

Language and Ethics: A Wittgensteinian Perspective

Pierre Mailly

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Philosophy

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2003

© Pierre Mailly, 2003

National Library  
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services

Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*

*ISBN: 0-612-83814-5*

*Our file* *Notre référence*

*ISBN: 0-612-83814-5*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

# Canada

## **Abstract**

Language and Ethics: A Wittgensteinian Perspective

Pierre Maily

Using a Wittgensteinian view of language to provide a novel account of how metaphors function, I argue for the importance of imagination and creativity (as opposed to reason and discovery) in bringing about intellectual and moral change or progress. Those who first extended the use of terms like 'equality' or 'person' to apply to women are seen as being more akin to poets than to logicians. Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance concepts is shown to be central to his later conception of philosophy, and elements in his later philosophy are revealed as having several parallels with Aristotelian contextualist approaches to ethics. In the process, serious doubt is placed upon Wittgenstein's contention that philosophy leaves everything as it is.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to the memory of my brother Eric. It was he who inspired me to love reading.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

The Department of Philosophy, for having given me a second chance – and my parents, for giving me many more.

Dr. Michael Hymers, for starting me on the right track.

Dr. Sheila Mason, for largely introducing me to the subject in her courses on narrative and virtue ethics.

Dr. Kai Nielsen, for helping me finish what I had begun.

And my friends and family – especially my nine nieces and nephews – who kept me away from my studies when I needed it.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Wittgenstein Transformed	5
A. Russell and the Early Wittgenstein	6
B. The Later Wittgenstein	13
Chapter 2: Family Resemblances and Understanding	24
A. Family Resemblances and Realism or Nominalism about Universals	25
B. Understanding and Rule-Following	35
C. Private Languages and Linguistic Idealism	44
Chapter 3: Contextualist Ethics and the Later Wittgenstein	49
A. Contextualism in Ethics	49
B. Wittgenstein Mirrored in/with Contextualism	60
Chapter 4: Metaphors and Minor Premises	67
A. Minor Premises	68
B. Speaker's Meaning vs. Sentence Meaning: Grice and Searle	73
C. 'Everyone' – except Wittgenstein – on the Roll: Of Metaphor	79
D. Wittgenstein and Metaphor	90
E. Social Change and Moral Exemplars	95
Conclusion	102
Bibliography	111

## Introduction

*We have eyes, but we do not see.*  
 –**Jeremiah 5: 21**

Ludwig Wittgenstein moved from holding a denotative theory of meaning that sees language as requiring – for its very possibility – (sources of) fixed and determinate senses, to a view that recognizes that language need not be so determinate; rather, that it can be ‘fuzzy’ and indeterminate in its meanings and still function as an instrument of communication. This latter view of language, with its notion of ‘family resemblance concepts’ (– as opposed to universal concepts bounded by complete sets of necessary and sufficient conditions) and its concomitant stress on the importance of ‘seeing aspects’, I argue, has many affinities with what I call ‘contextualist’ positions in ethics. Contextualists – many of whom would also call themselves ‘virtue’<sup>1</sup> or ‘narrative ethicists’ – too emphasize the lack of codifiability that our *ethical* language and concepts (e.g. terms such as ‘cruel’ or ‘generous’, but also, more generally, rules or principles such as ‘Do not lie’ or ‘Be kind and charitable’) have, going on to stress the need of ‘abilities of perception’, especially in generating the minor premises that call into play the major premises of our practical syllogisms. Since many of those whom I call

---

<sup>1</sup> Virtue ethics, however, has historically – although perhaps not necessarily – been associated with a form of moral realism that may lead its adherents to resist much of the brunt of this thesis (especially those parts dealing with metaphor in chapter four). As the discussion in chapter two concerning realism and nominalism about universals presages, I would agree with Cora Diamond when she writes – in criticism of Sabina Lovibond’s realist interpretation – that “Wittgenstein is misread... when taken either as a philosophical realist or an antirealist.” (Diamond, 1996: 226) Insofar as this is the case, and insofar as the account of ethics I lay out in this thesis purports to be Wittgensteinian, then virtue ethicists may wish to disassociate themselves from it.

contextualists (e.g. John McDowell, Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum) have already explicitly made use of the later Wittgenstein in their work, much of what this thesis does is to merely elaborate on connections that many authors – albeit often only in the form of footnotes – have already made mention.

But this thesis also involves a project wider than that of simply drawing out connections between contextualism and the later Wittgenstein in an original (if not an entirely new) and detailed manner. The thesis also goes on to argue that a later Wittgensteinian view of language can provide us with a novel account of metaphor, and that adopting this take on metaphor allows us to better understand how our concepts can be extended to apply to new cases, as well as how intellectual or social change or progress can (be made to) come about. Following – but also developing on – ideas found in Max Black, Stanley Cavell, Donald Davidson, Michael Hymers, Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, W. V. O. Quine, and Richard Rorty, I argue that those who first extended the use of terms such as ‘equality’ or ‘person’ to apply to women are more akin to creative and imaginative poets than to logicians who merely uncover the significance of our already held terms. In addition, this may help explicate what is going on in – and what is so special about – persons who are ‘skilled at generating minor premises’ for practical syllogisms. Such moral exemplars imaginatively extend the use of moral categories (like ‘murder’, ‘patience’, ‘honesty’) to instances that the rest of us, not-so-exemplary agents, are less readily able to identify as cases in point. Underlying the whole thesis is the contention that, contrary to Wittgenstein’s claims that ‘philosophy leaves everything as it is’, insights stemming from his later philosophy can actually



change the world: in coming to understand ourselves in a Wittgensteinian/contextualist way, we may actually be able to lead better lives.

The thesis is divided into five main parts. In chapter one, I lay out and expost the views of the early and later Wittgenstein, showing how they differ, but also how they agree in their conception of philosophy as being merely elucidatory. This chapter will introduce us to several of the concepts that will be of fundamental importance in this thesis, especially that of family resemblances. The second chapter provides an in depth analysis of the concept of family resemblances, using as its backdrop the longstanding debate between realism and nominalism concerning universals. The chapter will also explicate what understanding is for Wittgenstein ( – since it isn't the grasping of a Platonic 'Form' telling us how, when, and where to apply our concepts), leading to a discussion of practices and what the later Wittgenstein calls 'agreement in judgments'. Together, then, chapters one and two will flesh out my own particular understanding of Wittgenstein. This is of consequence as these Wittgensteinian ideas act very much like premises throughout the thesis, and, as such, readers will know where to look if they come to disagree with the thesis's conclusions. (They may want to dispute some or all of the premises, or to claim that the conclusions don't really follow from them.)

Chapter three moves on from a focused discussion on Wittgenstein and the philosophy of language to ethics and contextualism. Especially concerning itself with the contextualist emphasis on the role of vision in our moral lives, the chapter concludes by drawing out several parallels between contextualism and Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Building on this, chapter four introduces a Wittgensteinian account of metaphor and shows how this account can help explain how societal or intellectual

change and progress can come about. In so doing, the chapter also points to connections between poets and moral exemplars. Finally, the concluding chapter sums up what has been achieved and addresses the general objection that a Wittgensteinian approach to language and ethics may be relativistic.

## Chapter 1: Wittgenstein Transformed

*The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!*

**–Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations***

Wittgenstein is one of those rare philosophers to have worked out two powerful – but opposed – philosophical ‘systems’<sup>1</sup> in his lifetime. Here I refer to his early work, culminating in the Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus, and his later work, best represented by the Philosophical Investigations. The overall aim of this chapter is to introduce readers to the thought of the later Wittgenstein by showing how it emerged out of some irresolvable problems that Wittgenstein came to see as lying at the heart of the Tractatus. Doing so will expose us to some of the ideas of the later Wittgenstein – especially that of ‘family resemblances’ – that will play a central role in the later stages of this thesis. At the same time, it will also make us aware of the highly respectable philosophical standpoint which the later Wittgenstein – and, by implication, this thesis – rejects.

A good way to carry out the main task of this chapter is by way of defending a specific claim: *Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy – in its essentials – remains constant throughout his philosophical career*. I will argue that when Wittgenstein says, in the Philosophical Investigations, that “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment

---

<sup>1</sup> I put ‘system’ in scare quotes because, as we shall see, the later Wittgenstein’s philosophy is probably

of our intelligence by means of language,” the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus would agree with him. (PI \*109) The difference, I hope to show, between the early and the later Wittgenstein lies in their conceptions of language, and any differences in their conceptions of philosophy are contingent (i.e. they are not essential) on the fact that their differing conceptions of language leads to their envisioning different ways in which our intelligence can be bewitched. In setting out to defend this claim, the obvious methodology would be to begin by speaking of the Tractatus, to then move on to the Investigations, and to conclude with a comparison of the two. This is precisely what shall be done. First, however, I shall speak a little of Bertrand Russell's conception of philosophy at the turn of the last century. Doing so will provide the necessary background for understanding the Tractatus.

### **A. Russell and the Early Wittgenstein**

In the late nineteenth century, Gottlob Frege invented modern symbolic logic. Shortly thereafter, in 1905, Russell applied Frege's new logical calculus to denoting phrases in general and definite descriptions in particular. (See Russell, 1990) In so doing, he revealed that sentences such as ‘the present King of France is bald’, although grammatically of the subject-predicate form, are not logically subject-predicate sentences at all. Instead, and as P. F. Strawson aptly puts it, “the propositions they express are a complex kind of *existential* proposition part of which might be described as a uniquely existential proposition.” (Strawson, 2000: 291) For Russell, the proper logical symbolization of the sentence ‘the King of France is bald’, would be one that captured the conjunction of the following three sentences: 1) There is at least one King

of France; 2) There is at most one King of France; 3) Anything that is a King of France is also bald. Once armed with this “correct logical point of view,” to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, Russell thought that we would be able to see that definite descriptions do not have objects as their semantic values; rather, they have second-level functions as their semantic values. (TLP, \*4.1213) This realization, moreover, and according to Russell at least, allows us to dispel Meinongian temptations to postulate abstract objects in order to account for the meaningfulness of statements that contain non-referring expressions. Otherwise put, awareness of the true logical form of definite descriptions undermines crazy philosophical views such as Meinong’s. (For the details in all of this see Russell, 1990; 2000)

Russell made much of this early success in the logical analysis of our language. He saw in it the key to all future and the downfall of all past philosophy. He became convinced that distrust of grammar was the first requisite for philosophizing. Grammar conceals logical form and makes totally distinct types of expressions appear to belong to similar logico-syntactical categories. This, in turn, makes room for and generates all sorts of error and miscommunication. In fact – and self-flatteringly – Russell located in this the source of the fundamental confusions characteristic of philosophy up to – but not including – the time of his own logical atomism. (See Russell, 1946) In this regard, Russell came to believe that the new method of logical analysis would dispel old philosophical illusions and place philosophy – for the first time – on a firm scientific (i.e. progressive) basis. He even went so far as to call logical analysis “the scientific method in philosophy,” and he wrote a paper by that very name. (See Russell, 1918) Connected to all of this, Russell also came to agree with G. E. Moore that logical analysis – and

only logical analysis – would tell us what, if anything, the sentences of our ordinary language really mean. Indeed, he was persuaded not only that the grammar of our ordinary language is, as it stands, logically deceptive, but also that our ordinary language is, at bottom, logically *defective*. In light of this, Russell aspired to the construction of a perfectly logical language. In such a language, every sign would immediately indicate its logical function and all possibility of misunderstanding, miscommunication, confusion, etc., would vanish. As John Passmore puts it, “such a language... would make logic unnecessary and metaphysics impossible.” (Passmore, 1966: 360)

