

VERY GENERAL FACTS OF NATURE

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In *Philosophical Investigations* 415 Wittgenstein gives what appears to be a general characterization of his method in philosophy:

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes.

The remark has no obvious connection with the surrounding remarks. How is it to be understood? How general is its scope?

In this essay I wish to argue that this remark points to quite an important dimension of Wittgenstein's later thought, a dimension that has largely been bypassed or underplayed (perhaps even, as I shall suggest, by Wittgenstein himself). It concerns the importance, for our way of thinking about language, of recognizing the ways in which the language we speak is contingent on the circumstances of our lives.

Wittgenstein makes explicit reference to this theme on only a few occasions. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, chap. xii, there are two remarks that bring to mind the one just quoted, although here Wittgenstein no longer insists that he is *doing* natural history:

If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in that in nature which is the basis of grammar? – Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between

concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). But: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.

These remarks are somewhat obscure. Wittgenstein is contrasting two approaches to the dependence of our concepts on facts of nature. One approach would be explanatory in the spirit of natural science: it would concern hypotheses about the causes of our having formed the concepts we have. Wittgenstein does not say whether he thinks that such an investigation would be meaningful, although it is a safe bet that he would consider it problematic. What is less clear is the alternative he has in mind. The central notion is apparently the *correspondence* (*Entsprechung*) between concepts and facts of nature. This, the second remark suggests, is something having to do with the *correctness* of concepts, with the idea that what concepts we have is an expression of our having realized or failed to realize certain things. Wittgenstein seems to accept the idea that concepts may or may not be correct, although suggesting that their correctness is not absolute, but relative to the circumstances in which they are used.

The implication, then, seems to be that it is not a matter of explaining but of *judging* concepts. The idea would be that philosophers may ask themselves whether such and such a range of concepts (say, of an alien culture) makes sense, and they may then decide that it does or does not. On this reading, Wittgenstein is reminding the philosopher that in passing judgment on concepts she should be sure to take into account the actual circumstances in which the concepts are being used.

However, I would contend that this reading would be hard to square with Wittgenstein's later thought. There seems to be no room for the idea of philosophers passing judgment on the intelligibility of concepts. Rather, philosophy is a matter of creating a clear picture of the ways language is used in various contexts.

Thus, in *Zettel* 320 Wittgenstein writes:

Why don't I call cookery rules arbitrary, and why am I tempted to call the rules of grammar arbitrary? Because 'cookery' is defined by its end, whereas 'speaking' is not. That is why the use of language is in a certain sense autonomous, as cooking and washing are not. You cook badly if you are guided in your cooking by rules other than the right ones; but if you follow other rules than those of chess you are *playing another game*; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such-and-such ones, that does not mean that you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else.

Here, evidently, Wittgenstein is rejecting the idea of an independent yardstick for checking on the correctness or meaningfulness of a vocabulary and its attendant grammar. The idea of looking for a grounding for the concepts we use in our having come to realize certain things about our environment is misguided. For instance, it is only against the background of a received way of classifying things that there can be an incorrect way of applying those classifications: calling a whale a fish only became an error when a new way of classifying animal species had been adopted. If we attempt to describe the use of a range of concepts and it comes out as unintelligible, that is a failure on the part of the description, not of the speakers.

The suggestion I wish to make is that when Wittgenstein speaks about the correspondence between concepts and facts of nature, about the correctness of concepts¹, or about their intelligibility, what he has in mind is an *internal* relation

¹ The phrase "absolutely the correct ones" in the remark quoted above is a translation of „*schlechtweg die richtigen*“, which would have been better rendered as “*simply* the correct ones” (or perhaps as “correct *period*”, “correct *sans phrase*”). This could hint at a somewhat different thought: Wittgenstein might be taken not to be questioning the idea that the correctness of concepts might be independent of the circumstances in which *concepts are used*, but rather that the notion of concepts being correct (or

between the concepts and the life in which they have a place. The circumstances do not define the standard against which the meaningfulness of the concepts is to be adjudicated, rather it is only by taking note of the circumstances that we can get a clear picture of those concepts: we see them for what they are in the context of life in which they have a use. One way of doing this, as Wittgenstein suggests, may be to imagine that context of life as being radically different from what it is, and trying to see how those differences might bear on the concepts we use.

The idea that we could adjudicate the meaningfulness of a range of concepts by asking whether they correspond to certain facts of nature, it might be said, rests on too simple an idea of what that correspondence might consist in. In fact the relations between the concepts we use and the world in which we live is as varied as life itself, and in order to get a clear view of human concepts we must be open to that variety. We need to get clear about the different things it may *mean* for our concepts to correspond to the facts. What are intelligible ways of speaking about the relation between our words and reality? In this essay I shall try to throw some light on these issues.

There are, I will argue, two sides to the dependence of concepts on general facts of nature in Wittgenstein's account. On the one hand, the use of words may be dependent on facts concerning the surroundings in which words are being used, and on the other hand it may be dependent on facts concerning those who use them. I shall deal with each of these in turn. The dependence of the use of words on facts about our surroundings comes out the most clearly by reflecting on ways in which our use of words might be undermined or become impossible if certain very general facts of nature were radically different from what they are. We might speak about facts pulling the rug from under our practices. I shall discuss this issue in section 1. The dependence of the use of words on those who use them, in turn, is seen most clearly in connection with language learning, and the bulk of this essay is devoted to this theme.

incorrect) might be independent of the circumstances in which *the question is raised*. Still, the second remark as a whole does not seem to be open to this reading. Is Wittgenstein possibly running together two different thoughts here: the problematic idea that the *correctness* of concepts is *situation*-dependent and the more natural notion that the *question* of their correctness is *context*-dependent? I find no obvious answer to this question. – I should point out here that in this section I follow Wittgenstein in using the word “concept” although this is a rather abstract notion and accordingly is bound up with certain problems. It would be preferable to speak about *words*.

In section 2, I shall discuss a received view of Wittgenstein's account of language learning, arguing that this view fails to give an account of the way language comes to have a place in our lives, by tending to reduce language learning to a matter of learning to recognize the objects to which our words refer. In section 3, I argue that what is needed is some account of how language comes to have a place in our lives. In sections 4-5, I reflect on the role of primitive reactions in connection with learning to speak. In the concluding section, I raise the question whether the emphasis on facts of nature makes Wittgenstein a naturalist. I will argue that he was not attempting to formulate a competing theory about concept formation; rather, for him, appeals to real – or imaginary! – facts of nature was part of an attempt to change our ways of thinking about language. For Wittgenstein, the goal of philosophical activity was to rid our thinking of confusion. This means that he saw no use for the hypothetical reasoning of the naturalists, but neither for the *a priori* approach of those who regard philosophy as conceptual analysis.

