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Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Attention

Lars Hertzberg

1. Wittgenstein's philosophy is a philosophy of attention. For Wittgenstein, philosophical difficulties arise from our tendency to overlook things. In reflecting on the sense of words, we tend to concentrate on a limited range of examples and to ignore other kinds, or we tend to be absorbed by certain analogies at the cost of other possibilities. Philosophical bewilderment is to be overcome by the redirecting of our attention, by our being reminded of things we know but fail to bring to bear on the issues that confront us. There are plenty of remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* giving expression to this idea, for instance:

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of their enquiry do not strike people at all... – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (PI § 129.) [1]

> 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.)

> What do I mean when I say "the pupil's ability to learn *may* come to an end here"[speaking of continuing a number series]? Do I report this from my own experience? Of course not... Then what am I doing with that remark? After all, I'd like you to say: "Yes, it's true, one could imagine that too, that might happen too!" – But was I trying to draw someone's attention to the fact that he is able to imagine that? — I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* sequence of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*. (PI § 144.)

[1] Paragraph numbers refer to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4 revised edition (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

> How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviourism arise? — The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we'll know more about them – we think. But that's just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a certain conception of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that seemed to us quite innocent.) ... (PI § 308.)

When I am told that there is something I overlooked or that I failed to notice, the implication is that the matter in question, in some sense, was within my reach: I could have taken it into account although I didn't. This may either have been something that was present in the moment, something I could have observed but did not, or something I could have recalled although I failed to do so. Thus, the case is not like one in which I did not succeed in solving a problem because there was something I hadn't been told or because the task was simply beyond my grasp. Similarly, to say that I was reminded of something is to imply that this was something I already knew or had already decided on.

Thus, when Wittgenstein speaks of philosophical activity as a matter of "assembling reminders for a particular purpose", what he is suggesting is that the means for overcoming philosophical difficulty are within our reach. There is no specific matter we need to be informed of, say, concerning certain phenomena that are hard of access. No one *possesses* the answer to philosophical difficulties; in this sense, there is no such thing as a philosophical authority that may be referred to in matters of dispute. But neither does the removal of philosophical difficulties take the form of following complex arguments which may be difficult to master.[2]

Doing philosophy, then, requires neither specific information nor specialized reasoning capacities. Rather, the difficulties are of a nature such that our ability to see our way out of them is dependent on our bethinking ourselves of things relevant to having a clear grasp of the matters at hand. This has consequences for the way we are to understand the *a priori / a posteriori* distinction. While it is true that philosophical inquiry does not involve the gathering of evidence in the way empirical science does, this does not mean that we can count on having immediate and unproblematic access to the things that bear on the

[2] Cp. also Wittgenstein's sketch for a foreword from 1931: "if the place I want to reach can only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must be at already." (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 10.)

questions raised, since there is always the danger that we are overlooking matters of importance. This may concern, for instance, the actual use of words.

I suppose what I have said so far is more or less common ground to readers of Wittgenstein. In this talk I want to take a closer look at what is involved in thinking of philosophy as a discipline of attention.[3]

It appears to me that the concept of attention gives rise to a peculiar set of difficulties, centring around the question: to what extent is attention something we may be held responsible for, to what extent are we at the at the mercy of what we happen to notice?

In coming to consider this subject, I was struck be the curious fact that while the concept of attention is central to Wittgenstein's attitude to philosophy, he himself does not have very much to say about the nature of attention. Though he uses the word in describing philosophical activity, there is little explicit discussion of attention itself. Wittgenstein does, on the other hand, talk about a concept that has important affinities with attention: aspect seeing. I shall have a few things to say about the relation between attention and aspect seeing later on.

Wittgenstein is not alone in his relative neglect of the concept of attention. To my knowledge, very little has in fact been written about attention in recent English-speaking philosophy. Gilbert Ryle's discussion of the so-called heed concepts is a classic, and I suppose quite useful as far as it goes. There is Alan White's book on attention which was very much written in the spirit of Ryle. John Austin touches on questions of attention in his essay "A Plea for Excuses".[4] Neither Ryle, White nor Austin, however, go into the more bewildering aspects of attention. Apparently, the neglect of attention has long standing. William James writes, in *The Principles of Psychology*: "Strange to say, so patent a fact as the perpetual presence of selective attention has received hardly any notice from psychologists

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[3] It might be claimed that the emphasis on attention is not peculiar to Wittgenstein, but rather characteristic of philosophical argumentation in general. It was suggested in discussion that W. V. O. Quine's philosophy, for instance, might be regarded as concerned with drawing attention to certain relevant matters. The point has some merit, yet there is a crucial difference between the activity of a philosopher like Wittgenstein and that of a philosopher like Quine. Whereas the reminders of someone like Quine are in the service of a certain philosophical programme, in the case of Wittgenstein taking note of things is what the activity is all about. Wittgenstein's activity is open-ended; he is making us attentive, we might say, to the dangers of inattention itself.

