference theory of meaning” (Robinson 1998, p. 26), according to which one can’t really criticise what any group of people, for instance philosophers, say, for if meaning is use, if it’s constituted by agreement in form of life – and isn’t that supposed to be Wittgenstein’s point? – then surely the fact that there is a more or less permanent “form of life” which consists in philosophers of various persuasions going around the world to conferences where they talk about their favourite subjects with the likeminded, and in which their discourse is taken to be legitimate and important, then it seems there can be no way of showing that what they say fails to make sense in some general or pervasive way – even though it seems clear that Wittgenstein wants to say this.

It seems to me that the problem with the conference theory is not that meaning “isn’t really like that”. Unfortunately, meaning is very often created more or less like that, at philosophy conferences, in the world of advertisement, in political debates, in organisations at every level – and no less in everyday conversations and quarrels at dinner tables, whether these be trivial or heated or bitter. The way the talk goes is an essential aspect of the way the world around the dinner table or in the organisation gets constituted and carried on as the particular world it is. The form of life gets its form, gets formed, through the way the people talk to each other – and that of course includes not just what they say in a narrow sense, but who says what to whom, the forms of address, the tones of voice, the patterns in the reactions of the various people to each other.

There is not much point in saying, flatly, that what philosophers say at conferences generally makes no sense, but there is a point and an urgent need to ask what kind of sense it makes, what kind of function it fills. I'm not saying there is no point in designating something a philosopher says as nonsense, but if we do, we need an account of the fact that it is not just gibberish, but rather an *attempt* to say, or *do*, something, or more often an attempt to do, or to avoid, many things, to satisfy many cravings. In general, the conference theory is not so much plain false as radically insufficient, it suppresses the most important aspects of things, and is therefore false in a much more insidious way than anything that is just plain false can be. The theory fails to actually *investigate how* the constitution of meaning takes place at conferences and around dinner-tables. In particular, it fails to note how the constitution of meaning is premised on a tacit but systematic *exclusion* of certain reactions, questions, suggestions – and the theory fails to note this, I will state without argument, because it's proponents do not wish to “know” anything about it (and they don't wish to, because they really know what is going on all too well; in other words *repression* is in play).

These exclusions do not normally become an issue at philosophy conferences, they are not felt by the participants, by those who have made themselves at home at them, or only in the sense of a general feeling of comfortable familiarity. They will, however, surface, although in an ambivalent way, in reactions and feelings, if someone arrives at the conference who is not in agreement with the prevalent exclusions, and thus asks questions or makes suggestions that shatter the universe of meaning of the conference. Then one will witness, if not nervous giggles, at least awkward silences, eyebrows raised in consternation or amusement, with contempt and hostility not far off.

It is in such reactions as these, I suggest, that we see the failure of what the philosophers are saying to make sense. It is not that there is just a blank, *no* sense where there appeared to be sense, but rather that there are particular meanings, determinate paths of inquiry and possibilities of experience, that the philosophers *refuse* to countenance. That is why it's false to say, with the Conference theorists, that “You speak like this, but they speak differently, and there is nothing to decide between you”, for the point is that they *refuse* my “way of speaking”, and they do so in a way which betrays that they understand it, they see the sense it makes, quite well enough to want to *deny* that they understand it. What they sense is precisely that the way of seeing things I propose *threatens* their “language-game”, that it cannot be dealt with by putting it alongside their game as “just another game”.

So the explanation of the trouble *here* is precisely *not* the one favoured among Wittgenstein-commentators, which sees the problem in a confusion or mixing of ways of

speaking at home in, and appropriate to different contexts (as in talking about “thinking machines”). The issue is rather *conflict within a person*; if you feel that you are torn asunder by acting and thinking the way you do, that you are doing violence to something crucial in yourself, then there is a problem. The point is not, of course, that if you don’t feel the conflict enough to be much bothered by it, it’s all right; the question is whether the conflict is there or not, but if it is you will feel it in some way, or at least you will need to keep yourself from feeling it, through various strategies of repression and exclusion. So the question is whether there is something other in you than ‘the philosopher at a conference’; for instance, something that *that* role does violence to? If you meet a philosopher at a conference in whom you can manage to get hold of nothing but ‘the philosopher at a conference’, then there is nothing fruitful you can say to them.