1. Rug-pulling facts

In *Philosophical Investigations* 142, Wittgenstein writes:

... if things were quite different from what they actually are --- if there were for instance no characteristic expression of pain, of fear, of joy; if rule became exception and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency ---- this would make our normal language-games lose their point. – The procedure of putting a lump of cheese on the balance and fixing the price by the turn of the scale would lose its point if it frequently happened for such lumps to grow or shrink for no obvious reason. ...

In a note inserted in the manuscript, obviously connected with this remark, Wittgenstein writes:

What we have to mention in order to explain the significance, I mean the importance, of a concept, are often extremely general facts of nature: such facts as are hardly ever mentioned because of their great generality.

(We may note that these remarks immediately precede the discussion about learning to continue a number series.)

Precisely how are we to understand these remarks? In fact, the conclusion Wittgenstein draws from these thought-experiments is strangely cautious. What would be undermined if certain very general facts of nature were different, he is suggesting, is the *importance*, the *point*, of certain concepts or language-games. He seems to leave open the possibility that the language games might recede to the background but would still exist. Yet in *many* cases it is not clear what it would mean to distinguish importance from intelligibility. In the case of determining the price of a lump of cheese with the help of a scale, the question of what someone is doing and why he is doing it can hardly be separated. If there were no point to the procedure, there would be no distinction between a correct and an incorrect way of doing it (assuming, of course, that it is not part of some other practice, such as a ritual). So if lumps of cheese were to start growing or shrinking unpredictably and unaccountably, it is not just that we should stop weighing them; there would, in a strict sense, *no longer be such a thing* as weighing a piece of cheese; i.e. whatever someone was doing in placing it on a scale would not be described in those terms. Of course, if the same thing were true of products in general, of people, rocks, heaps of sand, cups of liquid, etc, the concepts of weight and scales would lack application, and thus intelligibility, altogether.

The problem is more obvious in some of the remarks in *On Certainty*. In 513-14, Wittgenstein wrote:

What if something *really unheard-of* happened? - If I, say, saw houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause; if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words; if trees gradually changed into men and men into trees. Now, was I right when I said before all these things happened "I know that that's a house" etc., or simply "That's a house" etc.?

This statement appeared to me fundamental; if it is false, what are “true” or “false” any more?!

Wittgenstein is trying to describe a situation in which our practice of judging would be plunged into chaos. But what precisely is the situation that we are supposed to imagine? Let us assume that it seems to me that something that looks like a cow is laughing or speaking comprehensible words. In this case, it is not clear *what* my response would be. Would I still call it a cow? Would I conclude that the sounds really came from the cow? How would a laughing cow sound? And in what sense would the sounds made by the cow constitute comprehensible words? Am I to imagine the cow parroting words, or actually speaking and responding in ways that make sense from the cow’s point of view (and whatever would that be)? What language would it speak, and in what tone (anguished, bantering, blasé)?

Rather than “what are ‘true’ or ‘false’ any more?”, should Wittgenstein not have asked “what are ‘cows’ and ‘trees’ any more?”? He says that what characterizes our ways of judging is that in such a case all our certainty would vanish (just as in the case of the cheese, the point of the practice would dissolve). Yet it would, it seems, be more to the point to say that what characterizes our ways of judging is that we could not now imagine circumstances that would lead us to describe what was happening as a case of talking cows, etc.²

It appears as if Wittgenstein were suggesting that, in one case the *importance* of the language-game, in the other case its *certainty*, were external to the sense of the game. If this were so, that would indicate that Wittgenstein is still in the grip of a strand of thought that runs through much of Western philosophy: the notion that, however the world may twist and turn, our ideas or concepts or words can never leave us in the lurch: there will always be a correct way of describing what is happening.³ Classical cases in point are Descartes, who saw no problem in using the words “dream” and “awake” in formulating the supposition that we might be dreaming when we take

² For a discussion of this point, see Peter Winch, “Ceasing to Exist”, in his book *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

³ I have discussed similar issues in “The Factual Dependence of the Language Game” (which is reprinted in my collection *The Limits of Experience*, Helsinki: Acta Philosophica Fennica, 1994), pp. 58 ff. However, I would place some of the emphases differently today.

ourselves to be awake, and Hume, who thought we should have no difficulty identifying ordinary objects even if they seemed to behave in what, for them, would be extraordinary ways.

This is connected with the notion that ideas or concepts are in the mind, and that the mind's capacity to picture things to itself can in no way be hampered by whatever changes take place outside it. Also, since the meanings of our words are grounded in our connecting them with ideas, language too is impervious to any contingencies. Our capacity for thought and for putting our thoughts into words is in this sense *a priori*. Our words, as it were, constitute an immutable measuring stick that can be laid against any possible reality – which, as the saying goes, is applicable in “all possible worlds”.⁴

This is reminiscent of ideas put forward by Wittgenstein himself in the *Tractatus*, where he argues that the simplest objects that enter into states of affairs must be indestructible, if we are to be able to make true or false assertions about states of affairs. If they were not, the sense of our sentences would depend on whether or not the constituents that correspond to them happened to exist, and thus, whether one sentence made sense would depend on whether some other sentence was true. That would mean that language is dependent on the *a posteriori*. This, he held, is unthinkable. Our linguistic resources for giving an account of events must be independent of any contingencies.⁵

Are we to suppose that Wittgenstein meant to hold on to this idea in his later work?⁶ Quite the contrary, I would argue: it seems evident that to assume that he does would

⁴ The idea that we could talk about possibilities in such a context-independent way is itself highly problematic.

⁵ Of course, in referring to the *Tractatus* one will have to add the proviso that there is no widespread consensus on whether and to what extent what he says there is to be taken at face value.

