

Some Remarks on Philosophy and on Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy and its Misinterpretation

P. M. S. Hacker

*University of Kent at Canterbury
St John's College, Oxford*

Abstract

The paper advances a broadly Wittgensteinian conception of the nature and limits of philosophy. It differs from Wittgenstein over the claims that (i) philosophical problems arise only when language is idling; (ii) that philosophy does not result in new knowledge: it does. But the new knowledge does not concern the nature of the world, but the character of our forms of description of the world, and its form is not discovery but realisation. (iii) in the domain of practical philosophy further considerations come into play that are not budgeted for in Wittgenstein's conception. A variety of criticisms of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, in particular some advanced recently by Diego Marconi and Timothy Williamson, are examined and shown to rest on misunderstandings and ignorance.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, philosophy, private language arguments, Diego Marconi, Timothy Williamson.

1. Philosophy: some reminders

Philosophy is not a natural science. There is no body of philosophical facts, on the model of facts of physics. There is no body of well-established philosophical truths, on the model of the truths of chemistry. There are no philosophical theories on the model of theories in the natural sciences that can be or have been confirmed by experiment and observation. Philosophy, unlike the hard sciences, issues no predictions. Philosophical reasoning, unlike scientific reasoning, involves no idealizations of observable phenomena for theoretical purposes and formulations of laws of nature. There are no hypotheses in philosophy that may be confirmed or disconfirmed by an experiment. Nor can philosophy tolerate approximations to the facts. For philosophy is not concerned with discovering laws of nature or with determining the facts. It is concerned with plotting the bounds of sense. And a mere approximation to sense is one form or another of nonsense.

Philosophy is not an a priori science either. The a priori sciences are mathematics and logic. Mathematics is concept-formation by means of proofs. Philosophy too is a priori. But philosophy is not concerned with concept-formation for the purposes of the sciences or for the transactions of daily life. Nor is it concerned with the construction of new rules of representation or rules of inference. Metaphysics, of course, purports to be an a priori discipline that investigates the necessary structures of reality. By contrast with physicists, who investigate contingent truths about the world, meta-physicists purport to investigate the necessary scaffolding of all possible worlds. But it is a bogus science. There are no possible worlds, only possibilities for things to be or to have been otherwise in this, one and only, world. The world has no scaffolding. What, to the blinkered eye, appears to be the necessary scaffolding of all possible worlds is no more than the shadow cast upon the world by our forms of representation. What appear to be statements of *de re* necessities are in fact expressions of norms of representations. *Red is darker than pink* is actually an inference rule to the effect that if A is red and B is pink, then one can infer without more ado, and without looking afresh, that A is darker than B. *Red is more like orange than it is like yellow* looks like a description of an adamant necessity in nature. But in fact it is the expression of an inference rule in the misleading guise of a description. What it says is that if A is red, B is orange and C is yellow, then one can infer without looking that A is more like B in colour than it is like C. The principle that every event has a cause is a norm of representation of Newtonian science, not a generalization about events but a determination of what is to count as an event.

If philosophy is neither an empirical science nor an a priori one, what then is it? What, if anything, is a philosophical proposition? Are there any philosophical truths? Do we know any? Is there any such thing as philosophical knowledge? The natural, social and a priori sciences all have a subject matter of their own. Physics studies the laws of matter, energy and motion. Chemistry studies the constitution of stuffs and the methods of combining or isolating them. Biology studies living things and their environment. History studies the recorded sufferings, crimes and follies of mankind throughout the ages. What is the subject matter of philosophy? Meta-physicists held it to have as its primary subject matter the *de re* necessities of the world. But that is an illusion. Descartes held philosophy to be a quest for the ultimate certainties upon which all knowledge rests, and a system for the construction of the tree of knowledge. But there is no such tree of knowledge, and there are no such certainties. Hume held that philosophy was the science of the mind—but that task was taken over by psychology (without any slimming down of philosophy). The quest for a special subject matter for philosophy continued well into the twentieth century: Russell held that the subject matter of philosophy consisted of the most general facts in the universe and the description of their logical forms. Husserl held that the subject matter of philosophy was the discovery and description of the unique phenomenological features of experience. And so on, each such chimera lasting for awhile before succumbing to the next illusion. Philosophy seems to be a subject in perennial search of a subject matter (its latest being possible worlds—if the scientists have evicted us from the actual world, we may find solace and a subject matter in the infinite number of possible worlds).

Enlightenment on the nature and proper tasks of philosophy in the twentieth-century had to await Wittgenstein. In his post-1933 writings he avers that:

- (i) Philosophy has no subject matter of its own—in the manner in which the natural, social, and human sciences have a subject matter of their own.
- (ii) There are no philosophical propositions—in the sense that there are propositions of physics or chemistry, economics or history.
- (iii) There are no theses in philosophy.
- (iv) There are no theories in philosophy—in the sense in which there are theories in the sciences of nature and of man.
- (v) There is no philosophical knowledge—comparable to the knowledge achieved in the sciences.
Philosophy is not part of the quest for knowledge of the world. The philosopher is not a citizen of any republic of ideas.
- (vi) Philosophy is an activity of conceptual clarification the purpose of which is to resolve philosophical problems.