Let’s now take a concrete example of philosophical difficulties to refocus our discussion. Consider the confusions connected with the temptation, fiercely and patiently combated in Wittgenstein’s writings, to take *scientific* thinking as one’s model for thinking as such. Does his temptation arise from the “misleading surface-grammar of our language”, as Hilmy thinks, and thinks Wittgenstein thought (*ibid.*)? I would not say so. Rather, the fact is that science, or the image of science as it appears in that idol of our age, the so-called scientific world-view (clearly the most unscientific thing imaginable!), holds a great charm for many of us, and much of the charm comes from an unconscious promise or hope, which could be expressed somewhat like this: “The scientists will found out how things are – what death is and life and love and morality and thinking are, so I don’t have to think about these things, I don’t have to try to get clear about the world and about myself, I don’t have to put myself through the wonder and the terror of thinking about these things, because *answers* will eventually be forthcoming to all our questions, objective answers which will make what I or anyone else thinks irrelevant.”

Perhaps someone will now object: “But surely the fact that existential wonder and puzzlement can naturally be put in the form of questions – as you yourself just did: What is death? and so on – suggests, by the mere force of surface-grammar, that there is a plain answer to them, like there is to ordinary empirical questions, and so that they are liable to be answered by scientists?” But again, the notion of ‘misleading features of surface grammar’ is treated in a thoroughly metaphysical manner here, as though certain interpretations or ways of taking words were simply self-evident or inevitable. Should we not rather ask ourselves *who* would be tempted by – or, to put the same question differently, *why* anyone might be taken in by – the possibility of assimilating existential question to ordinary empirical or scientific

ones?

Temptations are not like rocks that just lay there in our way whether we like it or not; temptations are always *someone's* temptations, they express that person's attitude, their way of seeing and relating to things. The wallet left lying on the bar may certainly tempt me to take it – but only insofar as I'm a thief at heart. The problem is in *me*, not in the wallet! Certainly to *me*, with my thieving heart, it will feel as though the wallet exerted a kind of magnetic pull on me: it's lying there, quite unguarded, full of all that wonderful money... But this is a clear case of precisely the kind of projective delusion that Wittgenstein is always fighting, where, as he says: "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (PI §114).

Now the scientific worldview looks just as irresistible as the unguarded wallet looks to the thief – but only *to someone who is tempted by the promise that it holds of not having to face the terrors of thinking about oneself*. Those who are not afraid of those terrors, or who are not conquered by their fear of them, will not be taken in by the surface analogy between scientific and existential questions; they will immediately see that it is a very superficial thing. Anyone who has the humility or patience or courage to think about existential questions with any honesty at all will realise that they are not to be answered like scientific ones. But of course, the people who are taken in by the surface analogy and claim to see no real difference here, are taken in, or allow themselves to be taken in, precisely *because* they do not *want* to go further into the existential questions, they are terrified or perhaps disgusted by them, disgusted by themselves, and so they fasten onto this seeming "insight" that there is no point in thinking further, because like all questions, the existential ones will in good time be answered by science and make the idleness of our "speculations" apparent.

It was perhaps this that Wittgenstein had in mind when he said: "Man has to awaken to wonder ... Science is a way of sending him to sleep again" (CV, p. 5). Clearly he was not complaining about the misleading surface-grammar of our language here, but deploring a particular attitude to life.¹⁴ Those who have or are tempted by this attitude will certainly make use of all the surface-grammatical analogies and specious arguments and suggestive metaphors they can find to present the attitude as convincingly as they can, first of all to

¹⁴ Consider here, as one alternative to or variation on the temptation of the "scientific worldview", Wittgenstein's remark about Frank Ramsey as "a bourgeois thinker" who was comfortable in thinking as long as the aim was "clearing up the affairs of some particular community", for instance solving some particular problem in a specific branch of logic, whereas the idea that things might be done in some quite different way than they happened to be done now, "in part disquieted him and in part bored him", Wittgenstein says; "real philosophical reflection disturbed him until he put its result (if it had any) to one side and declared it trivial" (CV, p. 17).