⁶ This view has in fact been argued by John Cook in *Wittgenstein's Metaphysics*. Cook calls the type of description given in *On Certainty* 513-14 a description of a “metaphysical nightmare”. He explains Wittgenstein's belief that metaphysical nightmares are intelligible by the claim that he accepted a form of phenomenalist metaphysics, “neutral monism”, according to which objects are constituted by appearances. What we call a cow, for instance, is a collection of cow-type appearances, and hence there is no problem about supposing that a cow might start talking at any moment, just as there is no problem about assuming that a man might turn into a tree or a tree into a man. What occurs at any one moment is logically independent of whatever occurs the next moment. According to Cook, Wittgenstein retained this view, which is closely analogous to that of Hume, basically unchanged throughout his philosophical work.

be to miss one of the main thrusts of that work, even if it is true that he did not always express himself clearly in this regard. In *PI* 80, for instance, he makes it clear that the application of our concepts would be threatened by strange occurrences:

I say, "There is a chair." – What if I go up to it, meaning to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight? ----- "So it wasn't a chair, but some kind of illusion." ----- But in a few moments we are able to see it again and are able to touch it, and so on. ----- "So the chair was there after all and its disappearance was some kind of illusion.." ----- But suppose that after a time it disappears again – or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases – rules saying whether one may use the word "chair" to include this kind of thing? But do we miss them when we use the word "chair"; and are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it?

This remark is part of an extended questioning of the claim (attributed to Frege, *PI* 71) that a concept without sharp boundaries is no concept at all. This discussion goes on from *PI* 68 through *PI* 88, and is evidently of central importance to Wittgenstein. Now, why did Wittgenstein relinquish the ironclad requirement of determinacy of sense that he (apparently) upheld in the *Tractatus*? (Hardly just because he had become more flexible with age!) Clearly, determinacy of sense and the *a priori* character of language went together. On this view, if the character of our concepts were not such that their application in every possible case was unambiguously given, then the question of how they were to be applied, and whether they had any application at all in particular cases, would depend on something external to language,

Whatever the disagreements between readers of Wittgenstein, Cook's interpretation is, of course, at loggerheads with almost everybody else's. It is commonly held that Wittgenstein was critical of metaphysical philosophy in general and of all forms of empiricism in particular. To be sure, that in itself is not an argument against Cook's reading. And Cook is right, of course, in pointing out the type of anomaly that we have noted here; however, his claim that it is due to an underlying metaphysical doctrine seems gratuitous. If he is arguing that Wittgenstein was actively trying to propagate his phenomenalist metaphysics, that raises the question why Wittgenstein was trying so hard to convey the opposite impression. On the other hand, the claim might be that Wittgenstein occasionally expressed himself in conflicted ways because he was still, in part, unconsciously under the influence of the empiricist ontology of which he was openly critical. Such predicaments are not unheard of in philosophy, and the unfinished *On Certainty* seems to be a text in which many of the tensions have still not been resolved. That could, of course, account for the problematic formulations in remarks like 513-14. But Cook seems to argue for the stronger reading.

hence to that extent meaning would be an *a posteriori* matter. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, however, these are no longer seen to be two separate options. The application of what is said does not depend on the form of words itself, but is a matter of the part they play in a context of human interaction. The fact that what would fit the instruction in one situation would not fit it in another, and that in a third situation it is not clear what would fit it, does not rob the words of their sense. Thus, “Stand roughly here” may be a perfectly good instruction, given that speaker and listener share an understanding of the activity going on, whether it is getting ready for a photo session or getting into position for a softball game. (Cp. *PI* 88.) There is no line, given in advance, between the contribution made by utterance and that made by the context to our understanding of the words.

The notion that the meaning of what someone says must uniquely be determined by the form of the sentence uttered seems plausible when questions of meaning and understanding are raised in isolation from various contexts of human intercourse.⁷ Thus, Bernard Harrison speaks of “this feeling, that the signs of a language dictate the interpretation which a speaker of the language places upon them” as central to what it means to be a speaker: “for him [the signs] bear their meaning and their grammatical structure upon their face.” He refers to the ability of linguistic signs to evoke this feeling as “the autonomy of language”.⁸ I should be inclined to argue, on the contrary, that what Harrison is referring to is a psychological fact about our attitude towards words and sentences; a psychological fact that actually gives a misleading picture of how we are related to language in using it, since it ignores the way in which the

⁷ It is true that Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, argues that we need to attend to the use of a sign (e.g. of a given sequence of words) in order to recognize the *symbol* being expressed in it (3.326). But it would be a mistake to read into this an anticipation of his later thoughts about the way the sense of our words is dependent on their role in a context of human interaction. Rather, the point he seems to be making here is that the same sequence of words can sometimes express several different thoughts (since it may admit of different syntactical parsings or contain homonymous words). (Cp. 3.321-3.323.) In such a case, we need to establish which thought is being expressed before we can recognize the syntax of the sentence; only then can we tell how the sentence is to be compared with reality in order to determine whether it is true or false. Once we have removed this formal ambiguity, on the other hand, the sense of the sentence is given independently of context.

Similarly, it would appear that when Wittgenstein says in 3.328 that if a sign is useless it is meaningless, he is not speaking about the point of using the sign; rather for a sign to be useless seems to mean that it has no bearing on the truth-grounds of the sentence in which it occurs. Thus – to borrow an example of Michael Dummett’s – the sentences “She was poor but she was honest” and “She was poor and she was honest” would have the same meaning since they have the same truth-value; and yet, the *point* being made by the choice of conjunction is clearly different. (On the other hand, 6.211 seems to be pointing towards a broader conception of use.)

⁸ Bernard Harrison, *The Philosophy of Language* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 5.

context influences my reading of a sign whether or not I actively think about it. We may be culturally predisposed to regard language from the perspective Harrison advances by the fact that much of our thought about language is concerned with the situation of learning a second language, as well as with translating from one language to another; both of these are activities which primarily take the form of relating words and sentences to other words and sentences. These contexts incline us to think about discussions about meaning along the lines of grammarbook exercises. It is from such a perspective that the idea that we should be able, independently of context, to draw a line between what is internal to language and what is external to it arises.

Of course, even if it is admitted that the idea of such a line is illusory, and that the meaning of what someone is saying is not determined solely by the words she uses, it does not follow that in a particular instance we may not want to distinguish *what* a person said from the *point* of his saying it; what needs to be recognized is simply that the way to make that distinction depends on the details of the particular case and the purpose for which the distinction is being made.

I would contend that something analogous is true of Wittgenstein's discussion in *On Certainty*. One of the central aims of that discussion is to draw into question the possibility of separating, once and for all (what, in that text, he calls) logic from the actual use of words in making judgments about various states of affairs. In any particular inquiry, there will be matters that could not intelligibly be asserted, but the line between what can and what cannot be asserted (hence, between what does and what does not belong to logic) is shifting and depends on the context.