[4] See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Chapter V; Alan R. White, *Attention* (1964); J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (1961). John Campbell wrote a paper called "Wittgenstein on Attention" of which I was not aware at the time of writing this talk (*Philosophical Topics*, 28 (2000), 35-48). In that paper he is mainly concerned with what might be called the negative aspect of attention: with Wittgenstein's thought that attention cannot account for the learning of language in the way in which we are tempted to think. I am grateful to Lawrence Berger for drawing my attention to this paper.

from the English empiricist school." One might ponder what weight the explanation of this neglect proposed by James might still carry among today's analytic philosophers: "The motive of this ignoring of attention is obvious enough," he writes. "These writers are bent on showing how the higher faculties of the mind are pure products of 'experience;' and experience is supposed to be of something simply *given*. Attention, implying a degree of reactive spontaneity, would seem to break through the circle of pure receptivity which constitutes 'experience,' and hence must not be spoken of under penalty of interfering with the smoothness of the tale."[5]

2. One way of approaching issues involving attention is by discussing what *failures* of attention amount to: what does it mean not to be attentive? As was said, lack of attention may take the form of failing to *take something into account* I should have remembered or failing to *take note* of something that is present to me now: in short, there are failures to recall and failures to observe. There are, however, close analogies between these two types of failure. For my present purposes, I shall treat them side by side.

Let us begin with an everyday scene. My wife and I are sitting in our living-room, she is busy at her computer, writing. I am reading a philosophical article. A fly is buzzing around the room. I can't help taking note of the fly, it keeps distracting me from the text on which I am trying to concentrate. My wife, however, does not notice the fly, she tells me later. She is focused on her work, concentrating hard on what she is doing. There is clearly an attention failure on my part: I was failing to do, or failing to do attentively, what I meant to be doing. However, although my wife didn't notice the fly she can't be said to have been inattentive, given that she had no reason to pay attention to it. On the other hand, if instead of a fly the buzzing insect had been a wasp, if I had been trying to talk to her, or if the doorbell had rung and she had not noticed one or the other of these, then the question might arise of her having been inattentive.

What the example seems to suggest is that to call someone inattentive or to say that she was lacking in attention presupposes some type of requirement or a standard concerning what matters call for attention, and in respect of which someone has fallen short. The word "inattention" will sometimes have a critical ring to it: we might blame someone, or blame ourselves, for failing to be attentive.

[5] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, 1890), Vol. I, p. 402.

Failing to notice something is both analogous and disanalogous with missing an aspect. Consider a case of the latter. Suppose I am struck by how Shirley looks like her mother Sarah and you fail to see the similarity. The analogy is this: the similarity (provided it is actually there) is, in a sense, accessible to anyone who sees Shirley and who knows what Sarah looks like. No hidden information will help. (While I might be adverted to the similarity by being told that Sarah is Shirley's mother, I don't have to have that information to be able to see the similarity.) The disanalogy is this: where an attention failure is concerned, it is enough that the matter is pointed out to you for you to notice that which you had been overlooking. If having the matter pointed out to you doesn't suffice, it wasn't a question of an attention failure. But this is not true in the case of missing an aspect: as was said, you may have had the similarity pointed out to you and yet not see it. (Which does not prove it wasn't there.) So the sense in which the hidden aspect was accessible to you even if you didn't see it is different from the sense in which the thing you overlooked was accessible to you even if you didn't notice it. And this seems to be connected with the way in which we may be held responsible for our attention failures in a different way than for missing an aspect.

Attention failures, it seems, often take one of two opposite forms. We may be distracted from something we should be concentrating on or are trying to concentrate on, or our concentrating on something may prevent our noticing something we should have noticed or that we would wish to have noticed. There may be an attention failure because there's something I'm trying to do but failing, or because I wasn't aware that there was something I was called upon to do. Perhaps we could talk about *centripetal* attention: attending to the task at hand, and *centrifugal* attention: attending to matters external to the task at hand.