How, then, does Russell’s *Weltanschauung*, as just construed, relate to Wittgenstein’s early views on philosophy? On the face of it, at least, the two are very much related. To see this, one need only read section 4.002 of the Tractatus. It goes as follows: “Language disguises thought, so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought beneath, because the external form of the clothes is designed not to reveal the form of the body but for different purposes.” Wittgenstein, then, like Russell, perceived ordinary language as concealing its logical structure. Moreover, he too saw in this “gulf between the appearance and reality of language” a source of all sorts of error. (Hacker, 1972: 13) For instance, and discussing the different roles and the different meanings of the word ‘green’ in the sentence ‘Green is green’, Wittgenstein concludes in sections 3.323 and 3.324 that failing to notice that in the first instance the word ‘green’ is acting as a proper name and in the second as an adjective, is “how the most fundamental confusions can easily arise (philosophy is full of them).” With these confusions in mind, Wittgenstein too came to think that the remedy for philosophical error lies in the use of an adequate sign language or conceptual notation

that is perspicuously governed by logical syntax. And in section 3.325 he informs us that the “logical symbolism[s] of Frege and Russell... [although they] still do not exclude all errors,” are, nevertheless, such sign languages.

That having been said, there are also some important differences between the early Wittgenstein and Russell. For instance – and although Russell did not realize this (and to see that he did not realize it one need only read his preface to the Ogden translation of the Tractatus)<sup>2</sup> – Wittgenstein was not, in the Tractatus, laying out the foundations of a logically perfect language. Instead, Wittgenstein saw himself as setting the grounds *for the possibility of any language whatsoever*.

Newton Garver has noted that “the key to the Tractatus is the idea that language is a mirror of reality, and that logic is the essence of language.” (Garver, 1996: 141) “This does not mean,” he says, “that the form and substance of the world are given in advance.... [But] it does mean that reality must have the same form or structure as logic, a logical form.” (Garver, 1996: 141) Together with this, and as P. M. S. Hacker reminds us, “Wittgenstein argued that *all* possible languages share, and *must* share, an essential unalterable logical syntax which is isomorphic with the logical forms of what can be represented by a language.” (Hacker, 1996: 43) And given this idea of a universal logical syntax necessarily common to all possible languages, Wittgenstein insisted against Russell that “all the sentences of ordinary language are actually, just as they are, logically and completely in order.” (TLP \*5.5563; see also: PI \*98) *Put differently, although Wittgenstein agreed with Russell that our ordinary language is logically deceptive* (necessitating the method of logical analysis into its hidden but real structure),

---

<sup>2</sup> There Russell states explicitly, but incorrectly: “Mr. Wittgenstein is concerned with the conditions for a logically perfect language.” Bertrand Russell, preface, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. C. K.

*he did not think that it was logically defective.* Contra Russell, Wittgenstein took our ordinary language and our ordinary thought to be in good logical order. This, moreover, led him to argue “that a perspicuous notation will not enable us to say something we could not say hitherto. It will not improve upon our thoughts or extend our knowledge. It will [only] enable us to make clear to ourselves what we said and knew before.” (Hacker, 1980: 466) “The goal of philosophy,” Wittgenstein wrote, “is the clarification of thought.... Philosophy should make clear and sharpen the contrast of thoughts that are otherwise opaque and blurred.” (TLP \*4.112) “The end result of philosophy,” he continues, “is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’ but to make propositions clear.” (TLP \*4.112) “This,” he concludes, means that “philosophy is not a theory but an activity.” (TLP \*4.112)

Frank P. Ramsey aptly characterized this “elucidatory” philosophy of the Tractatus as being “scholastic” – “the essence of [scholasticism being] the treatment of what is vague as if it were precise.” (Ramsey, 1950: 269) This was intended, on Ramsey’s part, to be a criticism of the Tractatus. And, in fact, one gets the sense that Ramsey was here pointing towards a fundamental tension that lies at the heart of Wittgenstein’s early masterpiece, a tension that has been insightfully circumscribed by Hacker. “The point of the clarifications of logical analysis,” Hacker tells us,

was to reveal the logical structure concealed by ordinary language, to show the illegitimacy of pseudo-propositions – particularly those of philosophers – to eliminate ambiguities and apparent vagueness, and [to] prevent misunderstandings arising out of those and other grounds. But if ordinary language is all right as it is, and if ideal conceptual notations have no privileged status, however useful they may be for limited purposes, if they are defective in relation to ordinary language, then the clarification of ordinary language, out of which confusion and misapprehension arise, cannot be by means of an analysis into an ideal notation. If the primary functions of philosophy are what the



Tractatus alleged them to be, then we must find a different way to fulfill them.  
(Hacker, 1972: 98)

Here, Hacker is alluding to certain fundamental problems Wittgenstein himself, shortly after having published it, came to have with the Tractatus. Perhaps the most important of these, stemming from what is known as the ‘color exclusion problem’, was discussed by Wittgenstein in his “Remarks on Logical Form.”

Wittgenstein’s scholasticism, we saw, lies in his notion that our language – indeed any language – *despite its appearance* must be in perfect logical order. Although our expressions may look vague, Wittgenstein insists that they are necessarily precise. Otherwise put, Wittgenstein thinks that if any sense is to be expressed by a word or proposition, then it must be determinate. Indeed, and in relation to this, it became “one of the corner-stones of the Tractatus semantics, as well as the fundamental source of its metaphysics,” that the only way that the sense of our propositions could have the precision or have the determinacy required of them, would be if “in propositions, thoughts [could] be expressed such that the objects of the thoughts correspond to the elements of the sentential signs.” (Hacker, 1972: 15; TLP 3.2) Wittgenstein calls these elements “simple signs”, and such propositions – i.e. elementary propositions – “completely analyzed” propositions. (TLP \*3.201) “A simple sign used in a sentence,” he tells us, he calls “names”. (TLP \*3.202) And “names,” he says, “signify objects and the designated object is what the name means.” (My rendition. TLP \*3.203) The crucial statement, however, occurs in section 3.23. There, Wittgenstein sums everything up by telling us that “the demand for the possibility of simple signs is the demand that sense be determinate.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This demand can be traced back (via Frege’s “Concept and Object”) all the way to Plato and Socrates.

But why mention all of this? As Hacker points out, “the initial set of relevant doctrines of the Tractatus that should be borne in mind in this context are as follows:”

Elementary propositions are constituted by a well-formed arrangement of names which refer to eternal, elementary, non-composite objects. Objects concatenated in an atomic fact are described by an isomorphic elementary proposition whose logical independence of other elementary propositions mirrors the logical independence of atomic facts.... Truth is determined by laying each elementary proposition alongside reality like a measuring rod; the proposition is bipolar thus leaving reality room only for a yes or no answer. Non-elementary propositions are truth functional compounds [of elementary propositions], connected by topic-neutral logical connectives whose meaning is given by the truth-tables. (Hacker, 1972: 87)

This set of inter-dependent doctrines, as we shall now see, runs aground in the face of the color exclusion problem.

The color exclusion problem stems from the fact that color statements can be self-contradictory even though they are supposed to be, on the *Tractarian* account, names of simples. Hacker sums up the problem as follows:

The claim that ‘A’ is red and ‘A’ is blue is contradictory (where ‘A’ refers to a point in the visual field at a given time) implies, in the Tractatus system, that the two conjuncts are not elementary propositions and that ‘red’ and ‘blue’ are not names of simples. For elementary propositions are logically independent, hence their conjunction cannot be contradictory. (Hacker, 1972: 87)

Wittgenstein was deeply troubled by this and envisioned only two ways out: 1) to “modify the syntax and semantics of the Tractatus;” or 2) do the unthinkable and “abandon the notion of simples as the correlates of logically proper names and as the foundations of language.” (Hacker, 1972: 88) In his “Remarks on Logical Form,” Wittgenstein tried to do the former. But remaining dissatisfied with the achievements of that article, and coming to think that it actually created more problems than it solved, Wittgenstein soon decided to embrace the unfathomable and rejected the doctrine of simples and all that stands or falls together with it. As should be clear, however,

---

See Plato’s Euthypro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997: 5a-7a).

“discarding the concept of simple objects and atomic facts, together with the parallel notions of logically proper names and elementary propositions, involves rejecting the notion [that] logical analysis” is at the core of elucidatory philosophy. (Hacker, 1972: 98) After all, if there are no simples, what would our ordinary propositions be analyzed into? Somewhere in the years 1930-31, then, there was a break in Wittgenstein’s thought, a break that transforms him into what is commonly called ‘the later Wittgenstein’.

## **B. The Later Wittgenstein**

What is philosophy and what does it do according to the later Wittgenstein? This is the question that shall now begin to be addressed. As we shall see, two fundamental changes (among others) occurred in Wittgenstein by the time he wrote the Investigations – changes that had an important bearing on his understanding of philosophy. First – and to Russell’s horror – *the later Wittgenstein puts grammar, or, more specifically, grammatical investigation, in the place of logical analysis as the central method of philosophy*. Secondly, and relatedly, *the later Wittgenstein rejects the view that expressions need to have determinate and fixed senses in order to be meaningful*.