themselves. But their thinking is not somehow automatically determined by the analogies, rather they *exploit* them (albeit unconsciously).¹⁵

Part of the point I have been trying to make could perhaps also be put by saying, simply, that the fact that our philosophical confusions are *expressed* in language, in the way the apparent sense of our statements continuously breaks down or dissolves or undergoes strange displacements, does not mean that language is the *source* of our confusions. Similarly, the fact that our philosophical confusions are expressed in intellectual terms, in how we think and argue, does not mean that their sources are merely intellectual, in the sense – if there is such a sense – of having no connexion with our moral or existential difficulties, with who we are, what we fear and wish for.

Wittgenstein certainly seems to put a very strong stress on the fact that philosophical problems are quite unlike any merely intellectual problem. A chapter heading in the *Big Typescript* reads: “Difficulty of philosophy not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences, but the difficulty of a change of attitude. Resistances of the will are to be overcome” (PO, p. 161). What makes a philosophically speaking important subject difficult to understand is, Wittgenstein says in the same chapter, “the contrast between the understanding of the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things that are most obvious can become the most difficult to understand. What has to be overcome is not a difficulty of the intellect but of the will” (PO, 161). – This passage should be borne in mind when reading the remarks in the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein says that we are blind to “the aspects of things that are most important to us”, that “we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful” (PI §129), and that in his philosophical practice he often supplies “observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes” (PI §415). In these remarks, the *character* of the failure to notice the most obvious and important things is left open; it might be quite unmotivated, due to some

¹⁵ Even in the case of the most ancient philosophical quandaries – those having to do with the nature of time or space, for instance – whose apparent timelessness Wittgenstein refers to the fact that “our language has remained the same and ever again tempts us to raise the same questions”, so that “as long as one talks about the flowing of time or the extension of space, and so on, people will keep running into the same enigmatic difficulties, and to stare at something which it seems no explanation can clear away” – even in this case, Wittgenstein adds that the temptation, and the philosophical confusion, are connected to a “longing for the transcendent” that people feel, “for when they think they see ‘the limits of human understanding’, they of course believe that they can see beyond them” (BT §90, tr. mine). – We should always ask: why do we so eagerly grab the possibility to misunderstand when it is offered us? Let me remind you of a simile used by Freud in connexion with his discussion of the influence of such factors as fatigue or distraction on slips of the tongue and similar errors. Freud did not deny such influence, but saw it as merely contributory to the errors, which he maintained were very often to be explained mainly by unconscious motives. He said that those who blamed physiology alone behaved like a person who has been robbed while walking in a lonely neighbourhood on some dark night, and makes his complaint at the police-station in the words: “Loneliness and darkness have just robbed me of my valuables”. As Freud dryly comments, it would be better to look about for the thief instead of blaming these elements of the situation, which the thief no doubt took advantage of (IL, p. 49–50). In the same way, rather than blaming our confusions on the misleadingness of surface-grammar, we should try to catch the thief in our own thinking who takes advantage of it to create confusion.

“native” weakness of our intellect rather than to a resistance of the will. In the *Big Typescript*, however, the latter interpretation is boldly advanced.

Maybe Wittgenstein changed his mind, and came to see that his earlier emphasis on ‘will’ was mistaken? Maybe, but I have my doubts, as I will explain shortly. In any case, I don’t think there is any sense in arguing that it must always be one way or the other; as always, we should heed Wittgenstein’s advice not to think, but look. What is interesting, however, is that the passage from the *Big Typescript* suggests that the unconscious pictures which set us in the tracks of our philosophical thinking (or fantasising) may not be the root of the problem; perhaps the real problem is rather that there are things about ourselves that we do not want to see, and in order to keep them from view we start philosophising wildly, somewhat in the way you might engage a person in discussion if someone *else*, whom you for some reason don’t want to talk to, comes into the room.