Philosophical problems are a priori. No empirical discoveries can solve or dissolve them, *any more than discoveries in physics can solve problems in mathematics*. Whereas mathematics is concept-formation by means of proof construction, philosophy is concept-clarification by means of description. What philosophy describes are the logical relations of implication, exclusion, compatibility, presupposition, point and purpose, role and function among propositions in which a given problematic expression occurs. Philosophy describes the uses of expressions in our language for the purpose of resolving or dissolving conceptual entanglements. The descriptive task, like the description of the mores of a society or of the laws of the land, is a normative one.¹ It is not a legislative project. It is not the task of philosophy to reform language or to construct artificial languages. It leaves everything (in grammar) alone. One might say, and Wittgenstein did say, that its task is logical cartography. Its purpose is that we be able to find our way around the landscape of grammar without getting lost in the jungles and marshes created, *among other things*, by similarities of form that mask differences of use, and differences of form that conceal similarities of function.

2. Going beyond Wittgenstein

Thus far Wittgenstein. I should like to go somewhat further, but in a direction that I think he would find unobjectionable. I shall disagree with him on one point. I shall also point out a limitation in his account.

I suggest that *philosophy is not a contribution to human knowledge, but rather to human understanding*. The object of this understanding is our conceptual scheme—the grammar of our language. By ‘grammar’ here I mean, as did Wittgenstein, everything that has to be settled in order for an expression to have sense. It is obvious that we already know the grammar of our language—that is what it is to be a competent speaker of the language. We know how to use expressions correctly, and we are able to explain what is meant by their use in sentences we understand. For correct use and correct explanations of use are criteria for knowing what expressions mean. We need no new information about the uses of words. What we come to understand is the way in which the web of our

¹ By ‘normative’ I mean no more than ‘pertaining to a rule’.

conceptual scheme is woven. We competent language users know how to use the net of language to catch empirical fish. But we have the greatest of difficulties in describing the net. And it is virtually unavoidable that the net become entangled and knotted. The task of philosophy is to disentangle the net, and to show the confused fishermen that a tangle in the net is not a new kind of fish. There are no metaphysical fish in the seas of philosophy, only metaphysical knots in the net.

It is a striking fact that no new knowledge of facts is relevant to the solution or dissolution of philosophical problems. Unlike scientists, the philosopher can never say that he is waiting on the result of further experiments and observations, although, to be sure, new experiments and observations may give rise to new scientific theories that in turn may provide grist for philosophical mills. A philosopher cannot licitly hold that he does not yet have enough information or sufficient knowledge. Everything he needs to know, he already knows. For what he needs to know is the conceptual scheme with which he operates daily. If he is a philosopher of one of the special sciences, what he needs to know is the technical conceptual scheme daily employed by scientists in their technical discourse. If we fail to solve or resolve the problems of philosophy, it is not for lack of information. It is our fault. For we then fail to select and marshal the familiar rules for the uses of expressions—no matter whether ordinary expressions familiar to competent speakers or technical expressions in science and mathematics familiar to scientists and mathematicians—in such a manner that the problem dissolves.

‘Philosophy is a contribution not to human knowledge, but to human understanding’ is a slogan. It is, I believe, an insightful one. But like all slogans it needs qualification and explanation. The upshot of philosophical investigations is not that one will speak one’s native tongue *better* than hitherto—although one may be more careful. One will have an overview of the logical grammar of expressions in the domain one has been investigating. So one will be able to find one’s way about. Nevertheless, *one will come to know things one had not previously known*. Wittgenstein would surely concede that after having studied his work one will know that mathematics is a system or better: a motley, of norms of representation. That is something no one ever knew, ever *realized*, prior to Wittgenstein’s investigations. It was commonly asserted by philosophers and unreflectively assumed by physicists and psychologists that we learn names of sensible qualities by introspective scrutiny of the contents of sensible experience, and that we learn the name of psychological attributes by association of name and experience. Prior to Wittgenstein’s investigations no one ever realized that these are incoherent suppositions. So we surely learnt something new!

I think this is correct, but only with the strict proviso that what we learn about is not facts or super-facts about the world, but features of our means of representation. We learn about the net, not about the catch. We gain an overview of a segment of the grammar of our language, the grammar we, as competent speakers, have all mastered. But to master a language does not imply gaining an overview of the way it hangs together. Mastery of the use of an expression does not require mastery of its comparative use, or an ability to describe its deceptive similarities to expressions with which it is commonly confounded. One may indeed have mastered the use of ‘almost’ and ‘nearly’ without being able to say how they differ. One may likewise have mastered the use of ‘know’ and ‘believe’, but be unable to describe how they are related. One may know

how to use the phrase ‘mental state’ but still not realize that knowing and believing are not mental states.