A classical expression of the thought that our ideas or concepts are impervious to whatever happens in the external world is the traditional view of mathematics. Mathematical knowledge is held to be beyond doubt, since it concerns itself exclusively with what are considered to be contents of our minds (or with timeless entities with which our minds are in direct, suprasensible contact). In the *Philosophical Investigations* (Part II, p. 226), however, Wittgenstein points out that even our ability to carry out mathematical operations is, as it were, dependent on the contingent facts of nature:

... am I trying to say some such thing as that the certainty of mathematics is based on the reliability of pen and paper? *No*. (That would be a vicious circle.) – I have not said *why* mathematicians do not quarrel, but only *that* they do not.

It is no doubt true that you could not calculate with certain sorts of paper and ink, if, that is, they were subject to certain queer changes – but still the fact that they changed could in turn only be got from memory and comparison with other means of calculation. And how are these tested in their turn?

What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*. (p. 226.)

Here, compare Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, I-63 (p. 61):

I have read a proof – and now I am convinced. – What if I straightway forgot this conviction?

For it is a peculiar procedure: I *go through* the proof and then accept its result. – I mean: this is simply what we *do*. This is use and custom among us, or a fact of our natural history.

The suggestion seems to be that we could imagine a culture which did not have anything reminiscent of mathematics simply because they did not trust their memory in these matters – or, in the other case, ink and paper – the way we do (whether this was just an accidental cultural variation or a matter of biology, say, makes no difference). Whether we are right in trusting our memory, or whether they are wrong in not trusting theirs, is not the issue. The point is that what we consider to be “the certainty of mathematics” is not something laid down in the nature of mathematical concepts themselves, but is ultimately an expression of the place calculations have in our lives. In this way, what we know as “mathematics” is also dependent on very general facts of nature.

2. Language learning: the simple story

One common way of reading Wittgenstein's remarks about the acquisition of concepts is succinctly described by Peter Strawson as follows:

Consider the case of somebody learning the meaning of a particular common word or, simply, coming to know what the word means. The followers of Wittgenstein are apt to speak of a preliminary period of *training* in the use ... of the word... The point is that after a time the learner comes to find it *utterly natural* to make a certain application of the expression; he comes to apply it in a certain way *as a matter of course*... Here we may see one of the suspect pictures being, as it were, undermined...: viz. the picture of the learner's application being governed by, or determined by, his acquired acquaintance with the abstract thing, its sense or *meaning*...⁹

Further along Strawson writes:

The great point, on this view of the matter, is that there is, philosophically speaking, nothing at all behind this, and no need for anything beyond or behind it all to constitute a philosophical explanation of it. This is not to say that there are not biological and anthropological and cultural-historical explanations of how speech-communities agreeing in common linguistic practices came about. Such explanations there may well be. But as far as the philosophical problem is concerned, the suggestion is that we can just rest with, or take as primitive, the great natural fact that we *do* form speech-communities...; that we have, if you will, a natural disposition to develop the dispositions which qualify us for ... the description ... "members of a speech-community, agreeing in a common linguistic practice".¹⁰

We may note that "facts of nature" are only given a minimal role here. The only relevant fact of nature is that we *are* beings who are disposed to form speech-communities. Of course, Strawson admits, biological, anthropological and historical circumstances play a role, presumably affecting what particular conceptual schemes

⁹ P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 75 f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77 f.

are actually developed, what similarities are accorded importance, etc. However, we can “divide through” with them: these are just contingent details having no bearing on the *philosophical* problem, which, for Strawson, as I read him, is this: what kinds of entities do we need to invoke in order to account for the fact that speakers are able to acquire concepts?¹¹

On Strawson’s account, then, the only philosophically relevant variation would be between beings who are by nature disposed to form language-communities and beings who are not. However, this does not touch on the question how, given that a community does have concepts, imagining *different* facts of nature might render wholly different concepts intelligible. This seems to me to be connected with another point in Strawson’s argument: for him, the problem of concept acquisition seems, roughly, to be the problem of *learning to classify things correctly*¹². The learner encounters a set of examples of the application of some class, say, “red” or “apple”, and the question is how she learns to go on in the right way. Wittgenstein remarks that there is nothing about the particular red things or the particular apples that will determine any given way of going on as the correct one, or that will infallibly lead her to go on in some specific way; we cannot, for instance, explain the success of our instruction by saying that the learner understood that the relevant property was that of being red or being an apple, since that would presuppose that she already had command of the classes that we were trying to convey to her (and, indeed, of what it means to classify things in the first place).

More generally, there is no *ground* for our going on in one specific way rather than another, we simply do. The fact that we may be biologically disposed to respond in one way rather than another, while doubtless true in many cases, of course has no bearing on the present issue. In fact, the notion that there is only one way of going on, I would suggest, comes from our mixing together two different ways of describing the

¹¹ Strawson goes on to argue, tentatively at least (pp. 84 f), that concept acquisition cannot be accounted for without invoking the notion of universals, which he takes Wittgenstein to be denying; but this need not concern us here; I quote him for his elegant way of presenting a common way of reading Wittgenstein. We find similar readings, for instance, in Eike von Savigny, “Common Behaviour of Many a Kind”, in R. L. Arrington & H.-J. Glock (eds.), *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: Text and Context* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 109; as well as in David Bloor, “The Question of Linguistic Idealism Revisited”, in H. Sluga & D. G. Stern (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹² Strawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 78 f, 84.

learning process: from confusing what the learner ends up knowing (the criteria of the mastery in question) with the explanation of how she manages to pick it up. The relevant concepts or formulae will be part of the former description but not (in many cases) of the latter.¹³ If we fail to keep these apart, we end up with an account in which that which we are trying to explain is invoked in the explanation itself. (This may be what lies behind Strawson's felt need for universals.)

Undeniably, the discussion of how we acquire classifications – what we might call the recognition problem – has an important place in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is closely connected with some of the central discussions of the early parts of the book. One point (though not the only point) made through the discussion about continuing a series of numbers (*Philosophical Investigations* 143-155) is that even if we find it natural to apply the examples in one particular way, we could have imagined people applying them in some other way, or in a number of different ways (the suggestion that they might do that is not self-contradictory).

However, from large parts of the *Philosophical Investigations* one may get the impression that the recognition problem is *the* central issue where language-learning is concerned. Sharing a language, it seems to be suggested, is simply applying words in the same way, hence by getting clear about the recognition problem, we become clear about what it means to speak a language. *PI* 242 is often quoted as an expression of this view: "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound¹⁴) in judgments." However, I would argue this account of language learning does not capture the whole story about the contingency of our concepts on the nature of speakers, and that what is left out is as important as what is included.