Grammar is central to Wittgenstein’s later conception of philosophy and we would do well to get a proper sense of the role he sees it as playing. Like Russell, and like his earlier self, the Wittgenstein of the Investigations continues to think that the grammatical forms of words are endlessly misleading in contexts of philosophical reflection. But there is also an important shift that occurs in Wittgenstein’s attitude towards this ‘fact’. In the Investigations, Wittgenstein no longer believes that grammatical forms conceal a hidden logical structure that is to be dug out by means of

logical analysis. *Instead, he sees grammatical form as concealing the diversity of use of expressions.* Indeed, it is an awareness of this diversity of use of expressions – what Wittgenstein calls “commanding a clear view of the use of our words” – that he now thinks prevents our understanding from getting bogged down in philosophical muddlement – not logical analysis. (PI \*122)

This last statement is actually a little bit misleading. It is not the case that Wittgenstein rejects outright the role of logical analysis in philosophy, but, rather, that he now no longer gives to it the universal significance that logical atomists like Russell and his own previous self had. According to the later Wittgenstein, as Garver remarks, “logic consists of rules for language-games that involve pictures of facts; it is an important part of language-games [that involve] predication or truth-claims.” (Garver, 1996: 147) When dealing with these language-games, then, logic, and logical analysis, can play an important role in dissolving philosophical puzzles. On the other hand, and as Wittgenstein was apt to emphasize in his later work, truth-claims are only one out of countless uses of language; only one in countless forms of language-games. In section 23 of the Investigations, for instance, Wittgenstein asks us to “review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples:”

- Giving orders, and obeying them –
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements –
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) –
- Reporting an event –
- Speculating about an event –
- Forming and testing an hypothesis –
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams –
- Making up a story; and reading it –
- Play-acting –
- Singing catches –
- Guessing riddles –
- Making a joke; telling it –

Solving a problem in practical arithmetic –  
 Translating from one language to another –  
 Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

Part of what is going on in this section is that Wittgenstein is going out of his way to show that there are all sorts of language-games that do not involve truth-claims; the point being that with regards to these other language-games, logic and logical analysis will not be of any philosophical help. One way of putting this would be to say that grammar, for the later Wittgenstein, is larger than logic; that logic is contained in grammar; that it is merely one out of many forms of grammar – a limiting case. In sum, not only did Wittgenstein come to reject the Tractatus's rigid correlation of names and objects (something we'll see more of shortly), but he also discarded its "exclusive reliance on truth-functional form," as well as its notion that there is "one and only one use of language." (Garver, 1996: 142) This last gets best borne out in relation to the later Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances'.

In a passage of the Tractatus that presages much of his later philosophy, Wittgenstein informs us that "the question, 'what do we actually use this word or this proposition for?' repeatedly leads to valuable insights." (TLP \*6.211) In the Investigations, Wittgenstein provides a telling example of this. Most of us, he thinks, upon recognizing that the word 'game' is applied to various different activities (e.g. tennis, chess, ring-a-ring-a-roses) would face the question "what is common to them all?" by responding that "there *must* be something in common, or they would not [all] be called games." (PI \*66) But, Wittgenstein tells us, this is a bad approach to take, it is an approach that exhibits that one is being "held captive by a picture": in this case an Augustinian/Platonic picture of language that believes that just as some words denote,

then all words must denote, and, so, that the word 'game' too must denote and apply to things that capture the essence or fit into the universal definition of what games are. (PI \*115) On this view, it is only when the word 'game' is applied to something that shares in or has this essence that it is being used meaningfully. But, Wittgenstein shows, if we "*look and see*" instead of saying "*must*" we "will not see something that is common to *all* [games], but [instead] similarities, relationships, and whole series of them at that." (PI \*66) As he reminds us, there are all sorts of games: "board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic-games, and so on." (PI \*66) Furthermore, when moving from one of these kinds of games to another, one may "find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out (just as) others appear." (PI \*66) In order to illustrate this, Wittgenstein asks us to consider the following about games:

Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! (PI \*66)

The result of this examination, of this looking and seeing, Wittgenstein thinks, is that "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail." (PI \*66) In other words, a grammatical investigation, or an investigation into how we actually use the word 'game' in common discourse, reveals to us the nature of the word 'game'; namely, that the word 'game' is a "family resemblance" concept: it is a word whose significance cannot be captured in a universal definition; a word, then, whose meaning and use is open-ended

and indeterminate.<sup>4</sup> (PI \*67)

Now this open-endedness and indeterminacy of the rules surrounding our use of the word ‘game’ is anathema to the desire – indeed, the requirement – for logical completeness characteristic of logical atomism. Here, Wittgenstein speaks of the logician’s (and he includes his earlier self as among these logicians) “*preconceived* idea of [the] crystalline purity” of our language, the idea that we can – and must have – a logically perfect language with universal definitions and a fixed and complete set of rules for when, where, and how to apply our words/concepts.<sup>5</sup> (PI \*108) This ‘logician’ view of language, Wittgenstein now believes, is a view that evinces someone who has not yet really ‘looked and seen’. Since family-resemblance concepts like ‘game’ provide “examples where the rules governing the use of a concept do not cover all cases, and since it is clear that these supposed gaps do not affect the practical employment of these concepts, [Wittgenstein concludes that] we should be cautious in supposing that the rules governing a concept possess greater completeness (and... greater determinacy) than the actual employment of that concept demands.” (Fogelin, 1996: 53) In Wittgenstein’s words: “I use the name ‘N’ without a fixed meaning. (But that detracts as little from its usefulness, as it detracts from that of a table that it stands on four legs instead of three and sometimes wobbles.)” (PI \*79)

This last statement of Wittgenstein’s confirms, I think, just how far he has moved away from the *Tractarian* conception of language by the time of his Investigations. The later Wittgenstein has clearly dissociated himself from the notion, quoted earlier, that ‘the demand for the possibility of simple signs is the demand that sense be determinate.’

---

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it was this, and similar things, that was behind Wittgenstein’s shadowy remark: “*Essence* is expressed by grammar.... Grammar tells what kind of object anything is.” (PI \*371; \*373)

In fact, and as we shall now see, things get even more radical than that.

Near the beginning of this essay I mentioned Garver's insight that 'the key to the Tractatus is the idea that language is a mirror of reality, and that logic is the essence of language'. The later Wittgenstein throws this key out the window. Not only does he reject, as we have just seen, the view that logic is the essence of language – replacing it with grammar<sup>6</sup> – but *he also rejects the view that language must mirror reality*. Instead, and as Hacker notes, the later Wittgenstein "defends the autonomy of language and grammar and denies that a language is answerable to reality for its structure." (Hacker, 1996: 279) What, one may be wondering, could this possibly mean? As Hacker explains, it means that the rules of a language "do not reflect metaphysical possibilities determined by the essential nature of [the] objects represented, but, rather, [that they] themselves determine logical possibilities – that is, [that they determine] what it makes sense to say." (Hacker, 1996: 80) In Wittgenstein's words: "Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary." (Wittgenstein, 1974: \*184) Although this may sound highly implausible – in fact it looks like it may amount to a form of linguistic idealism or relativism (and whether it does is a question I address in the next chapter as well as the last) – it might nonetheless prove helpful at this juncture to provide an illustration as to just how, on Wittgenstein's take, grammar can determine what it does and does not make sense to say. In the process of doing so we shall also see how an awareness of the different ways words are

---

<sup>5</sup> I name views that accept such premises 'logician'. They are instances of 'logicism'.

<sup>6</sup> This is not the most felicitous way of putting it. It would be better to say that, for the later Wittgenstein, grammar *gives* the essence of language. (Note: 'language', on the later Wittgenstein's take, is also a family resemblance concept. Hence his talk of there being various different 'language-games'.)



used can, according to the later Wittgenstein, dispel philosophical illusions.

On page 222 of the Investigations, Wittgenstein makes the following enigmatic remark: “It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking,’ and wrong to say ‘I know what I am thinking.’ (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar.)” Substituting (*mutatis mutandis*) the word ‘pain’ for the word ‘thinking’, Hacker provides a masterful account of just what Wittgenstein was intimating in this passage.

Hacker notes that similarities in what Wittgenstein calls the “surface grammar” of sensation words and the surface grammar of words for perceptible objects might lead us into what Wittgenstein considers to be “absurd ideas that pains are privately owned and epistemically private.” (PI \*664; Hacker, 1996: 109) Just as we can say ‘I have a pain’ and ‘I have a pin’, ‘I feel a pain’ and ‘I feel a pin’, ‘My pain is just like yours’ and ‘my pin is just like yours’, we might be tempted to conclude that pains are just like pins only mental and private. But this, Hacker shows, would be the unfortunate result of having failed to notice what Wittgenstein calls “the depth grammar” of perceptible objects and sensation words. (PI \*664) For instance, if one looked closer at the grammar of pins and the grammar of pains, one would quickly have noticed some important differences:

One may think that one feels a pin, but be wrong (if it is a thorn); but it makes no sense to think that one feels a pain and be wrong. One may wonder whether it is a pin one feels, and look to see or feel again; but it makes no sense to wonder whether it is a pain one feels, and to look to see or feel again. To feel a pin is to perceive a pin, but to feel a pain is no more a form of perception than it is to feel cheerful or to feel like a walk. To have a pin is to possess a pin, which one can give away, whereas to have a pain is no more to possess anything than is to have a train to catch or to have a birthday next week, and it makes no sense to talk of giving one’s pains away. (Hacker, 1996: 109)

Furthermore, although it makes sense to say that ‘I know you have a pin in your hand’ and ‘I know I have a pin in my hand’, it does not make sense to say ‘I know I have a pain

in my hand'. Why not? Because its negation, 'I do not know that I have a pain in my hand', makes no sense whatsoever! Such "a patient accumulation and arrangement of the grammatical differences between 'pain' and 'pin' enables us," Hacker and Wittgenstein think, "to resist the temptation to project the grammar of the latter upon the former, i.e., to desist from the absurd ideas that pains are privately owned and epistemically private."<sup>7</sup> (Hacker, 1996: 109)

What we have just seen, I think, is an ingenious illustration of the practice of what the later Wittgenstein calls "assembling reminders for a particular purpose." (PI \*127) It is an example of the later Wittgensteinian method of "dissolving a philosophical question by clarifications of the rules for the use of relevant terms and by explaining the entanglement of these rules that generates nonsense." (Hacker, 1996: 85) More specifically, it is an example of the "therapeutic" effect that having what Wittgenstein names an "*Übersicht*" – i.e., an overview, a purview, or a surview of the different grammars surrounding the different expressions of our language – can have. In fact, it is precisely this notion of an *Übersicht* that in Wittgenstein's later philosophy comes to replace the 'correct logical point of view' of the *Tractatus*. That being said, however, there is also one very important difference between gaining an *Übersicht* and having a 'correct logical point of view'. This is that coming to have an *Übersicht*, i.e., coming to recognize both the surface and depth grammars that govern the use of our

---

<sup>7</sup> Section 246 of the *Investigations* captures this well:

In what sense are my sensations *private*?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word 'to know' as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain.—Yes, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself!—It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I *am* in pain?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behavior,—for I cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.