In fact, my earlier remarks on what might draw someone to “the scientific worldview” or to the subjective/objective-dichotomy exhibited precisely this structure; the point was not what these allow you to get, but what they help you avoid. It also seems to me that a crucially important unconscious motivation for much theorising in ethics, for instance, is precisely to see to it that the more challenging aspects of life – conscience I already mentioned; love and forgiveness, joy and pain, but also disgust and shame of oneself belong in the same family – are kept away from consideration, by focusing on what is safe and manageable instead; rights, duties, utility, respect, the virtues, judgments, “moral reasons” and so on. My suggestion is that philosophers often talk about rights, say, not because rights would be so very interesting or difficult to understand, but rather because what lies beyond (or if you wish before) rights is something one would rather not think about. I throw out this merely as a suggestion, as food for thought; I cannot develop it here.¹⁶

I don’t say a focus on rights, for instance, *must* instantiate this kind of defensive behaviour, but that it *may* do so. I do think, however, that this is a very important possibility, and that the *stress* should not be on the fact that it does not have to be the case. In doing ethics, and in philosophy generally – and also in morally charged situations in everyday life – we should not only focus on what someone is saying, but also ask ourselves what they are *not* saying anything about, and what might motivate that silence.¹⁷

¹⁶ I develop it at some length in Backström (2007).

¹⁷ Let me sketch one example from moral life rather than moral philosophy, regarding the virtue of honesty, to make my suggestion more plausible, or perhaps I should say more alarming. Imagine a very honest businessman, who honestly pays his employees what he has promised to pay and never tries to cheat them or his business-partners, but who, his great honesty notwithstanding, sees nothing wrong in the fact that what he pays them is barely enough for their families to survive on,

7. “You can’t think decently if you don’t want to hurt yourself”

In discussions of Wittgenstein’s views on the difficulty of philosophising, one quote is sure always to appear, namely the remark that “Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself ... On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them)” (CV, p. 16). This is indeed a crucial remark, it seems to me, but everything hinges on the context in which you put it. To revert to our earlier metaphor, it’s a stick of dynamite – but if you’re careful not to light the fuse, you can of course render it quite harmless. Thus if the remark is read, as it mostly is, against the background of the notion of the deep temptations of surface grammar we are all equally subject to, it is apt to conjure up a picture of a serious thinker sitting in his study, working patiently on his inclinations to use words this misleading way or that. Now this seems a very *safe* picture, for while it presents philosophy as hard work, demanding painstaking reflection on one’s habits of thought, and perhaps also leading to the discovery of some unflattering aspects of one’s intellectual personality, it does not envision the possibility of any real *moral* challenge here.

If I find out, upon reflection, that I am inclined to think in this way or that, that may be unexpected and surprising, but as such it does not challenge me – whereas admitting that I am full of fear or vanity or other petty thoughts does. To be sure, coming to admit *that* is a case of realising something about “how one sees things and what one expects of them”, but my point is that to see the challenge of working towards such realisations, the description of them must be made morally speaking *concrete*.

And Wittgenstein always insists on being concrete; properly understood, that is the *only* thing he demands. He says his philosophy is characterised of an “*unpoetic* mentality, which heads straight for what is concrete” (CV, p. 6). At one point he reminds himself, in the middle of philosophising: “Refrain from writing down ... any vague general statements and you have made a philosophical investigation”.¹⁸ In keeping with this, a recurrent move in his investigations of philosophical confusions is, as he says, to “describe in practical details and objectively how a reality looks which corresponds to the general world-description of

while he makes a handsome profit. Now it is clear, I think, that he may use the very insistence on honesty (“I’m a man of my word, I would never fail to pay what I promised”) to mask from himself his callous disregard for the plight of others, and for the justice of his actions or of the social system within which he acts. – At this point someone may want to respond that if honest people may be unjust, it is just as likely, to say the least, that radical social-critics and self-styled revolutionaries use their supposed insight into the ideological nature of ordinary decency as a justification for their blatant personal dishonesty. To which I would say: Well, exactly!