The term ‘realize’ is crucial here. For insofar as we *can* speak here of the acquisition of knowledge as the upshot of philosophical investigation, the form of knowledge is not observation or discovery, but *realization*. We realize features of our conceptual scheme that we had not apprehended. Realization is a form of cognitive receptivity that is the upshot of putting together things we already knew, and grasping consequences we had not noticed. What we thus put together are rules for the use of familiar words that we know perfectly well, but of which we need reminding. We know perfectly well that mental states are states one can be said to *in*: we may be *in* a state of intense concentration, *in* a state of anxiety, *in* an excited or joyous state. We know that when one falls asleep one ceases to be *in* any mental state whatsoever, for one is *in* one mental state or another only when one is awake. It is obvious that mental states must last (obtain) for a while, since something momentary is an event or achievement, rather than a state. It is patent that mental states, such as being in pain, feeling tired, feeling cheerful, concentrating hard, can be interrupted, and later resumed. We all know that mental states can vary in intensity, and can wax or wane. These observations are not news from *The Metaphysical Herald*. They are reminders of what we all know. They are not opinions, conjectures or hypotheses. They are, in effect, constitutive rules for the use of the phrase ‘mental state’—aspects of what the phrase *means*. It *makes sense* to ask how long one’s anxiety, concentration or excitement lasted, but not how long one’s noticing or recognizing lasted. It *makes sense*, even if it is not true, to say that one’s concentration was interrupted; but it *makes no sense* to say that one’s understanding, one’s recognizing, or one’s noticing were interrupted. One’s weariness or excitement may wax or wane, but not one’s winning or losing. These grammatical observations are no more than reminders of what we would or would not say, reminders of usage (of what it *makes sense* to say) that any competent speaker of the language has learnt.

However, it should not be supposed that such reminders are always straightforward. Some differences between the uses of distinct expressions are difficult to think of (‘nearly’/‘almost’). Some are very difficult to survey. Prejudices often stand in the way. Fresh misunderstandings are always possible. Let me give an example. Understanding, Wittgenstein sapiently averred, is *akin* to an ability. This observation has been the source of further incomprehension. Michael Dummett² (following a mistaken observation of Frege’s) protested that we need to distinguish between a dispositional sense (‘A understands English’) which signifies an ability, and an occurrent sense (‘A understood what B said’), which does not.³ But, first, an ability is not a disposition (we all have the ability

² See Dummett 1993: 58-60, 101-103, 109, 133. For criticism, see Rundle 2001: 109ff. For further discussion, see Baker and Hacker 2005: esp. 380-85.

³ Recently Professor Diego Marconi has resuscitated this confusion (in his review of Hacker 2013: see Marconi 2014). Surprisingly, he asserts that the sentence ‘She knows how to understand this sentence’ does not support the assertion that understanding is akin to an ability. The sentence, to be sure, is ambivalent and not very good English. If it means ‘She understands this sentence’, then it confirms the claim that understanding is ability-like, for she can say what it means. If it means ‘She knows how this sentence is to be interpreted’, then this too confirms the claim, since she can, presumably, tell us how it

to kill another, but fortunately few of us have any such disposition). Secondly, understanding English is not *exercised* in understanding an English utterance. Understanding an utterance is not *an act* one performs—unlike reporting what was said, acting on what was said, explaining what was said. Understanding English is ability-like in so far as it is exhibited in responding cogently to what is said in English, in reporting what was said, in explaining what English words, sentences or utterances mean, and so on. For these performances are criteria of understanding a language. Understanding the utterance ‘Pass the butter, please’ is exhibited in passing the butter, in reporting correctly what was said (requested), and in explaining what the utterance means. For these performances are criteria for understanding an utterance. Hence, thirdly, these are not two different *senses* of ‘understand’, but two different *objects* of understanding. To understand what was said is not to exercise one’s ability to understand English, but an instance of it—it is not to “exercise one’s understanding” of English, but to exemplify it. In this example, one can see vividly that drawing our attention to features of usage with which we are indeed perfectly familiar may be a lengthy and difficult process. For the difficulties and misunderstandings ramify, and it is often as difficult to abandon a picture to which one cleaves as to hold back one’s tears. Nevertheless, if one perseveres, if one can think afresh and is willing to retrace one’s steps, the reward is substantial. Let me give an example.

If we look at the familiar use of the word ‘belief’ and its cognates, it is immediately evident that neither believing nor what is believed can be mental states. For while one may be *in* a state of incredulity, one cannot be *in* a state of belief or of believing. When one believes something to be so, one’s beliefs don’t lapse on falling asleep. Nor can one be interrupted in the middle of believing something and later resume believing it. Although there are degrees of conviction, there are no degrees of belief. One cannot believe *too much* that World War I lasted from 1914 until 1918, and I can’t believe it *more than you*. One may have less conviction than hitherto, but not less belief. So believing is not a mental state, indeed, not a state of any kind. That is something few philosophers recognize. It has dramatic consequences. For now one may come to realize that belief cannot be identical with a neural state of the brain, for only what *is* a state can be identical with a state. Of course, this is not an empirical discovery of an empirical truth, let alone an a priori discovery of an empirical truth. It is recognition of the bounds of sense—acknowledgement of a grammatical proposition. For it does not make sense to suppose that believing something is a mental state. It does not make sense to assert that something that is not a state at all is identical with a state of the brain. The apparently philosophical proposition ‘Belief is not a state of the brain’ is not a description, but the expression of an exclusionary rule (like ‘One can’t checkmate in draughts’). There is no such thing as a ‘mental state of believing’—this is a form of words that has no use, and it is excluded from our language.

is to be interpreted. Marconi suggests that “we seem to use the same word for both the ability (‘she understands English’) and its exercise”. But this is mistaken. To understand English and to understand an English utterance are not two different kinds of understanding, but two different objects of understanding (compare knowing English history and knowing that the battle of Hastings was fought in 1066: here too there are not multiple senses of “knowing”).