The truth is: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not

expressions, does not involve – unlike the logical analysis of unanalyzed expressions – penetrating or excavating into the hidden depths of our terms. On the contrary, depth grammar is really just like surface grammar simply that it has managed to remain unperceived. Otherwise put, laying out the grammar of a word or sentence “involves neither new discoveries nor new logical or grammatical forms; rather, it involves [simply] describing the ways in which we [already] use expressions, ways with which every speaker of the language is fully familiar.” (Hacker, 1996: 108) As Wittgenstein says: “Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us.”<sup>8</sup> (PI \*126)

---

to say it about myself.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these last statements have muddled, for some, the conception of grammar that is at work in the later Wittgenstein. In fact, G. E. Moore once said of Wittgenstein that “he was not using the expression ‘rules of grammar’ in any ordinary sense, and I am still unable to form any clear idea as to how he was using it.” (Moore, 1993: 69) Taking this as a criticism of Wittgenstein, I see two ways of responding to it (ways which, hopefully, will clarify our grasp of what Wittgenstein means by ‘grammar’). First, if what Moore is looking for here is that Wittgenstein provide a definition of what he means by ‘grammar’, then what Moore doesn’t realize is that the drive for definitions is very much against (as we saw in our discussion of family resemblances) the spirit of the Investigations. In Passmore’s words: “exact definitions would make philosophy look like a species of science; but philosophy as Wittgenstein envisages it explains nothing, analyses nothing – it simply describes.” (Passmore, 1966: 433)

So stated, this probably would strike Moore as being too facile a defense of Wittgenstein. In that case, there is an alternative approach. This is simply to bite the bullet and to say that Moore is right: Wittgenstein is not using the phrase ‘rules of grammar’ in any ordinary sense. First of all, it is clear that Wittgenstein’s use of grammar is not like that of school teachers who use grammar normatively – “enforcing its forms on their pupils and punishing deviations.” (Garver, 1996: 148) Rather, and as Garver notes, “Wittgenstein is more like the linguist and simply “aim[s] to give an accurate description of how the language is actually used.” (Garver, 1996: 148) (We might say that grammar, for Wittgenstein, involves descriptive or constitutive rules for the usages of terms – not prescriptive or regulative ones.) But there are also some significant differences between the linguist’s method and that of the later Wittgenstein. The linguist tends to focus on the phonology, the morphology, and the syntax of our language. Wittgenstein, however, really does maintain his focus on use. In light of this, Garver brings our attention to the fact that whereas the linguist’s “study of forms lends itself naturally to [a-contextual] analysis,” Wittgenstein’s continued observance of the “uses of language makes *context* prominent.” (Garver, 1996: 150) Similarly, Wittgenstein does not share the linguist’s goal of a systematic and exact description of our entire language. For Wittgenstein, the descriptions of grammar we elicit “need only go so far as is necessary for the resolutions of philosophical problems.” (Hacker and Baker, 1980: 479) This, Hacker and Baker point out, should not be taken to suggest that “exactness and comprehensiveness are unattainable,” but that “an Austin’s lavish description of the details of English grammar,” for example, would probably “strike Wittgenstein as philosophically fairly pointless.” (Hacker and Baker, 1980: 479; 543) Hacker and Baker even suggest that by their very complexity, Austin’s descriptions could, “like a ‘proof’ in the notation of

Having said that, it would be unfortunate if this important *difference* between an *Übersicht* and a ‘correct logical point of view’ should be allowed to mask an equally important – indeed more important given the specific claim being defended in this chapter – *similarity* between the early and the later Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy. Readers will have been able themselves to notice that when, in the Investigations, Wittgenstein makes remarks such as: “It is the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view,” or “we must do away with all explanation and description alone must take its place,” that he is still very much in the *Tractarian* tradition of conceiving of philosophy as being merely elucidatory. (PI \*89; \*109) After all, we previously saw that the early Wittgenstein too thought that the ‘end result of philosophy is not a number of philosophical propositions but to make the propositions [we already have] clear.’ It remains, then, a constant thread throughout Wittgenstein’s career that he conceived of philosophy not as being “one of the natural sciences,” not as contributing to and expanding human knowledge, but, rather, as solely being an aid to our understanding. (TLP \*4.111) And with this we have at last arrived at the particular goal of this chapter, which, as shall be remembered, was merely to show that the conception of philosophy – in its essentials – remains constant throughout Wittgenstein’s philosophical career. What we have come to see is that the most important difference between the early and later Wittgenstein – namely a switch from a focus on logical analysis to a focus on grammatical investigation – was entirely a result of Wittgenstein’s

---

Principia Mathematica that  $28+41=69$ , defeat our efforts to obtain a surview.” (Hacker and Baker, 1980: 543) These, and other differences, I think, help explain why Moore – and others – have had such a difficult time accepting that what Wittgenstein was doing did, in fact, amount to grammar. Wittgenstein, it seems, *was* being novel in his understanding of grammar. (Afterthought: when it comes to the word

changing views on the nature of language, not of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Throughout his life Wittgenstein consistently saw philosophy as being an activity whose only purpose is to clarify our existing thoughts so as to avoid falling into philosophical puzzlement. Whether such a merely elucidatory philosophy is a satisfactory one, however, or whether – as Russell thought – it manages only to trivialize philosophy as a discipline, is, of course, another question entirely. (See Russell, 1951) It is also a question which this thesis seeks to answer in the negative by showing how (some of) the later Wittgenstein's views actually add *substantive* insight into moral thinking, potentially resulting in our leading better lives. But before delving into the significant ways in which – despite his disclaimers – Wittgenstein's philosophy does not 'leave everything as it is', it will first be helpful to provide a more in depth analysis of the concept of family resemblances as well as those things that stand or fall in relation to it. The concept of family resemblances is crucial, not only in understanding Wittgenstein's later philosophy, but also for this thesis.

---

'grammar', Wittgenstein is not an ordinary language philosopher.)

<sup>9</sup> There may be more connections between grammatical investigations and logical analysis than I have here made out. Peter Winch has (also) argued for the unity of Wittgenstein's philosophy and he has done so by stressing that both the early and the later Wittgenstein are concerned with "problems about the nature of logic, the relation of logic to language, and the application of logic in language to reality." (Winch, 1969: 2) Taking logic to be the "field of the distinction between what can and cannot intelligibly be said," he notes that passages in the *Tractatus* itself (those dealing with the structure of elementary propositions) suggest that logic can consist of more than just the truth-functional form that is supposed to structure the relations between *non-elementary* propositions. (Winch, 1969: 7) This is interesting, especially since defining 'logic' as the field that determines what it does and does not make sense to say clearly places grammar – regardless of whether or not one is dealing with language-games that involve statements of fact – within the field of logic. This, however, should not be taken to undermine the specified thesis of this chapter. Whether there are more similarities between logical analysis and grammatical investigations than I have so far made out, that does not affect my contention that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as elucidatory remains the same throughout his philosophical career. Indeed, in many ways Winch and I support one another: both of us are arguing for the "unity of Wittgenstein's philosophy." The complementariness of our respective views is especially brought ought in that Winch argues that Wittgenstein's *changing views on language* was essentially a result of his 'need' to save the unity of logic that had been threatened by his *Tractarian* account of the (structure of the) elementary proposition. On both Winch's and my own account, then, Wittgenstein's changing views on language are seen as pivotal.

## Chapter 2: Family Resemblances and Understanding

*‘But how can a rule shew me what I have to do at this point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule.’ – That is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.*

*‘Then can whatever I do be brought into accord with the rule?’ – Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule – say a sign-post – got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here? – Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it.*

*But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only insofar as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom.*

*–Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations*

The previous chapter introduced us to several features of both the earlier and the later Wittgenstein’s thought. Among other things, we saw in passing how the ‘grammatical’ method of the Investigations came to replace the Tractatus’s method of logical analysis, as well as how Wittgenstein eventually denied the time-honored tradition which holds that expressions require determinate and fixed senses in order to be meaningful. Both changes – but especially the last one – we also realized, are intimately related to Wittgenstein’s claim that our concepts have (or, better – for reasons we shall soon encounter – *can* have) family resemblance structures. This chapter explores some of the implications of that claim. Following in large part the footsteps of Renford Bambrough and Michael Hymers, I set out to here deepen our understanding of family resemblance concepts, in part by situating Wittgenstein’s position in relation to the longstanding debate between realism and nominalism about universals. This more contextual exposition, I believe, will help locate the novel – if not the *revolutionary* – character of Wittgenstein’s later views within the history of philosophy. Furthermore – and given that part of Wittgenstein’s

acceptance of family resemblance concepts involves his repudiation of the view that understanding consists in the grasping of concepts interpreted as something like rules bounded by sets of necessary and sufficient conditions telling us when, where, and how to apply them – a large portion of this chapter will go on to explicate Wittgenstein’s alternative, non-Augustinian/Platonic, account of what understanding involves. At the risk of sounding repetitious, I reiterate that the notion of family resemblance concepts is vital to both Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and this thesis.

### **A. Family Resemblances and Realism or Nominalism about Universals**

Earlier, we came across Ramsey’s appraisal of the *Tractatus* as being ‘scholastic’. I begin this chapter by positioning Wittgenstein’s *later* work next to what is probably scholasticism’s most famous, if not greatest, contribution to philosophy: the debate between realists and nominalists concerning universals.

As shall be remembered, a fundamental premise of realism is that “there can be no objective justification for the application of a general term to its instances unless its instances have something in common over and above their having in common that they *are* its instances.” (Bambrough, 1970: 121) More concretely, the realist claims that we would have no objective justification for the application of the general term ‘game’ to its instances unless its instances have something in common over and above their having in common that they are called ‘games’. The realist goes on to claim that we *do* have an objective justification for the application of some general terms to their instances, concluding that, *ipso facto*, the instances that fall under a general term *must* share some common property over and above their being instances. As should be obvious by now, the Augustinian/Platonic picture of language encountered (ever so cursorily) in the

preceding chapter lies squarely within this realist position. Let us turn, then, to nominalism.

The nominalist, as Bambrough points out, agrees with the realist that there can be objective justification for the application of our general terms *only if* there are common properties or universals, but goes on to claim that we have *no good reasons* for supposing that such universals exist. Following the argument where it leads, the nominalist concludes that we actually have *no* objective justification for the application of our general terms. In Bambrough's words, "the nominalist says that games have nothing in common except that they are called 'games'." (Bambrough, 1970: 121) Part and parcel with this, nominalists deny that the world comes all cut up for us with "cookie cutters". Instead, they accord an underlying arbitrariness to the categories we use to divvy up our experience.<sup>1</sup>

But what about Wittgenstein? Where does he stand within this debate? What I hope to show is that Wittgenstein takes a middling position that cuts through both nominalism and realism. Wittgenstein, it will become clear, "asserts at one and the same time the realist's claim that there is an objective justification for the application of the word 'game' to games *and* the nominalist's claim that there is no element that is common to all games." (My emphasis. Bambrough, 1970: 121) This, moreover, he is able to do because "he denies the joint claim of the nominalist and the realist that there

---

<sup>1</sup> John Locke, in part III of his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, captures this aspect of nominalism well when he writes (using his own peculiar terminology) that "complex ideas are made by a *voluntary* collection of ideas, put together in the mind, independent from any original patterns in nature." (Locke, 1959: 44) "The species [(or essences/universals)] formed by human understanding," Locke adds, "are thus relative, superficial, and arbitrary, not absolute." (Locke, 1959: 64) The way these ideas are put together to make 'complex ideas', he suggests, are instead influenced by "motives of convenience and utility" (p. 53), as well as our individual and communal interests (p. 13), perceptive abilities (p. 9), and even the history of the communities to which we belong and to which our languages form a part (pp. 13, 154). As we will see, Wittgenstein, while he drops talk of simple and complex ideas (– and the private language that seems to follow from such talk), nevertheless retains much of Locke's nominalism.



cannot be an objective justification for the application of the word ‘game’ to games unless there is an element that is common to all games (*universalia in rebus*) or a common relation that all games bear to something that is not a game (*universalia ante res*).” (Bambrough, 1970: 122)

That Wittgenstein agrees with the nominalist that there is no element common to all games should be evident from our initial discussion of games and Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances. (See pages 15-17 above.) The point of Wittgenstein’s talk of family resemblances, after all, was precisely to illustrate just how our general terms are (or can be) intelligible despite the fact that they (may)<sup>2</sup> come with no set of necessary and sufficient conditions. For those for whom this remains questionable, consider the following passage from Bambrough:

We may classify a set of objects by reference to the presence or absence of features ABCDE. It may well happen that five objects edcba are such that each of them has four of these properties and lacks the fifth, and that the missing feature is different in each of the five cases. A simple diagram will illustrate this situation:

e	d	c	b	a
ABCD	ABCE	ABDE	ACDE	BCDE

Here we can already see how natural and how proper it might be to apply the same word to a number of objects between which there is no common feature. And if we confine our attention to any arbitrarily selected four of these objects, say edca, then although they all *happen* to have B in common, it is clear that it is not in virtue of the presence of B that they are all rightly called by the same name. Even if the actual instances were indefinitely numerous, and they all happened to have one or more of the features in common, it would not be in virtue of the presence of the common feature or features that they would all be rightly called by the same name, since the name also applies to *possible* instances that lack the feature or features. (Bambrough, 1970: 112-113.)