¹³ It is true that, once we have learnt to speak we often learn things simply by reading or hearing a set of verbal instructions, and in these cases the process of learning and the criteria of mastery may seem to mirror one another. Thus, I may learn the highway code or French grammar by reading a set of rules; this set of rules at the same time provides the criteria of my having mastered the highway code or French grammar. The prevalence of this type of instruction may be what tempts us to ignore the distinction between process and mastery. However, the ability to apply a set of verbal instructions is of course dependent on our already having mastered a number of more fundamental skills; the actual process of learning, accordingly, is much more complex than it seems on the surface.

¹⁴ This may appear queer to us if we take it to mean that, whenever people fail to agree on some judgment, that would show that they meant different things. That, of course, would mean that there could be no such thing as disagreement. Wittgenstein's point, rather, is that for there even to be disagreement, there must be some degree of overlap between our judgments.

3. Place in life

One of the commentators who seem to consider the recognition problem central is Marie McGinn. She writes:

Our concept of language describes ... a particular form of life, namely, one that displays the characteristic regularities or patterns that constitute the following of rules. Central to the idea of the form of life that our concept of language picks out is that there exists a pattern or structure in the activity of using words which fixes what counts as applying the words of the language correctly or incorrectly... The agreement or harmony that Wittgenstein suggests is essential to our concept of language is the agreement that constitutes the characteristic form of life that speaking a language ... consists in.¹⁵

Let us ask, however: what is *the nature of the agreement* invoked by Marie McGinn in the above passage? Evidently, to say that two persons agree in what they do or say is not simply to say that they do the same thing or utter the same sounds in the same circumstances. For one thing, such a description is empty unless one can assume some relevant point of view from which their actions or vocalizations (as well as the circumstances) are to be compared; the relevant basis of comparison, however, would obviously be one that is internal to the language in question. This does not necessarily render McGinn's description otiose. She only goes wrong if she means to be invoking a relation between two distinct entities; as if the language were dependent on there being a harmony in reactions that could be identified independently of the language in question. Rather, "agreement" and "language" should be understood as two sides of the same coin. Or, differently put, the point to be made is that in *calling* something a language, we imply that *there is room for the use of notions* like "agreement",

¹⁵ Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 110.

“correct” and “incorrect”, etc: when I regard something as a language I assume that notions like these enter into the interactions between its speakers.¹⁶

Furthermore, even setting aside the question of the basis of comparison, the relevant sense of agreement will not simply be a matter of people saying or doing the same thing in the same circumstances. To say that two individuals agree in something is to attribute a *sense* to what they are saying or doing. Actually, the fact that you and I agree in what we call red may show itself in you and I doing *different* things: for instance, in *your fetching* the book I have in mind when *I ask* you to bring me the red book.¹⁷

All the same, among the different ways of using language, colour language is a good instance of one in which recognition is central. In many other cases, however, agreement is not even *primarily* a matter of recognition. This is true, say, of a number of psychological expressions. Consider, for instance, what it means to agree on the use of the word “intention”. Our agreement may show itself in the measures I undertake after you tell me of your intentions. Teaching a child to express her intentions involves getting her to understand what it means to follow through on the intentions one declares. There is no particular state or process we teach her to recognize: for instance, learning to express one’s intentions is a different sort of thing than learning to understand someone else’s intentions.

¹⁶ Curiously, Wittgenstein seems to be overlooking this point in *PI* 207, in which he imagines people who speak what sounds like an articulate language, but where, as he says, there is no regular connection between the sounds they make and their actions. He concludes that the lack of regularity prevents our calling this a language. In an apparent fit of absent-mindedness he seems to assume that the notion of regularity can be given content independently of the activities of the speakers. Curiously, he himself notes this point in *PI* 206, where he observes that it is “the common behaviour of mankind” – i.e. the activities we share with the speakers – that provides “the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language”. It is only through the way the speakers make sense to *us* that we can begin to see how they make sense to one another. Eike von Savigny, however, argues in the opposite direction, claiming that when Wittgenstein speaks of „[d]ie gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise”, he is simply referring to behaviour *shared by the members of the alien community* (von Savigny, op. cit.). Now, it seems to me that, apart from the difficulties involved in this position, his reading of Wittgenstein’s words is rather strained. It is true that it would render *PI* 206 more consistent with *PI* 207. But I find it more plausible to suppose that Wittgenstein is not to be taken at his words in *PI* 207. In fact (as was pointed out to me by Hugo Strandberg), the opening of *PI* 208 seems to suggest as much. There he implies that the words “order” and “rule” are *not* to be defined by means of “regularity”, but that they are to be conveyed “by *examples* and by *practice*”.

¹⁷ For a thoughtful discussion of this issue, see Alberto Emiliani, “Agreement in Our Actions”, forthcoming.

In brief, the type of agreement relevant to language is something that will only show itself in the weave of life; in the ways in which we manage to make ourselves understood to one another. In the story about language learning as the acquiring of uniform reactions there is no room for what it means to become a speaker; to make language one's own. If language learners were simply drilled into uttering the same words in the same circumstances, *they would not learn what it means to have something to say*.¹⁸

This narrowness of perspective actually characterizes Wittgenstein's own treatment of language learning in the opening part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. For instance, the point of the example of the shopkeeper in *PI* 1 picking out five red apples is obviously to show the difference in procedure between applying colour words, natural kind terms and numbers (as it were, the different rituals involved); the concern here is limited to the problem of getting the result right, and does not touch on the question of the different things that getting it right might mean or how getting it right might matter in different contexts. The same is true, for instance, about the builders' game, where it is all about bringing the right type of building block. (I am not suggesting that the broader perspective is excluded in the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, rather it is simply ignored.)