¹⁸ MS 155, p. 80 [1931], quoted in Hilmy 1987, p. 202.

philosophers”, to “[t]ake the general (vague) talk (chatter [*Gerede*]) of philosophers seriously and make a practical application of it!”.¹⁹ Of course, we are used to seeing this move made in connexion with confusions which have no obvious moral dimensions (concerning naming or mental pictures, say), but it is just as applicable, and just as important, in the kind of case now under discussion.

In making vague general statements, or in leaving statements that could be concrete vague – as in saying “Philosophy is work on oneself, on how one sees things”, *and leaving it at that* – one has not made anything clear, on the contrary one has deliberately (which does not necessarily mean: consciously) *veiled* one’s meaning, one has made a gesture in a general direction without committing oneself to anything specific, thus leaving the field open for one to do as one pleases. This is how metaphysics proceeds, how it produces its semblance of sense; the metaphysician as it were gestures indiscriminately at a whole lot of things, but does so *as though* his gesture picked out one particular item from the mass of things. That is also how moral evasion proceeds. In discussions of the remark that “Philosophy is work on oneself”, there is often both metaphysical vagueness and moral evasion, or rather moral evasion expressing itself *in* metaphysical vagueness. To say, vaguely, that philosophy is work on oneself allows you, if you’re a Wittgensteinian philosopher, to feel different from and superior to your colleagues because *you* realise that philosophical problems demand deep and serious work on yourself, whereas *they* have the superficial notion that the problems are public in an obvious way, to be dealt with simply by rational argument; it allows you this satisfying contempt of the mere academic, while in essence you remain as comfortably academic as anyone – where ‘academic’ means thinking in such a way as to *avoid* challenging yourself, confronting others or endangering your position in the world.

It seems to me that Wittgenstein himself, in contrast to many of his commentators and would-be followers, was very clear that philosophy – or simply: thinking – is challenging in a very concrete, moral-existential way, and that *this* is where its difficulty lies. This comes out, I believe, in his constant emphasis on *courage* as – one is almost tempted to say – the intellectual virtue par excellence, as in the remark “What I do think essential is carrying out the work of clarification with COURAGE: otherwise it becomes just a clever game” (CV, p. 19).²⁰ Courage is a strong word. It characterises a relation to one’s fears, in particular to the

¹⁹ MS 131, p. 51 [c. 1945?], quoted in Hilmy 1987, p. 72.

²⁰ Nietzsche, too, thought that courage was the essential thing in thinking; alas, “[e]ven the bravest of us rarely has the courage for what he really knows” (1990, p. 33).

fears one is prey to in one's relations to others.²¹ It may be dismaying, but it takes no *courage*, to acknowledge an inclination in oneself if it lacks (or is perceived as lacking) a connection with one's relationship to others, if it is a merely *private* matter. More exactly, there is nothing to *acknowledge* in such a case, only a fact to take note of. But insofar as admitting to the inclination, or acknowledging a truth or a fact, jeopardises one's relationship to others, and so one's view of who oneself is in relation to them, things take on a different, *dangerous* aspect, and there is suddenly a place and a need for courage.

The thoughts or inclinations one finds in oneself frighten one insofar as they *threaten one with loneliness*, with isolation from others, as they raise the unsettling question "How can I think *this*, feel *that*, when everyone else thinks or feels the opposite?" Frightened by that question, one may shy away from thinking a thought, long before it ever becomes an issue whether one should communicate it to others. Thus, Galileo needed courage not just to claim publicly that the sun, that heavenly body assumed by everyone to be perfect, had spots, but even to *believe his eyes when he saw* it was so. Why? Because that fact threatened the authority of a whole "world-order" ordering the relations of people to each other, and so Galileo's claim awakened a sense that if we accept *this*, then anything goes, *and who will we then be?* Insofar as the questions of philosophy demand courage, and not just cleverness or conscientiousness of one sort or another, it is because they challenge us in this kind of way.