As Douglas Huff notes, two things seem to follow from this description: “First, the groups of letters can be intelligibly understood to be subsumed under the same name

---

<sup>2</sup> The reason for this qualification shall be made clear in the paragraph after next.

even though the shared features are limited and no one letter, or set of letters, is held in common. And second, it cannot be said that they are subsumed under the same name because they all share the same kind of relation to one another.” (Huff, 1981: 2-3) But if Wittgenstein adheres to all of this (and he does!), what prevents us from calling him a nominalist?<sup>3</sup>

Wittgenstein is not a nominalist because, unlike the nominalist, he “rejects the realist’s inflated notions of objectivity and justification.” (Hymers, 1990: 28)

Wittgenstein, in short, disagrees with the nominalist (and the realist), and *does not* think that the existence of universals or essences is required for an objective justification of our use of general terms. In the place of universals, as Hymers insightfully remarks, Wittgenstein comes to see “*communicability* [as being] a primary constraint on objectivity [and justification].” (Hymers, 1990: 26) To understand how this can be the case, it will be helpful to first mention some further similarities that exist between the nominalist and Wittgenstein. These similarities will then serve to bring us to what is distinctive in Wittgenstein’s stance.

It was already mentioned that the nominalist finds a basic arbitrariness in the classifications we make of the world around us. In fact, nominalists assign “no limit to the number of possible classifications of objects.” (Bambrough, 1970: 126) More specifically, for the nominalist “there are only similarities and differences from which we may choose according to our [own] *purposes and interests*.” (My emphasis.

---

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein himself worries that we may confuse his position with nominalism: “We are not analyzing a phenomenon (e.g. thought) but a concept (e.g. that of thinking), and therefore the use of a word. So it may look as if what we were doing were Nominalism. Nominalists make the mistake of interpreting all words as *names*, and so of not really describing their use, but only, so to speak, giving a paper draft of such a description.” (PI \*383)

Bambrough, 126) Wittgenstein, I think, would agree with these aspects of nominalism.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that, given a special purpose, we *can* come up with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for applying a concept/term:

Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.) (PI \*69)

Hymers puts flesh on this with respect to the general terms of science. “Here,” he stresses, “it may make sound theoretical sense to insist that certain definite characteristics be present before allowing that a sample falls into a given category. So all atoms of gold have exactly 79 protons, and any atom with 79 protons is an atom of gold.” (Hymers, 2001: 5) The interests of the natural scientist, then, are a plausible example of the special purposes that, according to Wittgenstein, would justify drawing a set boundary for a concept/term. Those of us who are not natural scientists, on the other hand, can get by with less definite boundaries surrounding our concepts/terms of natural kinds (like gold). And this is because our *interests* in using such concepts/terms are not the same as those of scientists.<sup>5</sup> The question that this brings us to, however, is “how one can combine a belief in sharply bounded concepts with a family-resemblance view?” (Hymers, 2001: 5) The final answer to this question, it turns out, will also reveal to us why Wittgenstein is not a nominalist.

Wittgenstein accepts that some of our concepts/terms can be sharply bounded, coming, as it were, with lists of necessary and sufficient conditions. As a result, it may seem as though he is returning to the logicist’s dream of a language (or, at least parts of

<sup>4</sup> So would John Dupré. In his *The Disorder of Things*, Rosalind Hursthouse observes, Dupré “argues that there is no unique way of dividing up the biological world and that different modes of classification are in part determined by different *interests* of ours.” (My emphasis. Hursthouse, 2001: 202fn)

<sup>5</sup> Hymers realizes that “financial interests complicate the gold-example.” (Hymers, 1990: 20) But that need not worry us.

language) that would be clear enough to tell us when, where and how to apply our terms/concepts. Such a conclusion, however, would be mistaken. Consider the following excerpt from the Investigations:

A rule stands there like a sign-post.—Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?—And if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground—is there only *one* way of interpreting them? (PI \*85)

What Wittgenstein is suggesting here (and his discussion about rule following where he notes that “no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with a rule,” (PI \*201) makes – as we shall see further down – the same point) is that even if we have a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for applying a general term, “there is nothing in this that tells [us] how to *apply* a statement of those conditions.”<sup>6</sup> (Hymers, 1990: 27) Otherwise put, what we need in learning our general terms “is not simply a list, but how to *use* the list, and that

---

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein rejects the view that we could have a further rule telling us how to apply our rules. Among other absurdities, this would lead to an infinite regress. (See Wittgenstein, 1978: Part I \*113) Huff, it might here be worthwhile to note, takes this to be the *real* force of Wittgenstein’s attack on “essentialism” (i.e. realism): even if the realist is right about there being closed terms, he/she is mistaken in his/her logicism (i.e. the view that having a set of necessary and sufficient conditions is enough to inform us when, where, and how to apply our concepts – seemingly erasing the need for thought and judgment.) (See Huff, 1981: 19) (Interestingly enough, Immanuel Kant too recognized that rules by themselves are not enough. Consider the following passage from his “On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use”:

Between theory and practice, no matter how complete the theory may be, a middle term that provides a connection and transition is necessary. For to the concept of the understanding that contains the rule must be added an act of judgment by means of which the practitioner decides whether or not something is an instance of the rule. And since further rules cannot always be added to guide judgment in its subsumptions (for that could go on infinitely), there can be theoreticians who, lacking judgment, can never be practical in their lives, e.g., physicians or jurists, who, having done well in school, do not know how they should respond when they are asked for advice. (Kant, 1983: 61)

Note also that Kant too holds concepts to be tantamount to rules: “A concept, in terms of its form, is always something that is universal and that serves as a rule.” (Kant, 1996: A106) The use of the term ‘universal’ in this passage, I would argue, places Kant somewhere in between Plato and Wittgenstein in his understanding of ‘rules’ and ‘concepts’.)

[(importantly)] is a practical skill which can be acquired only through trial, error, and correction.” (Hymers, 1990: 27)

“There is a way,” writes Wittgenstein, “of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation* [(i.e. it is not a further rule telling us how to apply the rule – leading to an infinite regress)] but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases.” (PI \*201) “‘Obeying a rule’,” he continues in the next section, “is a *practice*.” (My emphasis. PI \*202) With these things – and those just mentioned in the above paragraph – in mind, Bambrough points out that

[i]n teaching the use of a general word we may and must refer to characteristics of the object to which it applies, and of the objects to which it does not apply, and indicate which of these characteristics count for the application of the word and which count against it. A pupil does not have to consult us on every separate occasion on which he encounters a new object, and if he did consult us every time we should have to say that he was not *learning* the use of the word. The reference that we make to a finite number of objects to which the word applies, and to a finite number of objects to which the word does not apply, is capable of equipping the pupil with a *capacity* for correctly applying or withholding the word to or from an infinite number of objects to which we have made no reference. (Second emphasis mine. Bambrough, 1970: 123-24)

The capacity that Bambrough is referring to is an *ability to make sound judgments*. As Wittgenstein phrases it (in a different but not unrelated context), “what one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right.” (PI \*xi, p. 227) Indeed, says Wittgenstein, “if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments.” (PI \*242)

This last ‘strange’ remark is key. Why? Because it places limits on the arbitrariness our categories/general terms can have, and it does so in such a way as to give rise to Wittgenstein’s (long awaited!) alternative account of objectivity and

justification. To illustrate this, Bambrough constructs a philosophical example consisting of the word 'alpha':

If I choose to give the name 'alpha' to each of a number of miscellaneous objects (the star Sirius, my fountain-pen, the Parthenon, the colour red, the number five, and the letter Z) then I may well succeed in choosing the objects so arbitrarily that I shall succeed in preventing them from having any feature in common, other than that I call them by the name 'alpha'. (Bambrough, 1970: 122)

The nominalist, according to Bambrough, "likenes the use of all general words" to this "imaginary case". (Bambrough, 1970: 122) This, Bambrough argues, nominalists do to their own detriment. How so? Because "the use of the word 'alpha' cannot be learned or taught as the use of a general word can be learned or taught." (Bambrough, 1970: 123)

Recall that when we describe or demonstrate a use for a general term we find ourselves compelled to 'refer to characteristics of the objects to which it applies, and of the objects to which it does not apply, and indicate which of these characteristics count for the application of the word and which count against it.' In so doing, "we trust that the person to whom we teach the term will be capable with our help of recognizing or coming to recognize similarities from case to case, however varied, complicated, overlapping and criss-crossing those similarities may be." (Hymers, 1990: 24)

Moreover, the pupil will have to learn, from a finite sample, how to continue in the same way for an indefinite number of instances. Such, Bambrough thinks, is not the case for 'alpha'. This is because one "cannot teach the use of the word 'alpha' except by specifically attaching it to each of the objects in [the] arbitrarily chosen list."