In this part of the *Philosophical Investigations* there is, we might say, a strong emphasis on what we do with *words*, on the differences between the way different types of words are applied, rather than on what we do with the sentences in which the words occur, or how the sentences enter into various forms of human interaction. The emphasis on words, I want to suggest, is closely linked to the emphasis on the recognition problem. This goes with a tendency to attend to general features of language use, rather than to the particular situations in which words are spoken. Wittgenstein hardly raises issues such as why we say things to people, or the bearing

¹⁸ This point is forcefully argued by Rush Rhees in "Can there be a Private Language?" (reprinted in Rhees, *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970). To my mind this essay, which originally appeared in 1954, has hardly been superseded in the discussion of the private language question. See also, along the same lines, "Wittgenstein's Builders" in the same collection, where Rhees points out some of the limitations of the language game metaphor in the *Philosophical Investigations* – although there are aspects of that essay that I would not go along with. For more on Rhees's thinking about language, see Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (ed. D. Z. Phillips, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the context of speaking has on how utterances will be taken. This is true, for instance, when he compares words to the tools in a tool-box (*PI* 11) or to the handles in the cabin of a locomotive (*PI* 12). The oft-quoted *PI* 43 is also concerned with defining the meanings of words in terms of use. (To be sure, sentences are discussed in *PI* 23 and 27, but even here, Wittgenstein is focusing on different *types* of sentence rather than on particular occasions of *speaking*. An exception, perhaps, is found in *PI* 19-20, where he discusses the relation between a single word and a one-word sentence.) This is, of course, in keeping with the use of the language game metaphor, which emphasizes set forms of linguistic interaction rather than particular instances of language use.

What I have here described as a narrow perspective on language learning is primarily characteristic of the introductory part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, roughly *PI* 1-88 (or perhaps 1-108). The perspective is widened in the later parts of the work. Thus, the discussion of rule-following (*PI* 185-242) partly moves beyond the recognition problem: on the one hand, Wittgenstein argues, there are no particular features we can point to in order to distinguish following a rule from proceeding without a rule; on the other hand, saying “Now I can go on!” is not expressive of my recognizing some inner state. Further on, in the discussion about privacy, consciousness, and intentionality, as well as various psychological concepts, the asymmetry between first person and third person utterances is a central theme (Part I, 244-693; large parts of Part II). This asymmetry can hardly be squared with a view that takes language learning to revolve around the recognition problem. In fact, the private language discussion seems precisely to be aimed at showing how focusing on recognition may lead us astray.

A large part of this discussion, however, is negative: Wittgenstein is pointing to flaws in various received views of what it means to become a speaker, but he is not providing many suggestions as to how to get around the difficulties. What might be wished for, of course, is not some theory of language learning, simply a coherent way of speaking about what it is to become a speaker. Readers of Wittgenstein have often taken him to be gesturing towards some kind of *tabula rasa* behaviourist account, but that is hardly more coherent than some of the more traditional views. In neither case is there room for the notion of learning to speak as connected with having something to

say. There are hints, all the same, of a more positive account, a few of them in the *Philosophical Investigations*, more extensive in some of the unpublished writings. This is the theme that has come to be discussed under the heading “primitive reactions”. This discussion brings into focus an important aspect of what Wittgenstein might have meant by the significance of very general facts of nature.

4. Causality and the solitary responder

The theme of primitive or unmediated reactions is brought up by Wittgenstein, primarily, in two different connections: on the one hand, in connection with learning the use of psychological expressions (particularly pain language), and on the other hand, in connection with acquiring an understanding of causality. These two discussions, as I shall try to show, point us in different directions. Let me begin with the latter.

PI 415, which was quoted in the introduction, originates in a manuscript from 1937. There it precedes an extended discussion of the concept of cause. None of these remarks on causality are included in the *Philosophical Investigations*; they have since been published, however, under the title “Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness”¹⁹. Of course, one can only speculate on why they were left out of the *Philosophical Investigations*; it is noteworthy that the concept of cause is hardly touched upon in that work. One possible reason for not including them may have been that Wittgenstein thought they gave a misleading emphasis to the discussion, as I shall try to show.

In the manuscript section on cause and effect, Wittgenstein is (evidently) discussing a suggestion made by Bertrand Russell, according to which our understanding of causality must be grounded in an ability to “see” something like causal connections.²⁰ As he often did, Wittgenstein was trying to fasten onto what might be of value in that suggestion without accepting it wholesale. In this connection, he drew attention to the importance of our unmediated reactions:

¹⁹ Reprinted in James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 370-405.

²⁰ On this, see the editors’ comments, pp. 370 f, n.

We react to the cause.

Calling something “the cause” is like pointing and saying: “*He’s to blame!*”

We instinctively get rid of the cause if we don’t want the effect. We instinctively look from what has been hit to what has hit it. (I am assuming that we do this.) (*CE*, p. 373.)

The importance of these kinds of reaction, he suggested, does not lie in their supplying us with an infallible guide to causal knowledge. Rather, they form the context in which the issue of causality comes to have meaning. Actually, Wittgenstein speaks of two kinds of reactions: immediately responding to the cause and looking for the cause.

Don’t we recognize immediately that the pain is produced by the blow we have received? Isn’t this the cause and can there be any doubt about it? – But isn’t it quite possible to suppose that in certain cases we are deceived about this? And later recognize the deception? It seems as though something hits us and at the same time we feel a pain. ---

Certainly there is in such cases a genuine experience which can be called “experience of the cause”. But not because it infallibly shows us the cause; rather because *one* root of the cause-effect language-game is to be found here, in our looking out for a cause. (*Ibid.*)²¹

There is a reaction which can be called “reacting to the cause”. – We also speak of “tracing” the cause; a simple case would be, say, following a string to see who is pulling at it. If I then find him – how do I know that he, his pulling, is the cause of the string’s moving? Do I establish this by a series of experiments? (*CE* p. 387.)

²¹ In fact, the example rather seems to fit what could be called the other root of the language-game: immediately responding to the cause.

Wittgenstein's thinking here seems to be a response to the Humean (or perhaps we should say "quasi-Humean"²²) idea that the concept of a cause must originate in the observation of recurrent temporal links between similar types of events. We start by collecting samples, at random as it were, and then study them in order to detect a pattern. What is assumed here is that if something is to be an experience of causal interaction, it must be an experience that we *can only have* when we are witnessing a genuine case of it, and so if it is always possible to be mistaken in the individual case, there can be no such thing as "experiencing a cause".²³

Wittgenstein's aim is to reverse this view of the matter. The idea of a causal connection does not enter only because we detect a similarity between a sufficient number of observations; rather we, more or less directly, react *to* something as a cause (as in removing the pebble from our shoe) or react *by* looking for the cause (trying to find the sharp point in our shoe); doubt, on the other hand, is a later reaction. The point he is making is not epistemological (even if it could be said to aim at removing the epistemological penumbra surrounding empiricist thought about causality), rather he is describing the context of human activity in which the notion of a causal connection has a place. He writes,

The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms grow.

Language – I want to say – is a refinement. "In the beginning was the deed". (CE p. 395.)²⁴

The outlook he is combatting is articulated as follows:

--- Reason – I feel like saying – presents itself to us as the gauge *par excellence* against which everything that we do, all our language games, measure and judge themselves. – We may say: we are so exclusively preoccupied by contemplating a yardstick that we can't allow our gaze to *rest* on certain phenomena or patterns. We are used, as it were, to "dismissing"

²² It is not inconceivable that Hume himself would have felt at home with Wittgenstein's suggestion.