What one comes to realize when one puts familiar grammatical propositions together is misleadingly characterized as a truth about the world. It is rather a truth of grammar, i.e. a rule for the use of words.⁴ And its truth is in an important sense Pickwickian. For to be sure, rules are not true or false. To realize that neither believing nor what is believed can be brain states is not to come to know a truth about the world. For in realizing that belief is not a state of the brain, or that there can be no such thing as private ostensive definition, or that the mind is not a thing of any kind (neither an aethereal thing nor a material thing), or that to have a body is not to possess anything, one has not come to know that things are as these sentences describe them as being. For these sentences are not descriptions of anything—they are expressions of rules in the material mode (like ‘The chess king moves one square at a time’). To attach the truth-operator to such rule-expressing sentences is not to assert that things are as the sentence describes them as being, but rather to assert that the content of a rule is as it has been stated to be (‘It is true that the king in chess moves one square at a time’).

So (i) any knowledge one might speak of here takes the form of realization, and

(ii) what is realized is a feature of the conceptual scheme that we have mastered.

One might say, in Aristotelian terms that it is knowledge of the forms of reality. But the forms of reality just *are* the shadows of grammar—the shadows cast by the scaffolding from which we describe how things are. One might better say that the realization in question is a deepening of our understanding of the structure and interconnectedness of our conceptual scheme.

Thus far I believe that I have gone a little beyond Wittgenstein, but I do not think I have averred anything he would not accept. I do, however wish to disagree with him over one point.⁵

⁴ Professor Marconi surprisingly ascribes to me the view that grammatical propositions are not merely formulations of rules for the use of words, but “more precisely exclusionary rules”. This is not a view I have ever advanced. Indeed, it would not be more precise, merely more mistaken. ‘An object cannot simultaneously be red all over and green all over’ is an exclusionary rule. It excludes a form of words from language (‘is simultaneously red all over and green all over’). In this respect it is like an impossibility-proof in mathematics (e.g., that one cannot trisect an angle with a compass and rule). But ‘Red is more like orange than it is like yellow’ is an inference rule. So too are arithmetical equations, for they too are rules of grammar. ‘A proposition is true if things are as it describes them as being’ is a transformation-rule. ‘This  colour is black’ is a definition, and hence too a substitution rule. Professor Marconi, labouring under the illusion that I hold that grammatical rules are all exclusionary rules, and noting correctly that I agree with Wittgenstein that arithmetical propositions are norms of representation, queries what *this* grammatical proposition is meant to exclude. To be sure, it is not meant to exclude anything, since it is not an exclusionary rule at all.

⁵ It is worthwhile trying to put the record straight about criticizing Wittgenstein, since there are philosophers who are propagating egregious falsehoods on the matter. Professor Timothy Williamson has recently suggested (lecture at Belgrade University, September 2014, on the web) that in the 1970s even non-Wittgensteinian philosophers were often afraid to speak out against Wittgenstein—a sorry state of affairs that he says lasted until 2000. It was then that Williamson himself challenged an Oxford student who, in a large

I think it was mistaken of him to assert that philosophical problems arise only when language is idling (PI §132). This remark is more or less correct when it comes to a wide range of traditional philosophical problems. When philosophers assert that knowledge is a mental state, that all vagueness is merely epistemological, that time is unreal, that the mind is the software of the brain, then indeed language is idling. Such transgressions of the bounds of sense do not interfere with our ordinary commerce with words like ‘mental state’, ‘knowledge’, ‘mind’, ‘vague’, ‘time’. But when neuroscientists assert that the brain decides to move 350 ms before we ourselves feel any decision or intention, or that memories are stored in synaptic connections, or that seeing is apprehending an image created by the brain, then language is not idling, but hard at work and experiments are conducted to prove these (nonsensical) allegations. Conceptual confusions are rife, in the natural sciences and in moral, legal and political discourse. When psychologists assert that the problem that afflicts autistic children is that unlike normal children, they have failed to develop a theory of mind, the psychologists are literally talking nonsense—that is: what they say makes no sense. But this nonsensical conjecture affects the kinds of treatment given to autistic children. When biologists investigate the biological function of consciousness, and come up with the idea that “The advantage to an animal of being conscious lies in the purely private use it makes of conscious experience as a means of developing a conceptual framework which helps it to model another animal’s behaviour”⁶ a conceptual incoherence is embedded in a putatively empirical evolutionary theory. There is nothing idle about that—it profoundly affects and infects an empirical science. So too, when zoologists proclaim that they have discovered that elephants, dolphins, chimpanzees and crows are self-conscious creatures because they can recognize themselves in a mirror—then conceptual confusions invade science. For to recognize oneself in the mirror is not to recognize one’s self in the mirror, and the ability to recognize the reflection of one’s face in the mirror has no more to do with self-consciousness than has the ability to recognize one’s hand in the mirror.