(Bambrough, 1970: 123) Put differently, "no characteristic [(i.e. similarities)] can be cited as a criterion for applying the word 'alpha'," hence no "observer can conclude anything from watching me attach the label to this, that, or the other object, or to any number of objects however large, about the nature of the objects or object, if any, to

which I shall later attach it.” (Bambrough, 1970: 122) To sum up: If I, as an observer, am to be able to go on applying the term in the same way, then I must have some set of criteria to employ in passing judgment on new cases – “though it is always I who pass judgment, not the criteria.” (Hymers, 1990: 24) The only criteria<sup>7</sup> to be given for applying ‘alpha’, however, consist in saying “‘Alpha’ applies to *these things*. Now go on in the same way.” (Hymers, 1990: 25) As Hymers observes, “[i]ts function, at best, is that of a proper name, and any attempt to apply it in new cases, as we would a general term, changes its use [and/or meaning].” (Hymers, 1990: 25)

Agreement in judgments, for Wittgenstein, is required for language to be possible. In the case of general terms, such agreement requires that there be criteria: features, similarities, characteristics that take on a certain relevance or significance as guides to our judgment.<sup>8</sup> In Bambrough’s words: “We can be sure that *if* [something] is a classification *then* it is backed by objective similarities and differences, and that if it is *not* backed by objective similarities and differences then it is merely an arbitrary system

---

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps a ‘definition’ of what is meant by ‘criteria’ is here called for. Jonathan Dancy gives the following “tentative account of that notion”:

A is a *criterion* for B if and only if the truth/occurrence of A is necessarily good but defeasible evidence for the truth of B, and in the absence of contradictory indications sufficient evidence. Hence in favorable cases the truth/occurrence of A perfectly justifies the belief/assertion of B. [And] to know this is part of competence with the concept of B; part of what it is to know the meaning of ‘B’.  
(Dancy, 1982: 72)

Also of use is Rogers Albritton:

I have no intention of committing Wittgenstein to the view that the criterion of X is a logically necessary and sufficient condition of X *in the nature of things*, so to speak. Criteria are for him primarily criteria that men ‘accept’, ‘adopt’, ‘fix’, ‘introduce’, and ‘use’, or ‘apply’ in connection with their use of certain *expressions*. If anything is the criterion of x and therefore a logically necessary and sufficient condition of x, it is because (in some sense of ‘because’) men agree in certain *conventions*. (Albritton, 1968: 236)

Such an ‘Albrittonian’ understanding of ‘criteria’ will ultimately underpin much of the discussion of chapter four of this thesis. I should add, however, that on both Albritton’s and Dancy’s accounts of ‘criteria’, the concept of ‘rule’ comes to (unlike in Plato or even in Kant) have less of an algorithmic flavor, and takes on the more “informal sense of norms or standards of correctness.” (Lovibond, 2002: 69fn)

<sup>8</sup> Huff aptly points out that although some such features/similarities/characteristics will “make up particular rule[s]... the way they are meant to be taken as relevant remains distinct from any formulation of the rule[s].” (Huff, 1981: 18) Otherwise we would end up with logicism. (Remember Hymers’s remark to the effect ‘that it is I, not the criteria, that pass judgment.’)

of names.” (Bambrough, 1970: 125) The crucial point, however, is that by ‘objective similarities and differences’ Bambrough – and Wittgenstein – does not mean what the realist or nominalist might mean. To the contrary, for Wittgenstein “a similarity or difference, like classification(s) connected with it, is objective if and only if it can be taught or learned.” (Hymers, 1990: 26) On Wittgenstein’s take, then,

it makes sense to speak of classification, only if the purported classification can be taught or learned, and our practices of teaching and learning provide all the objectivity and justification that we could ask for, since no universal and no list of necessary and sufficient conditions by itself would be capable of justifying our use of a general term.” (Hymers, 1990: 28)

And having arrived at such an understanding of objectivity and justification, it should simultaneously be clear that Wittgenstein is neither a realist *nor a nominalist*. He has carved out a position that ‘dissolves’ both.

But in moving beyond realism and nominalism in this way, has Wittgenstein left us with more questions than answers? For one, does Wittgenstein’s novel account of objectivity and justification leave us espousing some sort of linguistic idealism or relativism?<sup>9</sup> After all, there will probably be a plurality of classification systems, each of which would be objective insofar as it could be taught or learned. Furthermore, it may remain unclear as to just how far Wittgenstein has moved away from realism, nominalism, or, for that matter, Augustinianism/Platonism. The definitions of criteria found in footnote 7 may incline one towards thinking that Wittgenstein’s position really just amounts to a watered down version of the Augustinian/Platonist standpoint. Indeed, how different is the claim that ‘*part* of what it is to know the meaning of ‘B’ is to know that the truth/occurrence of A is necessarily good but defeasible evidence for the truth of

---

<sup>9</sup> The same accusation, recall, was brought up in a different but not unrelated context in chapter one. (See page 17 of this thesis.) The issue of linguistic idealism shall be dealt with at the end of this chapter. Relativism, however, shall be tackled only in the final chapter.



B, and in the absence of contradictory indications sufficient evidence,' from the Augustinian/Platonic view that the meaning of a word is given by an essence, or a list of necessary and sufficient conditions that it denotes?<sup>10</sup> In what follows I turn to a discussion of rule-following made notorious by Saul Kripke that will address both these queries in Wittgenstein's favor. Focusing most of its attention on Wittgenstein's refusal to identify understanding with either mental states or mental processes, the discussion will at the same time expound what is wrong in agreeing with the Augustinian/Platonist that understanding consists (*entirely*) in the grasping of concepts understood as rules or sets of necessary and sufficient conditions, together with the error of "innatist" theories in linguistics and the philosophy of language that are often accoutrements of such Augustinianism/Platonism. Lastly, a brief discussion of the Kripke vs. Hacker and Baker debate over the private language argument will bring to the surface what is mistaken in calling Wittgenstein a 'linguistic idealist'.

## **B. Understanding and Rule-Following**

The puzzle about rule-following that Saul Kripke points us to is the one expressed by Wittgenstein as follows:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. (PI \*201; see: Kripke, 1982)

---

<sup>10</sup> Notice that there is a distinction to be made between logicism and Augustinianism/Platonism. Logicism makes the claim that a list of necessary and sufficient conditions is itself enough to show us how to use the list in applying our concepts to particular cases. Augustinianism/Platonism, on the other hand, merely says that the meaning of a concept is captured by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. One can know the meaning of a concept, on this take, while nonetheless not being able to use it. It is not for nothing that Augustine, with his dictum 'I know until you ask me', became the patron saint of students! (On the Augustinian/Platonic approach, we could say, language is "like an engine idling".) (PI \*132)

Take a series of numbers: 1, 3, 5, 7 written on a blackboard. The person who wrote the series could ask you to continue it. You write down 9, 11, 13, 15. However, this was not the series they had in mind. Instead, they claim that the series runs as follows: 1, 3, 5, 7, 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 9, 11, 13, 15.<sup>11</sup> What this – by extrapolation – is supposed to show, is that “a series of examples does not *in itself contain* the information of what constitutes going on in the same way. [A] series is itself consistent with an infinite number of ways of going on.”<sup>12</sup> (Martin, 1987: 36)

This is worrisome. Wittgenstein, after all, pointed out that “the use of the word ‘rule’ and the use of the word ‘same’ are interwoven.” (PI \*225) And it seems true that we should like to say: “someone is following a rule if he/she always acts in the *same* way on the *same* kind of occasion.” (My emphasis. Winch, 1958: 28) But if any series of actions that a person performs can be brought within the scope of some formula or other if we are prepared to make it sufficiently complicated ( – this follows from the previous paragraph), then it becomes unclear as to how one will be able to distinguish between cases in which someone is actually following a rule and cases in which they are not (e.g. cases in which they are exhibiting “merely regular behavior”). (Martin, 1987: 65) Moreover, and given all of the above, it becomes unclear how one can ever be sure that someone has understood something properly. With regards to this, Wittgenstein gives the example of a student who has apparently understood how to continue a series of adding 2, but who, after reaching 1000, reveals that he/she hasn’t since he/she then continues the series as follows: 1004, 1008, 1012.... (PI \*185)

Misunderstandings such as the last, however, rarely – if ever – (actually) happen.

---

<sup>11</sup> I take this example from Winch, The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1958: 29).

<sup>12</sup> This is a variation on the theme that even with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions we still wouldn’t know how to apply our terms. Something more/else is required.

For whatever reason, we seem to have a knack for catching the gist of things properly. To use Robert Martin's example, although the finite sample on which we base our hypothesis of how to use the word 'Duck' is consistent with an infinite number of other hypotheses, we nonetheless *don't* encounter people who make use of these other hypotheses in their application of the word 'Duck'.<sup>13</sup> (Martin, 1987: 38) But why not? According to Martin "because these hypotheses are fully consistent with all our experience," we cannot properly be said to have "*learned* that they are false." (Martin, 1987: 38) Instead – and following the likes of Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor – he thinks that we can only account for this phenomenon by postulating "some *innate* mechanism that rules these out." (Martin, 1987: 38)

We can now pose the main question of this segment of the chapter: "what would Wittgenstein say about all this?" Martin's talk about an 'innate mechanism' suggests that one "knows the application of the rule of the series quite apart from remembering actual applications to particular numbers." (PI \*213) It suggests that "understanding itself is a state which is the *source* of the correct use [of a rule]." (PI \*146) Moreover, Martin seems to want to characterize this innate mechanism as being some sort of Fodorian "internal system of

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Hypothesis' and 'hypotheses' are Martin's terms. Wittgenstein – and we shall get glimpses of this during the rest of this chapter – would reject such 'scientism' in the philosophy of language. As an example of this, remember his claim, mentioned and elaborated on above, that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases." (PI \*201) One might think that understanding a rule consists in having the right set of instructions for interpreting the rule (or, if we want to sound scientific, the right *hypothesis* about the rule). But, Wittgenstein thinks, any instructions we have for interpreting the rule will also be consistent with indefinitely many different interpretations: "any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support." (PI \*198) Here, Wittgenstein thinks, we descend into an infinite regress. Wittgenstein, then, rejects the view that understanding consists in having the right interpretations or hypotheses concerning the use (or the rules for the use) of our words. With that, however, I fear that I have overstepped the bounds of this footnote. Suffice it to say that it was these considerations (among others) that led me to want to write on understanding and mental processes after having just written about family resemblances and Wittgenstein's dissolution of realism and nominalism about universals. The two topics are intimately linked. I would nonetheless like to here remark that in the main body of the text we will see Wittgenstein's rejection of yet other takes on what understanding consists in. Also, and for a sustained attack on contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics from a Wittgensteinian point of view, see Baker and Hacker's Language, Sense and Non-Sense (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). Special attention is paid to Chomsky.

representation”; a “system of representation rich enough to frame and rule out hypotheses and thus rich enough to be called an internal, unlearned, ‘language of thought’.” (Martin, 1987: 38) So construed, I think, Wittgenstein could not be more opposed to Martin.

A large portion of Wittgenstein's Investigations, sections 143-242, has as its central theme the concept of understanding. This portion can be further divided leaving us with sections 143-84 which deal with understanding itself, and the remaining sections (185-242) which deal with understanding in relation to rules. For the limited purpose(s) and extent of this chapter (and thesis), I shall focus most of my attention on sections 143-84. In so doing, I hope to show how, according to Wittgenstein, our capacity to use language correctly cannot be due to some innate understanding we have of language. With this in mind, I shall focus on Wittgenstein’s rejection of the notion that understanding is either a mental state or a mental process.