²³ Cp. *ibid.*, p. 429.

²⁴ The phrase in quotes is a quotation from Goethe's *Faust*.

these as irrational, as corresponding to a low state of intelligence, etc. The yardstick rivets our attention and keeps distancing us from these phenomena, as it were making us look beyond. --- (CE p. 389.)

The yardstick here is the idea that the notion of a cause can only be constructed on the basis of repeated observations and inductive argument, making us overlook the patterns of reaction that characterize our actual dealings with physical objects.²⁵

This theme is also broached in *On Certainty*:

I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination. (OC 475.)

Reasoning and doubt, say, about causality can only enter where there is already a language game in working order in which causal expressions have a use. Only then is there something for the reasoning and the doubting to be *about*.²⁶

5. Pain and the expressive responder

Here, then, Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting, are some of the ways the concept of a cause could make its entry into the language. It would appear, however, that an important part is missing from this story. In this account there is no speaker or listener, only a solitary individual responding to events. So far, there has been no indication of where communication about causes might enter. What connection is there between removing the pebble from one's shoe on the one hand, and discussing causes, asking about them, pointing to them on the other hand? In fact, the protagonist in this story has a close affinity with the solitary perceiver envisaged by Descartes or

²⁵ Wittgenstein's thinking here has parallels to that of Simone Weil, who wrote: "The elementary perception of nature is a sort of dance; this dance is the source of our perceiving." On this, see, Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 4. The quotation is from p. 41.

²⁶ Elizabeth Wolgast, in "Primitive Reactions", *Philosophical Investigations* 17 (1994), 587-603, seems to miss this point. As she reads Wittgenstein, his point was that concepts do not *need* to be based on reasoning; on my reading, what Wittgenstein is arguing, rather, is that the suggestion that concepts might derive from reasoning is not intelligible.

the empiricists, the main difference being that while they were passive collectors of impressions, the solitary individual in “Cause and Effect” is active (so perhaps we should rather think of him as a Kantian solitary). Wittgenstein, it seems, is trying to make a shortcut from the reactions of the individual to the language game of cause and effect. One might think that the reason this discussion was not included in the *Philosophical Investigations* was that Wittgenstein had come to realize that something was missing from it.

The story about gradually acquiring verbal expressions of pain is different from this, however. In one of the most frequently quoted passages in the *Philosophical Investigations* (sec 244), Wittgenstein writes, pondering how human beings learn the meaning of the names of sensations:

--- Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child hurts himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

The role given to natural pain reactions is entirely different from that of reactions to the cause in the other text. For one thing, many of our pain reactions are themselves expressive in nature. Furthermore, their role in the story depends on the ways others respond to them. In fact, elsewhere Wittgenstein speaks about our responding to other people’s expressions of pain as itself a form of primitive reaction²⁷. So what we get here, and what is missing from the remarks about causality, is the story of a natural pattern of interactions gradually evolving into a verbal interchange. Of course, this story is not intended as a factual account, nor even as a speculative hypothesis about some process that may or may not have taken place during some specific period of time (whether in the development of the individual speaker or in the evolution of language). Rather, it is an account of what might be termed a logical order: an indication of the circumstances in which we would be prepared to say that someone

²⁷ Zettel 540, 545.

has learnt verbal expressions of pain. What is central to such a story are not the reactions considered in themselves, but the interactivity between individuals.

In the story about reacting to the cause, on the other hand, there are logical gaps. Recognizing this does not mean denying that reacting to the cause is important in coming to have a concept of causality, it simply means that the story is incomplete. Some commentators on Wittgenstein, however, have in fact been misled by the individualist emphasis of “Cause and Effect”. A case in point is Norman Malcolm’s essay “Wittgenstein: The Relation of Language to Instinctive Behavior”²⁸. The problem of accounts such as his is that it is made out as if the concept in question (say, that of a cause) could somehow emerge directly from the primitive reaction: as if my reacting to the cause in itself supplied me with an understanding of causality, rather than a pattern of reactions and interactions providing the room in which we can imagine talk about causality developing.²⁹ This is how Hugh Knott, providing a lucid overview of the debate, summarizes the point at issue:

It is not as the prototype of the *concept* of pain that Winch speaks of crying. Rather he describes a sense in which we might speak of the crying as the prototype of the linguistic *expression* of pain. Mastery of pain language does mean having the concept of pain, but that which is thought of as being *refined* or *extended* is the expression of pain from a non-linguistic into a linguistic form.³⁰

²⁸ *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1982), 3-22. Reprinted in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays 1978-1989*, ed. by Georg Henrik von Wright (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995). On a similar note, see his “Kripke on Heat and Sensations of Heat”, *Philosophical Investigations* 3 (1980), 12-20, reprinted in *Wittgensteinian Themes*. For discussions of Malcolm on primitive reactions, see Peter Winch, “Discussion of Malcolm’s Essay”, in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 121-124; Elizabeth Wolgast, op.cit.; Rush Rhees, “Language as Emerging from Instinctive Behaviour”, *Philosophical Investigations* 20 (1997), 1-14; especially important are Peter Winch, Critical Notice of Malcolm, *Wittgensteinian Themes* (same volume), 51-64 and Hugh Knott, “Before Language and After”, *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998), 44-54. Also on this theme, see David Cockburn, *Other Human Beings* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 43 ff, and Lars Hertzberg, “Primitive Reactions – Logic or Anthropology?”, in Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr and Howard K. Wettstein (eds.), *The Wittgenstein Legacy* (Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume XVII; Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 24-39.

²⁹ This seems to be another instance of confusing *what* is being learnt with the process *through which* it is learnt.

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 50. The reference is to Winch’s critical notice of Malcolm.

This is one context in which the term “concept” is likely to contribute to the obscurity of the issue (cp. note 1 above). It tempts us to think that we are trying to explain the formation of concepts in the minds of individual speakers, rather than the development of a use of words in human interchange.

There seem, then, to be two currents in Wittgenstein’s account of language learning that never fully meet – except in a few points, such as the remark about learning pain language. On the one hand, there is the account in the early parts of the *Philosophical Investigations*, emphasizing the ways in which a speaker’s responses are brought into agreement with that of the community, but leaving out of the account what it means for her to make language her own; on the other hand, there are the remarks in “Cause and Effect”, bringing the natural responses of the individual into focus, but leaving out the ways in which those responses come to play a part in a shared language.