graduate seminar, “kept pressing the Wittgensteinian line that contradictions are meaningless rather than false”. Becoming exasperated, Williamson courageously asserted “Maybe Wittgenstein was just wrong; it wouldn’t be the first time”—at which, he alleges, there was a collective gasp of shock. This is an odd anecdote. Graduate students are not authorities on what philosophers have said. Wittgenstein never held that contradictions are nonsense. Graduate students ought to know that. The thought that it was prohibited to criticize Wittgenstein in Oxford prior to 2000 is risible. Numerous Oxford philosophers who were not Wittgensteinians had criticized Wittgenstein in print, in public and in private when Williamson was still a schoolboy, including Austin, Ayer, Grice, and Hampshire. Oxford philosophers who, to one degree or another, were followers of Wittgenstein, such as Dummett, Strawson, Waismann, had criticized him extensively. From 1976 onwards for more than a decade Gordon Baker and I gave well-attended graduate seminars on Wittgenstein. These were among the liveliest philosophy seminars of the time. There was certainly no shortage of criticisms at them. The suggestion that Wittgenstein was ever ‘sacrosanct’ at Oxford is pure fiction.

⁶ Humphrey 1984: 35. He continued thus: “Somewhere along the evolutionary path that led from fish to chimpanzees a change occurred in the nervous system which transformed an animal which simply ‘behaved’ into an animal which at the same time informed its mind for the reasons for its behaviour. My guess is that this change involved the evolution of a new brain—a ‘conscious brain’ parallel to the old ‘executive brain’” (37).

Not only do philosophical problems arise when language is hard at work. They arise ubiquitously in science, and in public life—in economics, politics, law and in moral debate. It is one of the great tasks of philosophy to struggle against the corruption of science, law, politics, economics, art and moral discourse by conceptual confusion. Ironically, it was Wittgenstein himself who showed what gives philosophy *the right* to interfere thus in the sciences. For philosophy is the Tribunal of Reason before which to arraign natural and social scientists for transgressing the bounds of sense.

I also wish to point out an important limitation on Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. It was geared to the branches of philosophy that concerned him, namely what Kant called "theoretical" (in contrast to "practical") philosophy. Wittgenstein had no interest whatsoever in legal and political philosophy, let alone in philosophical investigations into economics and economic reasoning. His own views on morality, as far as one can judge, were of an extreme personal and existential character. I am inclined to think that this conception is at odds with the tenor of his highly naturalist⁷ and historicist approach to the problems of philosophy. One would have expected him to favour a broadly Aristotelian and Humean approach to ethics, and to have approved of the endeavours of his pupil Georg Henrik von Wright in his great book *The Varieties of Goodness*. Be that as it may, it seems to me that when one turns from theoretical philosophy to practical philosophy, new factors come into play. Although conceptual clarification and logical cartography certainly have their place in the domain of ethics, legal and political philosophy, rational debate about how we should live our lives, about what is of intrinsic value in our lives, and about what kinds of laws are appropriate for free people living under the rule of law at a given stage in history are surely licit subjects for philosophers to discuss. These subjects have been part of the task of philosophy ever since its inception with Socrates, and woe and betide us if we relinquish it.

3. Interpretations, misinterpretations and misunderstandings

So far I have laid out the main contours of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. The mode of presentation has deliberately been synoptic and assertive, rather than discursive and argumentative, for I have argued in support of these claims elsewhere.⁸ I have added a few modifications to Wittgenstein's account, and pointed out a limitation that must be recognized. However, his observations have been met with incomprehension, bewilderment, and misguided criticisms. It is to some of these that I shall now turn.

I. Wittgenstein asserted that "if someone were to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them" (PI §128). Furthermore, he wrote "Philosophy states only what everyone admits" (PI §599). This has bewildered his readers and raised the ire of many philosophers. Surely Wittgenstein himself advances a multitude of theses, for example that mathematical equations are norms of representation, or that

⁷ By 'naturalist' I do not mean a form of scientific reductionism favoured by followers of Quine.

⁸ See Baker and Hacker 2005, essays XIV and XV.

one cannot define pain by a private ostensive definition, or that a dog may expect its master to come home *now*, but cannot now expect its master to come home this time tomorrow. Surely these are not only theses, they are highly controversial theses that most philosophers do not accept.

To reply to this set of objections, we must be clear what Wittgenstein meant by ‘theses’. Fortunately, we know. The remark was written with Waismann’s *Thesen* in mind.⁹ This document was an attempt to present Wittgenstein’s ideas in the *Tractatus* in a more accessible manner. So it consisted of apodeictic pronouncements about the essence of things—about the world, language, logic, and so forth. But if the very idea of *de re* necessities is chimerical, then to be sure there can be no theses. The proposition that reality consists of facts not of things¹⁰ is a thesis—a statement concerning the necessary, language-independent nature of the word. But it is a chimera. What one *can* say is that a description of (any part of) reality is a statement of facts. And with that grammatical triviality everyone would surely agree. If they did not, that would betoken failure of understanding. It is not a thesis, but a grammatical proposition—a rule of representation. It says that the phrase ‘a description of how things are’ can be replaced by ‘a statement of facts’.