Two language-games are brought forth by Wittgenstein in sections 143-84, both of which shed light on the nature of understanding. In one case a teacher is trying to teach and then establish when a student has understood a particular “series of numbers.” (PI \*143) In constructing or continuing a particular series, the student may begin by making mistakes, then (seemingly) proceed to follow the rule of the series correctly, only to then lapse into error once more. What the teacher is trying to determine is when it would be correct to say that the student has “understood the principle of the series.” (PI \*152) The second case is much the same except that the central concern is reading rather than a mathematical series. In this case, a teacher is instructing a student how to read. She is at the same time trying to determine when it would be safe to say that the student has truly read something or become able to read, as opposed to merely pretending or chancing upon the correct

pronunciation, or, merely reciting passages from memory while making use of context to chance upon ‘reading’ what is written on a sheet in front of her. The first case, that of understanding a mathematical series, is dealt with in sections 143-55, while that of reading is dealt with from sections 156-72. (I will not reconstruct all the particularities of these two cases here. A familiarity with them, however, will be helpful in reading what follows.)

In section 146, after an attempt to establish at what point it would be safe to say that the student has understood the principle of a series – “Has he understood the system when he continues the series to the hundredth place?” – Wittgenstein imagines a likely objection: “to have got the system (or, again, to understand it) can’t consist in continuing the series up to *this* or *that* number: that is only applying one’s understanding. The understanding itself is a state which is the *source* of the correct use.” (PI \*146) This objection is an ‘understandable’ one. It stems from the idea that correct behavior (e.g. my asking someone to multiply two by two and then the other person’s answering “four”) is an outer manifestation of an inner state of understanding. On this view, understanding can be shown by certain behaviors (e.g. answering questions correctly, speaking intelligently, etc.), but these behaviors are not understanding itself: understanding, rather (and one is tempted to say here ‘*the* understanding’, transforming understanding into some sort of entity like ‘the mind’), is something that is unobservable (directly) but which is, nonetheless, an inner something that makes these behaviors possible. It is, after all, this very innerness of understanding that makes it possible for people to pretend to be reading (or not to be able to read) and, also, because of this innerness that we can say things like “he alone knows if he’s really reading or merely saying the words off by heart.” (PI \*156) Understanding, according to his view, is something private (it can be hidden); in other words, understanding is a mental phenomenon. (This

stance is very congenial to an outlook that declares understanding of language as being grounded in some sort of innate mechanism.)

Wittgenstein, however, rejects the idea that understanding is a mental phenomenon. Dividing – I suppose, for the purpose of elucidation – mental phenomena into two types: mental states and mental processes, Wittgenstein denies that understanding can be located in either of them. Take, as a start, mental states. The key word here, as it turns out, is not ‘mental’ but ‘*state*’. As Baker and Hacker note, for Wittgenstein psychological or mental states “have genuine duration.” (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 609) Furthermore, Wittgenstein thinks that if phenomena have a genuine duration, then the “enduring phenomena can typically be observed, continuously or intermittently.” (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 609) These two aspects of mental states, we shall now see, undermine any attempts to identify understanding as a token mental state.

The relevant passages in which Wittgenstein rejects the notion that understanding is a mental state are those found in notes (a) and (b) of section 151 of the Investigations. In note (a), Wittgenstein gives as examples of mental states: depression, excitement and pain. The main criterion for a mental phenomenon to be a mental state, namely that these phenomena should have genuine duration, is fulfilled by depression (as well as pain and excitement) since, after all, we can be “depressed the whole day.” (PI \*151) It does *not* make sense, however, to say “I understood all day long.” Wittgenstein overrides any attempt that uses the fact that we say “I understood since yesterday” as a counter-example to his claim that understanding is not a mental state. (PI \*151) When we say “I understood since yesterday,” Wittgenstein stresses, we don’t mean that we have understood “continuously” since yesterday. (PI \*151) Although we can be in a continuous state (and to be continuous is precisely what Wittgenstein

means by 'state') of depression, we don't continually understand something – understanding has more of a sudden aspect to it: we understand something and then we continue with our lives. As Hacker and Baker note:

One may understand something *from* a certain time (the time at which one learnt or understood *it*) *for* a certain time (as long as one passes 'tests' of understanding, i.e. satisfies criteria of understanding), i.e. until one forgets or ceases to be able to do such-and-such. But one does not understand it continuously from the time one came to understand it until one ceases, as one is in a state of acute anxiety continuously from the time one hears that one's child is missing until, some hours later, one hears that all is well. (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 609-10)

Just as having an ability to walk (for example) does not mean that you are always walking (you may have the ability to sit and run also), understanding how to continue a series of numbers too doesn't mean that you are always continuing that series (either in overt behavior or simply mentally). In other words – and to sum up – understanding, like an ability, does not share that element of continuity (or duration) which seems to be vital (at least for Wittgenstein) for something to count as a mental 'state'.<sup>14</sup>

Wittgenstein also rejects the notion that understanding is a mental process.

Again, the key word here is not 'mental' but '*process*'. Wittgenstein does not deny that there are such things as mental processes (in fact, he even provides us with specific examples of them: "A pain's growing more and less; the hearing of a tune or a sentence: these are mental processes."), he only rejects the notion that *understanding* is a mental process.<sup>15</sup> (PI \*154) Baker and Hacker explain that mental processes are the same as any other processes but instead are "distinguished by... the fact that they can (commonly) be concealed, their owner's avowal has a privileged status, (and) their specific identity is logically dependent upon that

---

<sup>14</sup> For more parallels between understanding and ability see the chapter on "Understanding and Ability" in Baker and Hacker's Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980: 595-620). The last ten pages are especially illuminating.

<sup>15</sup> This brings out, I think, just one of the ways in which it would be wrong to call the later Wittgenstein a behaviorist.

of their owner, etc.” (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 608) The important thing to note about processes, however – whether they be mental or physical – is that they are characterized as taking time, and, thereby, as “having a beginning, a middle and an end.” (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 608) In accordance with all the above characteristics of mental processes, we could say (making use of Wittgenstein’s previous examples) that saying a sentence or singing a tune *silently* to oneself would be mental processes.

We have just seen how processes take time: this immediately gives rise to problems for anyone who wishes to claim that understanding is a mental process. As Wittgenstein reminds us, when someone exclaims “‘Now I can go on!’— ... this capacity, this understanding is something that makes its appearance in a moment.” (PI \*151) Understanding, then, is (or can be) sudden. It may take a long period of (or process involving) struggle before one understands but when understanding is ‘attained’ it comes about in a moment – we often speak, after all, of a “flash of understanding.” (See PI \*191) If this is the case, however, then understanding lacks a central criterion of mental processes, complicating any attempts to conflate the two together.

Wittgenstein goes on to reject any attempt to credit mental processes that may accompany this ‘flash of understanding’ as having been the source of understanding.<sup>16</sup> He does so, basically, by an appeal to examples. In one example he notes how understanding a mathematical series might as a matter of fact be accompanied by a mental process, e.g. the formula of the series occurring to you (– occurring, possibly, much like when you hum a tune to yourself), but, Wittgenstein goes on, there are similar cases where perhaps:

...B does not think of formulae. Rather he watches A writing his numbers down with a certain feeling of tension, and all sorts of vague thoughts go through his head. Finally, he

---

<sup>16</sup> Upon reflection, this arm of Wittgenstein’s critique of those who would equate understanding with a mental process (or mental processes) appears to be the strongest one.



asks himself: "What is the series of differences?" He finds the series 4, 6, 8, 10 and says: Now I can go on.

Or he watches and says "Yes, I know that series"—and continues it just as he would have done if A had written down the series 1, 3, 5, 7, 9.

—Or he says nothing at all and simply continues the series. Perhaps he had what may be called the sensation "that's easy!". (Such a sensation is, for example, that of a light quick intake of breath, as when one is slightly startled.) (PI \*151)

Indeed, Wittgenstein notes, "[i]t is perfectly imaginable that the formula [(or, for that matter, a list of necessary and sufficient conditions)] should occur to him and that he should nevertheless not understand." (PI \*152) For Wittgenstein, then, "no matter what mental processes accompany understanding, they are neither necessary nor sufficient for it." (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 608) As Wittgenstein says: "Even if someone had a particular capacity only when, and only as long as, he had a particular feeling, the feeling would not be the capacity." (PI \*181)

A final refutation of the view that understanding is a mental process is one that is aptly elucidated by Hacker and Baker. They observe that

[i]f someone were to insist that with him understanding is a mental process, we should draw his attention to the differences between the criteria for mental processes and the criteria for understanding. Understanding chess, understanding German, or understanding Bach are not interruptable as is a mental recitation of a poem. An 'interruption' of understanding, is a loss of understanding, or failure of understanding, not a hiatus in a process resulting from withdrawal of attention. Suddenly understanding the rule of a series is not something that goes on, lasts as long as, or longer than, the noise of the passing traffic. Understanding the multiplication tables is not a process with a beginning, middle, and end, but a gradually acquired ability to operate a calculus. Understanding what someone says is not an articulate process like the utterance of the sentence, nor yet an unarticulated process, for it is not a process at all. (Baker/Hacker, 1980: 608-09)

We have seen how, for Wittgenstein, understanding can be neither a mental 'state', nor a mental 'process'. In both cases Wittgenstein's key arguments centered around the words 'state' or 'process' and not on the word 'mental'. Understanding, we have seen, does not have the kind of duration that is required for something to be a state, either mental or otherwise. Nor does understanding have the requisite temporality (and characteristics that are

associated with this temporality) for one to count it as being a process. This, however, leaves us in the unfortunate position of knowing only what understanding is not, rather than what it is. But one thing is (becoming) clear, namely, that Wittgenstein does not think that our understanding resides in some sort of innate and hidden faculty of the mind. In fact, Wittgenstein instead claims that understanding is more analogous to “the mastery of a technique.” (PI \*199) He says that “to obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions).” (PI \*199) “‘Obeying a rule’,” Wittgenstein tells us – and we have already come across this – “is a practice.” (PI \*202) This conjures up *public* criteria that seem very much opposed to the privateness that innateness calls to mind. Put differently, by directly connecting (I hesitate to use the term ‘reducing’) understanding to, as it were, an ability, Wittgenstein seems to be eliminating a distinction on which innatist theories depend. Contrary to section 146 of the Investigations, understanding is *not* the source of our abilities: Wittgenstein does not think that the meaning of a word is (reducible to) some rule that the person had in mind (consciously or unconsciously) when applying it (the word).