Psychologists seem to be making a similar distinction by using the terms "voluntary", "endogenous" or "top-down" attention on the one hand, and "reflexive", "exogenous" or "bottom-up" attention on the other hand However, as we shall see later, the distinction is not as clear-cut as I'm making it out to be here.

Sometimes the relevant standards may be imposed from outside: the child who is said to be suffering from "attention deficit disorder", for one thing, is not living up to the requirements imposed by the educational system: for all we know, he may be attending to a fly buzzing around the room, a fly to which, in his view, the teacher and his classmates are strangely oblivious. (One might be tempted to make up an evolutionary psychology story here, suggesting that it would be good for a tribe both to have members who were good at

concentrating on a task and other members who were ready to notice whatever was happening around them.)

3. Evidently, we often speak about attentiveness or the lack of it as of something a person may be held responsible for. But how can I be blamed for failing to be attentive to something that was *outside my field of attention* in the first place?

I shall here speak primarily about *centrifugal* attentiveness and the lack of it. In fact, it seems, our life is shot through with situations of various kinds and various degrees of gravity, in which someone is hampered by his or her failure to be attentive to something:

> I agree to have a meeting next Wednesday, forgetting that that is when my daughter is to perform in a school play which I have promised to attend.
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> During a conversation with a group of friends, I fail to notice that I keep interrupting Janet; or I fail to notice that she is constantly being left out of the conversation.[6]
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> You fail to notice an ominous sound coming from your car.
>
> I'm oblivious to the fact that giving up her job meant that my wife was sacrificing her career for mine.
>
> In a chess game, I strike your castle with my knight, overlooking the fact that in doing so I expose my queen.
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> The criminal investigator didn't take account of the fact that the perpetrator might have entered with his own key.

All of these are cases in which I might come to blame myself for how I acted or failed to act once the relevant matter is brought to my attention.

Now, the idea that I might be responsible for my centrifugal attentiveness, that is, my attentiveness to matters that call on my attention yet are external to my concurrent endeavour, seems paradoxical. We are, it appears, inclined to think about the matterin the following way: my field of attention constitutes the arena for my actions. It provides the backdrop for the decisions I make. But then, evidently, becoming attentive to some object

[6] A problem area worth exploring, as pointed out to me by William Day, is that between failing to be attentive to a person in this or that particular respect, and generally failing to be attentive to a person.

cannot itself be something I decide to do. That would require that the object was within my field of attention to begin with. In order to act on it, I must begin by attending to it. My field of attention would have to shift. So it seems that my coming to attend to something that is external to my current activity is not something I do, it simply happens to me, independently of me.

We might compare the field of attention to our field of vision. In so far as my actions depend on my eye-sight, I cannot be blamed for not taking account of things that I was not in a position to see. It cannot be demanded of me that I should have turned my eyes in the direction of an object that was not in my field of vision to begin with.

If we are to avoid the conclusion that I am not responsible for my attentiveness or lack of it, it appears, we would have to postulate something like a dual self or dual agency: there is one agent that monitors the surroundings for relevant inputs and presents them for consideration by another agent who acts on them.

Of course powerful sense impressions – a loud bang, a sharp light, a strong smell, etc – will attract my attention without my deliberate involvement. Parents will react to their child's voice while oblivious to all the other sounds surrounding them, you respond to hearing your name called, etc. These are interesting empirical facts. Some psychologists talk about attention filters[7], in which there is a pre-attentive selection of relevant inputs, others postulate more complex selection mechanisms. We might say that they *do* point to the existence of something like a dual self. This is all of a piece with the fact that the organism has a teleology of its own, that it is geared to function effectively and beneficially independently of our planning. But do these findings really address the problem we are discussing, the question of responsibility? I suggest that they do not.

I would suggest that the puzzle about attention and responsibility arises from the manner in which we are inclined to approach these issues. We assume that the way to get clear about our own attentiveness is *by attending to* it. We picture something like a field of attention stretching out before us, like a field of vision but also comprising sound, touch, smell, etc. Here, it is thought, we can see what attending is: our attentiveness appears to us in the relation we have to the objects in this field. What we need to realize is that this way of looking at things is what leads to difficulties. In order to assess our own attentiveness, we should be able to relate it to whatever is demanded of us in the situation. Putting all other

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broadbent%27s_filter_model_of_attention.

difficulties aside, this means that we should have to be in a position to judge whether there is something we are overlooking. In other words, we should have to be attentive to our own lack of attention. But clearly this condition is paradoxical.