All right, one may concede, but what of such assertions as ‘One cannot define colour-words or names of psychological attributes by means of private ostensive definitions’, ‘Arithmetical equations are rules of representation’, or ‘Behaviour is not inductive but criterial (logical) evidence for the mental?’¹¹ These, Marconi exclaims, are surely not grammatical trivialities that everyone would agree to. Indeed, they do not even look like grammatical rules anyway. Surely, they are substantive theses about definitions, evidence, and the nature of arithmetical equations! Indeed, they are expressions of Wittgenstein’s opinions, which he explicitly avowed not to advance.

That is far too quick. Philosophers should greet each other with the words ‘Take it slowly!’ We must first explain what an ostensive definition is. It is an explanation of the meaning of a word by pointing at a sample, and saying “That is N” (e.g. “That is one metre”, or “That is red”) or, more explicitly, “That

⁹ Reprinted in McGuinness 1979: 233-62.

¹⁰ See Waismann’s *Thesen*, in McGuinness 1979: 233.

¹¹ This “seems to entail”, according to Marconi, “that we do not *conjecture* the mental from behaviour, which in turn could be taken to entail that we cannot go wrong”. It seems no such thing, and it could not be so taken. One can conjecture from the fact that one’s wife is taking an aspirin, that she has a headache (she suffers from headaches and takes aspirin to alleviate them). But when she holds her head moaning “I have a terrible headache”, one does not *conjecture* that she has a headache. However, pain-behaviour is a *criterion* (logically good evidence) for pain. It is defeasible. Hence satisfaction of the criteria for pain do not *entail* that we cannot go wrong in asserting the person to be in pain. For additional evidence may defeat the criterial evidence. But if it is undefeated, then it commonly confers certainty. Marconi queries whether we cannot distinguish between ‘putting forth a conjecture’ from ‘applying a defeasible criterion’, and asks whether this is ‘a logical or merely psychological difference’. To be sure, there is all the *logical* difference in the world between a conjecture warranted by well-established inductive correlations and ascription of a psychological predicate warranted by criteria that constitute logically good evidence. The former presupposes antecedent identification of the relata, and observation of their regular correlation. The latter does not.

length is (or is called) a metre” or “That colour is (or is called) red”. This is an explanation or stipulation of the technical expression ‘an ostensive definition’. No one can disagree with that. Then we must remind ourselves and explain what a sample is. A sample is something *we use* to explain the meaning of certain words and kinds of word, and as a standard to justify the application of such a word. Just think of colour samples in a paint-catalogue, or of rulers and tape measure that are samples of lengths. We explain what ‘1 metre’ means by pointing to the ruler and saying “That length is one metre” or pointing to a sample of peach-blossom pink in the book of samples and saying “That colour [not: that piece of paper] is (or ‘is called’) peach-blossom pink”. No one can disagree with that. We further point out that the ostensive definition we thus give is not a description of what we point at, for a description presupposes the meanings of its constituent words as given and known, but an ostensive definition *explains* the meaning of the word defined. This too can hardly be denied. Furthermore, not only is the ostensive definition not a description of what is pointed at, it is *a rule*. For it in effect says that anything that is *this* length is correctly described as being a metre long, and that anything that is *this* colour is correctly described as being peach-blossom pink in colour. This too cannot be denied. So, one concludes, the samples we use in thus explaining the meaning of certain classes of word belong to the means of representation—they are instruments of language, they are the measures, not what is measured. Indeed, we continue, is it not obvious that an ostensive definition is akin to a substitution rule constituted by familiar analytic definitions? For instead of saying “The curtains are pink-blossom pink” one can say “The curtains are *this* colour” (pointing to the sample). In effect, the sample, the pointing gesture, and the words “This colour” can replace the phrase ‘peach-blossom pink’. This too would appear to be undeniable.

What I have done in the above paragraph (for the benefit of Professor Marconi and anyone equally at sea) is to show how one may present the private language discussion as a step by step argument in which we assemble a select array of familiar and undeniable rules for the use of words, and marshal them in such a manner that the very idea of a logically private language disintegrates before one. I shall go no further, for this is not an essay on the private language arguments. But I shall point out the direction in which one must proceed here. The next step is to explain what purports to be “private”, namely *private ownership of experience* and *epistemic privacy*—both of which are and must be shown to be chimerical. Then one must proceed to explain why others *could not* understand a putative private ostensive definition, since they cannot share the defining sample with the subject. But one must go further, and explain why a mental representation cannot fulfil the role of a sample, i.e. that there is no such thing as using a mental image or representation as a sample for the application of a word. For

- (i) There is no criterion of identity for such an internal representation.
- (ii) Mental representations cannot, *logically cannot*, function as objects for comparison as samples must be capable of doing, for one cannot, *logically cannot*, hold up a mental representation alongside what it is meant to represent, in order to compare the two.