Sometimes, as in Galileo's case, the "we" that is challenged is a whole civilisation, and it is clear from Wittgenstein's writings that he too challenges, and knows himself to be challenging, "the spirit of the times", in other words challenging most of the people around him and strong tendencies in himself, for he is of course *also* a child of his times, like everyone is.²² But again, speaking of "the times" risks vagueness and evasion. A certain sense of lonely, heroic greatness – illusory precisely in its vague, day-dreamlike quality – may attach to the idea of fighting single-handedly against the current of a whole civilisation, but if one considers what it is actually like to be thought of by one's colleagues, and more importantly by the people one knows and loves, to be either a dangerous fanatic or an incomprehensible freak or a "difficult" character who always raises awkward questions and will never let them go, or a vulgar and disgusting person, then the air of heroism evaporates, and one is left with a nasty and terrifying prospect. But that is the prospect that thinking for

²¹ According to a self-report is quoted in McGuiness (1988), p. 47–8, for Wittgenstein himself the connection truth–courage and falsity–cowardice was impressed on his mind with his early recognition that where his brother Paul would speak the truth, *he* would often tell small lies because he was "afraid of the bad opinion of those around [him]" and wanted to "appear agreeable" in their eyes; his lies were, as he says, "simply lies out of cowardice".

²² One of the most well-known, and striking expression of this sense of swimming against the tide of the times is the "Sketch for a Foreword" from 1930, CV, p. 6–7.

yourself threatens, that is why the “work on yourself” takes courage.

Consider, finally, as an example of the dangers of thinking on this very personal, intimate, level, the conflict that broke out between Wittgenstein and his friend Norman Malcolm in 1939, after Malcolm had commented on the German accusation that the British were plotting the assassination of Hitler by saying that he could not believe it was true, because “the British were too civilized and decent to attempt anything so underhand”; such an act was “incompatible with the British ‘national character’” – a comment that, Malcolm tells us, made Wittgenstein “extremely angry” (Malcolm 2001, p. 30). After the incident Wittgenstein stopped visiting him, and then the war separated the friends for a long time. Five years later, in 1944, Wittgenstein answered a letter from Malcolm, writing:

My dear Malcolm, Thanks for your letter, dated Nov. 12th, which arrived this morning. I was glad to get it. I thought you had almost forgotten me, or perhaps wished to forget me. I had a particular reason for thinking this. Whenever I thought of you I couldn't help thinking of a particular incident which seemed to me very important. You & I were walking along the river towards the railway bridge & we had a heated discussion in which you made a remark about 'national character' that shocked me by it's primitiveness. I then thought: what is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any ... journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for their own ends. You see, I know that it's difficult to think *well* about “certainty”, “probability”, “perception”, etc. But it is, if possible, still more difficult to think, or *try* to think, really honestly about your life & other people's lives. And the trouble is that thinking about these things is *not thrilling*, but often downright nasty. And when it's nasty then it's *most* important.—Let me stop preaching. What I wanted to say was this: I'd *very* much like to see you again; but if we meet it would be wrong to avoid talking about serious non-philosophical things. Being timid I don't like clashes, & particularly not with people I like. But I'd rather have a clash than mere superficial talk.—Well, I thought that when you gradually ceased writing to me it was because you felt that if we were to dig down deep enough we wouldn't be able to see eye to eye in very serious matters. *Perhaps I was quite wrong*. But anyway, if we live to see each other again let's not shirk digging. You can't think decently if you don't want to hurt yourself. I know all about it because I am a shirker.
[---] —Read this letter in good spirit! *Good luck!* (Ibid., p. 93–4)

It would not be surprising if the first thought evoked by reading this letter was what a truth-loving person Wittgenstein seems to have been; one will perhaps say that with a slight shudder, because that kind of severity can be frightening. That the letter reveals what a good friend Wittgenstein was to Malcolm perhaps does not strike one; when one shudders to think what it would be to have such a severe man as one's friend... But friendship is, I think, what is at stake here. Wittgenstein did not want truth “for its own sake”, whatever that means, he wanted truth for the sake of his friendship with Malcolm. Or rather: the truth he wanted for its own sake was truth *in* their relationship, their being truthful with each other. I say this because a *longing for Malcolm* is so pronounced in Wittgenstein's letter – “What I wanted to say was this: I'd *very* much like to see you again” – a longing which, precisely *because* it is a longing

for Malcolm *is* a longing for truth, for openness between them (“But I’d rather have a clash than mere superficial talk”).

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