As so often when problems in the philosophy of mind are concerned, limiting oneself to the first person present tense perspective is liable to be crippling. In order to get out of a conundrum in this area, it is advisable to approach matters from a second or third person point of view, or better perhaps, to consider them in the light of the interplay between the first and the second or third person; it may also be useful to consider matters *ex post facto* or in a subjunctive mood, rather than in the light of our own present experience.[8]

Thus, I will call you inattentive if you didn't note some aspect of the present situation to which I think you should have paid attention, and in retrospect you may agree. Alternatively you may, of course, reject the accusation, arguing that the matter in question was not really significant (or that there was no way you could have been expected to realize what the situation entailed) . Suppose the matter is important: your three-year old son Jim is telling you he is going to play down by the shore, and you, being absorbed in the reading of the newspaper, simply answer "m'hm" without taking in what he is saying. Jim is on his way but fortunately your wife overhears what goes on, so she stops him and tells him he definitely can't go to the shore by himself. Then she rounds on you and asks you what you were thinking. You'll probably say you're sorry and defend yourself by saying that Jim was constantly talking and craving attention so that in order to get a moment's peace you simply shut him out. But you're not claiming that this made it OK for you to answer him without listening. In fact, if your wife hadn't intervened and something awful had happened, you probably would never have been able to forgive yourself. What you would *not* say is something like the following: unfortunately, my attention filter shut out what he was saying, so there was nothing I could do about it. Psychological selective attention mechanisms do not as such constitute an excuse – though there *are* cases in which a failure to notice will absolve us of blame, or at least provide a mitigating circumstance.[9]

The upshot of this is that an appeal to the psychological mechanisms that may be involved in our failure to be attentive leaves us right where we were at the start: they do not provide a solution to the question how we may be responsible for our lack of attention. This point might also be expressed as follows: whatever the precise form taken by

[8] Cp. Wittgenstein's remark: "Careful attention is no use to me. All it could discover would be what is going on in *me*, *now*." (*PI,* Part II, § 296 in the Schulte-Hacker numbering.)
[9] Consider issues involving negligence in law.

psychological theories of selective attention, their general aim is to explain failures of attention by appealing to some notion of relevance. What is filtered through to our attention, it is claimed, are the things that fulfil some standard of relevance: the standard in question may be physical (the loudness of a bang), semantic (e.g. one's own name) or cognitive (involving the significance of the stimulus), it may be generic or situation-dependent. The point, however, is that in the cases in which we blame ourselves for having been inattentive, the psychological standard of relevance, whatever it was, was not *ours*; it was not one that we ourselves could accept, otherwise we wouldn't have considered ourselves blameworthy. So this second self, which we take to be monitoring our sensory inputs, is not really part of us; its projects, in as far as it has some, are not ours, or not entirely ours.

The question we ask ourselves, when the issue of responsibility arises in a case like the one above, will primarily be whether your inattention was expressive of *you.* Are you a conscientious father, constantly solicitous of your children's need, totally exhausted after a week on the road, or are you generally neglectful of the children, do you never listen to them, leave their upbringing entirely to their mother? Etc. In the former case, we might be more inclined to think your inadvertence was something excusable, in the other case we'd be more inclined to blame you.

John Austin touches on this problem:

> The extent of the supervision we exercise over any act can never be quite unlimited, and usually is expected to fall within fairly definite limits ... though of course we set different limits in different cases. We may plead that we trod on the snail inadvertently: but not on a baby – you ought to look where you are putting your great feet. Of course it *was (really)*, if you like, inadvertence: but that word constitutes a plea, which is not going to be allowed, because of standards.[10]

We do not consider ourselves *totally* at the mercy of our capacity for attention. We do not just passively register the fact that we missed out on something. Our attentiveness is elastic, as it were: we may make an effort to be more attentive in one respect or another (though it does not, I believe, make sense to strive to be more attentive in all respects at once). More important: a normal adult human being lives in constant awareness of the possibility of there being something she is overlooking. Try to imagine what it would be like if we did not. Suppose there were a condition called "inattention-blindness" (somewhat on analogy with

[10] J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses", op. cit., pp. 194 f.