(iii) One cannot imagine something while one is actually perceiving it.¹²

It should now be evident first, that these assertions are no more *opinions* than the statement that bachelors are unmarried men is an opinion. They are not theses, but a sequence of grammatical clarifications with which no one can sensibly disagree. If someone does, that is not a mark of a difference of opinion, but of incomprehension, and that means that one must go back to whatever is puzzling and clarify it more thoroughly. Equally, no theses were advanced, no assertions concerning the language-independent nature of things. Nothing is appealed to except uses of words and grammatical stipulations. The method is indeed to assemble familiar rules for the uses of words, with which no one can disagree, and to order them in such a way as to demonstrate an incoherence, the realization of which is the culmination of a successful overview of the rules.

II. Surely, it is often remonstrated, Wittgenstein advances a wide range of theories that many, indeed most, philosophers contest. Is the private language argument not a theory? Does he not advance a use-theory of meaning? Is the contention that there are no theories in philosophy not itself a theory—sometimes caricatured as the “no-theory theory”?

This is confused. If all that is meant by ‘theoretical’ here is a contrast with ‘practical’, then of course, Wittgenstein’s investigations are theoretical. But that is wholly trivial. If the prototype of theory is given by scientific theories, then obviously Wittgenstein advances no theories, nor is there any room in philosophy for theories. For theories in science are, for example, hypothetico-deductive theories, or theoretical explanations by reference to intervening mechanisms, or inferences to the best explanation, and so forth. But there are no hypotheses in philosophy. There are no hypothetical rules of representation. Logical grammar, which determines the bounds of sense, can involve no hypotheses. We cannot say of a form of words: “Perhaps it makes sense, perhaps not, we must find out”. There are no intervening mechanisms in grammar—internal relations are

¹² It is quite remarkable that more than sixty years after the publication of the *Investigations* philosophers (such as the Wykham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford) can still labour under the illusion that the private language argument(s) depend upon the principle of verification. But Professor Williamson confidently announces that “The simplest and clearest reconstruction had the argument rest on a verificationist premise to the effect that one cannot *be* in a mental state unless some independent check was possible on whether one was in that mental state” (29). I am afraid that Professor Williamson is 44 years out of date. This simple and clearest malconstruction of the private language argument(s) was advanced by Judith Jarvis Thompson in 1971 and definitively refuted by Anthony Kenny in his reply to her: see Kenny 1971. Williamson adds that those defenders of Wittgenstein who denied that he relied upon the principle of verification never satisfactorily explain how. It would be interesting to learn what was unconvincing about Kenny’s explanation in that very article or in Kenny 1973. I too advanced a verification-free explanation in Hacker 1972 (and improved it in the 2nd edition of 1986). I gave a very detailed explanation of the intricacies of Wittgenstein’s argument in Hacker 1990, in a series of seven interconnected essays, and a paragraph by paragraph exegesis of 144 pages. Others since then have done an excellent explanatory job, e. g. H.-J. Glock (1996) and Severin Schroeder (2006). One would like to know what Williamson found unsatisfactory about these detailed and elaborate arguments, which he obviously must have read before he condemned them one and all as unsatisfactory.

not welded together by any mechanism, but by the practices of uses expressions. There are no inferences to the best explanation in grammar either, for grammatical remarks do not postulate the existence of unobserved or unobservable entities. Nor are they confirmed or infirmed by subsequent observations and discoveries.

Wittgenstein's slogan 'The meaning of a word is its use in the language' is not theory of anything, least of all a use-theory of meaning. It is a grammatical statement to the effect that in most uses of the expression 'the meaning of a word' we can replace it by the expression 'the use of a word'. In most contexts, the two phrases mean the same. That is no more a theory than the assertion that in most uses of the word 'bachelor', it can be replaced by the phrase 'an unmarried man' (but not in such contexts as 'bachelor of art' or 'knight bachelor').

Wittgenstein's assertion that there are no theories in philosophy is not a theory about philosophy, but a grammatical elucidation of what philosophy now is. Philosophy is the dissolution of conceptual confusion and the description of segments of our conceptual scheme that is guided by the need to avoid conceptual, grammatical, entanglement. There is no room in philosophy for conjectures, or for hypothetico-deductive conclusions that can be verified or falsified in experience, or for explanations by means of intervening mechanisms, or for inferences to the best explanation that can be confirmed by an *experimentum crucis*. Normative descriptions of the use of words may be systematic, but they are no theory.

III. Numerous philosophers, predominantly American ones, have found Wittgenstein's appeal to the ordinary use of words as a tool for philosophical clarification and means of elucidation deeply offensive and often outrageous. They have raised the following battery of questions: If philosophy investigates the ordinary use of words, then

- (i) Philosophy is just a branch of empirical linguistics, which is absurd!
- (ii) How can Wittgenstein know what the ordinary use of words is without doing social surveys?
- (iii) Why should ordinary language be privileged?
- (iv) Why should ordinary use be privileged over technical use? Why should we be guided by the usage of the man on the Clapham omnibus rather than by the educated scientist?
- (v) Why should philosophers, like scientists, not introduce new technical terminology of their own to replace ordinary language?