6. Was Wittgenstein, then, some kind of naturalist?

As we have seen, attention to the role of general facts of nature is distinctive of Wittgenstein’s (post-*Tractatus*) way of doing philosophy. On the one hand, he pointed to the way our use of concepts is contingent on the way things work in practice. On the other hand, he emphasized the ways in which our use of language is logically tied up with the lives we actually live. This, I would argue, sets him apart from the mainstream of analytic philosophy in the 20th century.

Does this make him a naturalist? The term “naturalism” has many meanings in philosophy; in contemporary debate, a naturalist has mostly come to mean someone who holds, roughly, that there is no clearcut divide between the methods of philosophy and those of empirical science. While philosophy has predominantly been thought of as a form of *a priori* reflection on concepts, naturalists will argue that it is quite legitimate, and maybe even necessary, to test the validity of such reflections against empirical data. This line of thought seems mainly to have been inspired by W. V. O. Quine’s criticism of the analytic-synthetic distinction in his classical essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”; to some degree also by Saul Kripke’s book *Naming*

and Necessity, as well as by Hilary Putnam's essay "Meaning and Reference"³¹.

While Kripke and Putnam were trying to show that certain matters external to my awareness have a bearing on the meanings of my words, Quine claimed that there can be no definitive way of distinguishing between matters of meaning on the one hand, and the contingent circumstances of a particular speech situation (specifically the speaker's beliefs) on the other hand.

A naturalist approach might, in principle, take two different directions: it could involve the study of facts concerning people who use a certain word (or respond to its use), or facts concerning the objects being referred to by people using the word. In practice, the latter course has almost invariably been chosen. For one thing, this means that the focus of the naturalist approach is diametrically opposed to that of Wittgenstein. As Winch puts it "one of Wittgenstein's most characteristic argumentative moves [is] a shift of attention away from the object to which a problematic concept is applied towards the person applying the concept"³².

However, the difference between Wittgenstein and the naturalists is even more radical. For Wittgenstein, philosophy is concerned with problems arising out of our lack of clarity about what we mean. From that perspective (as is clearly spelled out in *PI* 109), the suggestion that empirical data could somehow bear on a philosophical problem, whether by supporting or being in competition with the way in which we are inclined to view the issue, is misguided. If I consider the use of words like "seeing", or "consciousness", or "law of nature" bewildering, then part of what I find bewildering is precisely what bearing empirical data could have on the use of those words. Thus, if I am trying to get clear about a deep ambiguity in the way neurologists talk about consciousness, then reading about neurological "findings" about consciousness in which that ambiguity remains undetected will do nothing to resolve the issue. (Of course, it would be just as irrelevant to observe what happens in

³¹ For Quine's essay, see W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); it originally appeared in *The Philosophical Review* 1951. Putnam's essay originally appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy* 1973; it has been reprinted in A. P. Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd ed.; New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Kripke's text originally appeared in 1972, and was published as a book in 1980 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell). The proponents of naturalist views are numerous. For an explicit formulation of a naturalist standpoint in the study of emotions, see Paul E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³² Winch, Critical notice of Malcolm, p. 60.

someone's brain when he *hears* or *utters* the word "consciousness".) Putting the matter in simple terms, for Wittgenstein philosophy is concerned with clarification whereas empirical science is concerned with truth; hence they can neither be in competition with, nor supplement, one another. This is not to deny, of course, that empirical scientists will continually need to address issues requiring clarification in getting on with their work. However, if they confuse matters that, from the point of view of their inquiry, are in need of clarification, with questions that need to be settled experimentally, the research they do will be muddled.

All the same, as I have been suggesting throughout this essay, Wittgenstein does not sit very quite comfortably in the mainstream tradition of *a priori* conceptual analysis. One characteristic method of that tradition is, on the one hand, to propose general definitions of philosophically important concepts, and on the other hand, to test their tenability, by considering whether one can construct counter-examples to them. As a paradigmatic case of arguments of the latter kind we might mention Edmund Gettier's attempt to show, by means of counter-examples, that the common definition of knowledge as justified true belief is not tenable, there being cases in which a belief is justified and true but would not count as knowledge.³³ (Analogous examples are plentiful.) The unspoken assumption underlying many discussions of this type is that the correct answer to the question of what will count, say, as knowledge is given once and for all. It can, it is assumed, be answered in what might be called laboratory conditions, by a direct appeal to our "linguistic intuitions", without taking into consideration *the way in which the question might arise in particular cases*.

However, once it is acknowledged that in order to understand what someone is saying I should have to understand her purpose in speaking and how it relates to the particular occasion, it becomes clear that questions such as "is knowledge really justified true belief?" cannot be raised on a general level. There is no question about what is to be called knowledge that can usefully be separated from the points people are making in using the word "know" on particular occasions; on those occasions, on

³³ Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121-3. For an incisive discussion of the presuppositions of Gettier's argument, see Don S. Levi, "The Gettier Problem and the Parable of the Ten Coins", *Philosophy* 70 (1995), 5-25; reprinted in Don S. Levi, *In Defense of Informal Logic* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

the other hand, the question whether something is to be called knowledge usually does not give rise to philosophical problems.³⁴

Perhaps it will be thought that in doing philosophy we are forced to choose between the apriorism of someone like Gettier and the aposteriorism of the followers of Quine. Both of these, however, are programmes for the solving of general problems of meaning. When meaning is no longer seen to pose a problem on a general level, on the other hand, the distinction between apriorism and aposteriorism dissolves. Instead Wittgenstein proposes that we should attend to particular cases, in the hope that the philosophical problem will lose its hold on us. If the reading put forward here is correct, then, we may conclude that attending to very general facts of nature, as Wittgenstein suggests, will actually teach us to focus on the particularity of what is taking place when people speak to one another.³⁵

³⁴ As has been shown by Avner Baz, even contextualists like Charles Travis, who emphasize the degree to which meanings of sentences are “occasion sensitive”, are still inclined to approach questions of meaning in an *a priori* fashion, simply factoring in contextual circumstances into their general account of meaning, rather than attending to the variety of things speakers do with words on particular occasions. See Baz, “The Reaches of Words”, forthcoming in the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*.

³⁵ I wish to thank Kim-Erik Berts, Alberto Emiliani and Marie McGinn for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay. Particular thanks are due to David Cockburn, Hugo Strandberg and Göran Torrkulla for their very thorough and incisive comments.