Wittgenstein's notion of aspect-blindness). An inattention-blind person would never consider the possibility that he might be overlooking something, would never reckon with the need for taking things into account other than those he was currently aware of. He would never search his memory for whatever it was he had meant to do, never be on the alert in new situations. He might be quite a danger in traffic for instance (much more so than someone who was simply inattentive), not good company, a lousy chess or soccer player. Whenever we drew his attention to something he had overlooked, he'd be genuinely surprised but never feel guilty or ashamed. His relation to his own actions and intellectual capacities would be radically different from that of a normal person.

Normal people, on the other hand, obviously relate to attentiveness as something they may be held responsible for. Attention and the lack of it may indeed be of great moral significance. (This helps explain the central moral role accorded to attention by a philosopher like Simone Weil, for whom attention to others is, or comes close to being, a form of love.[11])

4. Let's get back to the role of attention in philosophy. In order to do so, I want to re-examine the distinction between centripetal and centrifugal attention. We said that centripetal attention is concerned with matters that are internal to one's present task, whereas centrifugal attention is aimed at matters external to it. The definitions used in the psychology of attention are analogous to this. But what is meant by a matter being internal or external? With regard to some circumstances, the distinction may be quite straightforward. Suppose I'm chopping wood. I must be attentive to the shape of the piece of wood, to the way I place it on the block, to my placing myself at the right distance from the block, to the force and direction of my swing. The limit, though, is not so sharp. What about noticing whether someone is approaching too near to the chopping block, risking being hit by a flying piece of wood? Is that internal or external?

In fact, I would suggest we are inclined to think about the distinction between the internal and the external along two different lines. On the one hand, we think about the distinction in terms of actual behaviour: the things that are internal to a task are those that we expect people to notice, those to which we customarily pay attention, or to which we

[11] On this, see e.g. Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"* (1989), pp. 187 f, 204. – We should note, by the way, that inattention may also be a virtue. Chekhov speaks about good manners not so much being a matter of not spilling sauce on the table-cloth, as of not noticing when someone else does. We could also think of a railway guard who tells us he hasn't noticed the ethnic distribution of those who try to cheat on the fare.

have learnt to pay attention as part of learning a skill or routine – whereas the things people can be expected to ignore or overlook are external. But we might also think about the distinction in evaluative terms: the things that are internal are those to which we *ought* to pay attention in carrying out a task, or things that make for a better performance if we attend to them, whereas things that are external are not relevant. On the latter view, the line between the internal and the external will obviously in many cases be a matter of debate.

The difference between these two ways of thinking about the distinction becomes important when we think of activities such as reading a novel or looking at a painting. In the case of many kinds of text, there may be a routine to follow, so that we will be assured of taking in the things that are crucial to the reading of the text as long as we don't let our minds wander from the task. In the case of some literary works, this is not so: in fact, in some cases we may be sure to miss something crucial if we simply concentrate on the text itself in a conventional way. We may be required to think around the text, maybe take note of what is *not* said in it, or notice something peculiar about the *way* events are narrated, etc. It may even be the case that there are things about a novel that we will hit upon only if we let ourselves be distracted from a highly concentrated reading. (This becomes even more evident, of course, if we think about creative activity, such as *writing* a novel – or painting a picture, etc.)

What, then, is the nature of the attentiveness that is required in doing philosophy? If we think of work done within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the tradition with which I am most familiar, I believe two different philosophical temperaments can be distinguished (though again, the dichotomy is not a sharp one). On the one hand, there is what might be called a centripetal style of doing philosophy. This is characterized by a persistent burrowing into the problems at close range, almost like a boxer going into a clinch. Paradigm examples of this might be the work done during the heroic period of logicism, when Frege, Russell and others were struggling with the task of creating a concept script in which the logical relations between the expressions of our language would be lucidly presented, or the work of G. E. Moore or the early Wittgenstein. This style of thought, of course, has close affinities with legal, mathematical or scientific modes of thought. To be done well, this form of philosophizing requires a huge capacity for sustained concentration. It demands the power to stay entirely within what *on a received view* is internal to the inquiry. Of course, this style has many representatives even today. (Now, one might argue that this form of attention is in some cases illusory. In fact, it might be claimed, it is the practice itself that creates the appearance of there being an independent object of inquiry, as when we

speak of sentences having a given logical structure independently of their actual use in a context of speaking.[12])

I would place the later philosophy of Wittgenstein at the opposite extreme to this. In his view, philosophical bewilderment is to be overcome by changing the focus of our attention. He is explicit about this. Thus, just after the remark quoted at the outset, where he speaks about the decisive move in the conjuring trick, he formulates his famous fly-bottle metaphor:

> What is your aim in philosophy? – To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. (PI § 309.)