These are grievous misunderstandings. I shall explain why.

First, the description of the correct use of words in our language is not the goal of philosophy, but of lexicography. Nor is language the subject-matter of philosophy in general, but only of philosophy of language. The description of grammatical rules is one, perhaps the major, *method* of philosophy. Moreover, the rules of grammar are described *with a very specific purpose in mind*: not to construct a grammar of the language—that is the task of descriptive linguistics. The purpose is to disentangle conceptual confusions and to resolve conceptual questions.

Secondly, knowledge of the grammar of one's language does not require social surveys, any more than a professional player's knowledge of the rules of chess requires social surveys. A philosopher's descriptions of the grammatical

rules for the use of some word or phrase that is the source of conceptual unclarity is the practical knowledge of the rules of a practice that anyone who has mastered the practice possesses. A chess master does not need to consult other chess players in order to be able to state rules of chess. Nor does a champion soccer player have to consult the man in the street to make sure what counts as scoring a goal. And a mathematician does not have to do social surveys in order to assure himself that $3 + 3 = 6$.

Thirdly, ordinary language may be contrasted with *formal* language, or it may be contrasted with *technical* language. Philosophy is concerned with formal languages or formal calculi only in the domain of the philosophy of logic. Otherwise formal languages are irrelevant to philosophical problems. No serious philosophical problem, outside the philosophy of logic, has ever been solved or dissolved by recourse to formal calculi. In general, philosophy examines expressions of natural language to resolve its problems. Natural language may be ordinary, non-technical language, or technical language of some science or other, or of mathematics and logic.

Fourthly, ordinary language has no privilege over technical language. Philosophy investigates technical language and the use of technical terms when the problems it confronts are problems that arise in the special sciences and involve theoretical terms of that science. No philosopher, least of all Wittgenstein, would suggest that we investigate problems in transfinite set theory without the use of the technical terminology of set theory. But most of the problems of philosophy concern non-technical terms of natural language, such as 'mind' and 'body', 'knowledge' and 'belief', 'cause' and 'reason', and so forth. These are not technical terms of any scientific theory (unlike 'meson', 'quark') that are rendered obsolete by the definitive refutation and rejection of the theory (like 'phlogiston' and 'caloric').

Professor Marconi queries whether, "if our 'conceptual scheme' is to be investigated by surveying our ordinary use of words, can such use really be conceived as completely segregated from scientific uses? E.g., is our ordinary use of 'mind' and related words entirely isolated from scientific theories of the mind and the brain?". To be sure, those parts of our conceptual scheme that belong to the province of technical terms in science are to be examined and described by scrutiny of the technical uses of words. Those parts of our conceptual scheme that do not are to be examined and described by reference to the ordinary, non-technical uses of words. Of course, the sciences also employ ordinary non-technical terms of natural language—as psychology and cognitive neuroscience employ such terms as 'mind', 'body', 'know', 'think', etc. If the use of the word 'mind' by psychologists and neuroscientists *in both true and false statements* differs from that of competent speakers of English, then they obviously do not mean the same by the word. There is nothing awry with that, as long as they explain what exactly they do mean, and do not attempt to draw inferences from sentences in which the word occurs that are licit only in the non-technical use of the word. In practice, we find that they do intend to use the word as we all do, that they really do want to illuminate the nature of what we all call "the mind". But because of conceptual confusions, they advance nonsensical assertions that pur-

port to be empirical, scientific discoveries (e.g., that the mind is the brain, that the brain thinks and decides, that memory is stored at synaptic connections).¹³

Finally, there is nothing stopping philosophers from introducing technical terminology of their own when they find the need for it—but not on the model of the technical, theoretical terms we find in the sciences. For the technical terms of the sciences are theoretical terms, the usefulness of which turns on the success of the theory. The repudiation of the theory typically renders the theoretical term obsolete, as happened with terms such as ‘phlogiston’ or ‘caloric’. But philosophy constructs no theories. Insofar as it needs technical terms this is for purposes of classification, as with such terms as ‘inductive’/‘deductive’, ‘analytic’/‘synthetic’, or ‘a priori’/‘a posteriori’—or indeed ‘language-game’, ‘family resemblance concept’, ‘genuine duration’.

Cannot philosophers introduce special philosophical uses of familiar expressions in ordinary language? May they not *regiment* usage for philosophical purposes—as Carnap and Quine recommended and did? Only if the regimenting is not for bogus theory construction. We must inquire what might be the special philosophical purposes for which the ordinary use of an expression requires a Procrustean bed. Most special philosophical uses turn out to be special philosophical confusions. For our task as philosophers is to examine the conceptual scheme we have, not one that we do not have. If the conceptual problem we are engaged with arises out of a confusion or unclarity in the use of an expression in our language, it is not going to be resolved by replacing it with a novel expression, but only surreptitiously swept under the carpet.*

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¹³ For detailed confirmation of this assertion, see Bennett and Hacker 2003.

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