The fly-bottle Wittgenstein is talking about was a trap constructed in such a way that the fly could not escape as long as it was striving towards the light. To get out it would have had to turn around and fly in the opposite direction. Similarly, philosophical bewilderment may only be resolved when we turn our attention away from the direction in which we have routinely been taught to look. As for what guides our attention, or lack of it, in doing philosophy, that is a large issue: it is, perhaps, a combination of some deeply ingrained propensities of human thought and various culturally conditioned prejudices (such as the current inclination to analyse human behaviour and experience in neurological or evolutionary terms).

Earlier on, in speaking about the craving for an account for the crystalline purity of logic, Wittgenstein makes the following aside:

> One might say: the inquiry must be turned round, but on the pivot of our real need. (PI § 108.)

In terms of our above discussion, this might be rephrased as follows: we must be ready to revise our view of what is internal and what is external to the inquiry. What is called for, sometimes, is the realization that certain matters that we tended to think of as absolutely crucial to our investigation were really peripheral, and that what we took to be insignificant details was central to the matter at hand.

For an instance of this, we might consider Wittgenstein's discussion of solipsism, the idea that one person's inner life is hidden from others.[13] Suppose we look at

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[12] The need for this qualification was pointed out to me by Reshef Agam-Segal.
[13] In this connection, think about Wittgenstein's remark *PI* § 315:

our friend sitting opposite us and tell ourselves that, while she appears to be focusing on the book she is holding in front of her, we can't really *know* what she is thinking about. Of course we might ask her, and while she might look surprised and say, "I'm thinking about what I'm reading, why do you ask?", even then we might tell ourselves that she might be lying, and that she may in fact be thinking about robbing a bank or trying to calculate π to the twentieth decimal in her head. In short, whatever we may observe of our friend, it appears, is compatible with attributing any thought we can think of to her. It follows that we can't *know* what she's thinking.

The centripetal tendency is to focus in this way on the particular situation, focusing on imaginary sources of error, and thus conclude, inevitably, that nothing we may observe can yield infallible certainty as to the other person's thinking. Now it is this frame of mind we should try to step out of. We may do so by trying to remind ourselves of the kinds of conversation in which someone may say that they know or don't know what someone else is thinking. Thus, watching a chessgame I might say, "Oh, *now* I know what he's thinking!" Reading of a man who drove out onto the frozen bay in his SUV with his little daughter and, after frantic emergency calls, had them both drowned, one might say, "I have no idea of what he can have been thinking!" If someone sees my friend sitting in a pensive pose he might ask me, "Do you know what she's thinking about?", and I might tell him, "She's thinking about how to end the book she's been writing; I know because she told me." In the course of a discussion, I may say, "Oh, now I know what you're thinking, you believe I'm opposed in principle to any raise in taxes", and then go on to dispel his suspicions. Etc.

In each of these cases, rather than claiming the presence in herself of some infallible inner state of awareness or its absence, the speaker is making a conversational move which is meaningful and which may be valid in its context.

It is true that in most cases a knowledge claim must be *withdrawn* if what the speaker claimed to know wasn't so. But this doesn't mean that he was *misusing* the word if it turned out he was wrong, provided he does not let on he had grounds he didn't have. From the fact that you didn't know in case you were wrong, it doesn't follow that you *couldn't* know in case you *could* have been wrong.

These are familiar facts about the way we speak about knowledge. By bethinking ourselves of them, we may come to understand why people may

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I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say "I know what you are thinking", and wrong to say "I know what I am thinking."
(A whole cloud of philosophy condenses into a drop of grammar.)

unproblematically claim to know what others are thinking. In this and similar ways, bringing our actual conversations to mind may help relieve us from the grip of philosophical fixations.[14]

[14] I wish to thank David Cockburn, Merete Mazzarella, as well as the participants at the conference "In Wittgenstein's Footsteps" in Reykjavík, 15 September 2012, for their comments.