### **C. Private Languages and Linguistic Idealism**

So where does this place us within the Baker and Hacker vs. Kripke debate over the nature of rule-following and the private-language argument? Kripke, it is well-known, concluded from the problems surrounding how we could ever know that someone was following the same rule, or that they were continuing the same series, that “if we are to find a ground for our belief that there is an objectively correct method of continuing a series, we must look beyond the individual to the community of rule-followers.” (Dancy, 1989: 75) “What makes our continuation of the series correct,” Kripke believes, “is that the community agrees with it” – and that it is (indeed, *must be*) *a community* is what Kripke takes to undermine

solipsism and the notion that there could be such a thing as a private language. (Dancy, 1989: 75) Baker and Hacker, on the other hand, consider “the thrust of the rule-following considerations [to be] that rule-following is a practice, a custom or a way of behaving.” (Dancy, 1989: 76) “Obeying a rule,” on their take, “is a matter of public behavior, not the operation of a private mechanism.” (Dancy, 1989: 76) And if they are right about this, then it follows, as Dancy points out, that the ‘publicness’ (i.e. the anti-private-‘languageness’) of rule following practices lies in ways of behaving instead of in Kripke’s “sense of being regulated by a community.” (Dancy, 1989: 76) What, then, are we to make of this difference between Kripke and Baker and Hacker?

Personally, I think that it is a difference that does not make (much of) a difference. How so? Peter Winch has convincingly argued that part of what it is to be engaged in a rule-governed practice is that *others* should be able to discover the rule that is being followed.<sup>17</sup> To see why, let us return to our original example of someone (call her ‘A’) writing the series of numbers 1, 3, 5, 7 on a blackboard and asking someone else, ‘B’, to continue it. After B has written 9, 11, 13, 15, Winch asks us to picture the following:

Let us suppose that A refuses to accept this as a continuation of his series, saying it runs as follows: 1, 3, 5, 7, 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 9, 11, 13, 15. He then asks B to continue from there. At this point B has a variety of alternatives to choose from. Let us suppose that he makes a choice and that A again refuses to accept it, but substitutes another continuation of his own. And let us suppose that this continues for some time. There would undoubtedly come a point at which B, with perfect justification, would say that A was not really following a *mathematical* rule at all, even though all the continuations he had made to date *could* be brought within the scope of some formula. Certainly A was following a rule; but his rule was: Always to substitute a continuation different from the one suggested by B at every stage. And though this is a perfectly good rule of its kind, it does not belong to arithmetic. (Winch, 1958: 30)

“All [of] this suggests,” according to Winch, “that one has to take account not only of the actions of the person whose behavior is in question as a candidate for the category of

---

<sup>17</sup> This ties in with Wittgenstein’s communicability constraint on objectivity and justification spoken about before.

rule-following, but also the *reactions of other people* to what he does.” (Winch, 1958: 30) “More specifically,” he writes, “it is only in a situation in which it makes sense to suppose that somebody else could in principle discover the rule which I am following that I can intelligibly be said to follow a rule at all.” (Winch, 1958: 30) In sum, there seems to be an *internal relation* between the notion of a community and that of rule-following practices. Insofar as a Robinson Crusoe, stranded on his island, were to be engaged in rule-guided behavior, he too would be in community with others given that the rule-following nature of his activities makes it such that others would be, *in principle*, capable of understanding his language/practices as well. So stated, this may look like it begs the question against the solipsist, but since it comes *at the end* of much argument, it does not.<sup>18</sup>

Wittgenstein’s anti-private language argument, as just construed, can add (at least) two noteworthy elements to our discussion so far. First, notice how a Wittgensteinian emphasis on behavior, practices, customs, community – in short, “forms of life”<sup>19</sup> – belies attempts to label Wittgenstein a ‘linguistic idealist’. *By tying language to the world and others in the manner he does, Wittgenstein avoids both solipsism and idealism.*<sup>20</sup> Secondly, and similarly, notice how the same emphasis on behavior, practices, customs, etc., takes meaning and understanding out of the mind and places them in the world (Hacker and Baker) or society (Kripke). The Augustinian/Platonist, we said (pages 33-34 and footnote 10), is tempted to maintain that we can understand the meaning of *all* our terms/concepts solely by grasping the list of necessary and

---

<sup>18</sup> The argument – not really provided here – is given by Wittgenstein, and elucidated in their separate, but internally related ways, by Hacker and Baker and Kripke. For Kripke’s side of the argument see his On Rules and Private Language (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982). Baker and Hacker’s reply to Kripke is in their Scepticism, Rules and Language (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> In On Certainty Wittgenstein says that “it is our *acting* that lies at the bottom of the language-game.” (My emphasis. Wittgenstein, 1969: \*204)

<sup>20</sup> For two detailed accounts that make related points see Newton Garver’s “Philosophy as Grammar” and David Bloor’s “The Question of Linguistic Idealism Revisited.” Both are in The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

sufficient conditions that (so they allege) specifies (also *all* of) them. Wittgenstein, however, denies both the claim that all our concepts are so specified (switching to talk of family resemblances and criteria in the place of necessary and sufficient conditions) and – more fundamentally – the contention that to understand a concept is just to identify its (purported) list of necessary and sufficient conditions.

When Wittgenstein writes that necessary and sufficient conditions/formula/criteria can occur to one but that one might still not know ‘how to go on’, or that they may not occur to one and yet one may nevertheless, despite this, ‘get things right’, he is revealing to us the importance of *use* for determining meaning and understanding. This, in turn, brings out the force of the term ‘part’ in the attempted definition of criteria given by Dancy in footnote 7. If only ‘*part* of what it is to know the meaning of ‘B’ is to know its criteria, then that is because we must – even just to get to know its criteria – ultimately look to the various uses a concept/term is put to in actual affairs in order to arrive at its meaning. Indeed, the ability to use a concept/term properly<sup>21</sup> is in large part just what we mean when we say that someone has understood it. And – as we have seen – it is not the case that we should say that an ability to apply a concept/term properly merely exhibits an, altogether apart from this ability, already held understanding of the concept/term: not only can we cite a list of necessary and sufficient conditions without understanding a concept/term, but without the ability to apply our concepts correctly what evidence would there be of understanding? It is such considerations that led to Wittgenstein’s anti-Augustinian/Platonist ‘doctrine’ of “meaning as use,” and it is this very same emphasis on use, or, more accurately, *customary or established use*, that will allow us to generate a Wittgensteinian account of metaphor in chapter four. (PI \*43) But before we get into that, I shall

---

<sup>21</sup> In chapter four we shall elaborate on the meaning of ‘proper’ or ‘correct’ by connecting it to the notion of customary or established usage.

first draw out, in the next chapter, significant connections between Wittgenstein's later views and (what I call) contextualism in ethics. Chapter four's description of metaphor will only further these associations.

## Chapter 3: Contextualist Ethics and the Later Wittgenstein

*All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality—without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.*

—George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

I now want to trace some of the congruencies that exist between the thought of the later Wittgenstein and what I have decided to name ‘contextualism’ in ethics. To do this, I shall first adumbrate some of the main insights of contextualism. After doing that, I shall show how these insights have their counterparts in the thought of the later Wittgenstein. Along the way, we shall see that the dialectical movement of contextualism parallels that of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. The presence of Wittgensteinian elements in contextualism, I hope to show, is close to ubiquitous.

### **A. Contextualism in Ethics**

Contextualism begins with the particular. In many ways, as Martha Nussbaum notes, it is “an Aristotelian defense of the priority of the particular.”(Nussbaum, 1995c: 165) Furthermore, and in its concern with the particular over the universal, contextualism emphasizes the importance of developing our “abilities of perception.”

(Nussbaum, 1995c: 154) In fact, developing these ‘abilities of perception’ is viewed as a moral task and exercising them is seen as being a “moral achievement.” (Nussbaum 1995c: 154) As John Kekes says, a “crucial moral task is to perceive accurately the situation in which one is called upon to act.” (Kekes, 1984: 10) In the spirit of contextualism’s stress on minutiae and individual cases, then, I’d like to jump-start and show just how picturing something in a certain way could be – *in itself* – a ‘moral achievement’ by relying on a model that stems from my own experience.

When I was eighteen, I lived for seven months in a Buddhist forest monastery in northeastern Thailand. Our monastery did not have electricity or running water. Our two sources of freshwater were a well and gigantic raised urns that captured rainwater that fell off the main meditation *sala*’s<sup>1</sup> roof. These huge urns were somewhat like beer kegs and had taps located at the bottom of them. One day, a large snake (to this day I do not know what kind of snake it was) made its resting spot underneath one of the urns. It just so happens that this urn was our ‘favorite’ one, as it was conveniently located near the back entrance of the *sala* – the one that we monks used most frequently. The snake’s presence under the urn, however, made it dangerous to use that urn, and, so, we had to – inconveniently – make use of the other urns. This went on for three days. (Chasing the snake away or killing it was not an option since monasteries are viewed by Thais as sanctuaries for humans *and* animals. Outside of the monastery, however, the Thais would have swiftly disposed of it.)<sup>2</sup>

I can vouch for the other monks and say that we were all pretty anxious and looking

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘*Sala*’ is a word that Thais pronounce with delight. The ‘main *sala*’ refers to a building in which monks eat, give talks, meditate, and chant with villagers. There is another *sala* in which monks, and only monks, congregate.

<sup>2</sup> This is true and is not a stereotype. I mention it only because I was always amazed at how Thais would undergo almost complete personality changes when moving from the world of the monastery to the world of ‘the world’. (Of course there were and are exceptions.)



forward to when this snake would move on its way. It was at this time that Ajahn Jayasaro, a British monk in his late thirties who had lived in the monastery since the age of nineteen, had a somewhat eccentric gestalt. Whereas the other monks – including myself – saw the snake as nothing more than a nuisance: a hindrance, and a clog to our daily routine, Ajahn Jayasaro saw things differently. He saw things, so to speak, from the perspective of the snake. Ajahn Jayasaro had the idea that maybe the snake was lying under the urn, not in order to annoy us, but, rather, because it was thirsty! (Put differently, he looked at the snake from the perspective of *its* “interests, desires, and loathings” – not from his (or our) own.) (Frye, 1983: 75) He filled a bowl with water and, slowly, brought the bowl and placed it near the snake, presenting it as a gift. Strangely, and magically, within a minute after having placed the bowl of water near the snake, the snake moved on its way and went back into the forest. It did not drink from the bowl of water mind you (I don’t think – nor do I think that Ajahn Jayasaro thought – that snakes do that sort of thing), but, nonetheless, it was as if that snake was waiting there all that time as a way of testing us monks in order to see whether or not we were really skilled at acts of kindness and at practicing the teachings of the Buddha. Whatever the ‘real reasons’ why the snake moved on its way just when it did ( – perhaps Ajahn Jayasaro’s movement simply scared it away), it is nonetheless the case that Ajahn Jayasaro’s gesture created something magical out of what had – *for three days* – been nothing more than an annoying situation. His gesture truly required skill in mindful and caring perception. His picturing the situation in the way he did was truly a ‘moral achievement’ – a lesson to us all.<sup>3</sup>

Ajahn Jayasaro brought the ‘best possibility’ out of the situation we were in. He

---

<sup>3</sup> It should be clear that the ethical import of this example can be found/made to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to situations in which only humans are involved. Nevertheless, and for those who don’t like the example of the snake, I suggest reading Maria Lugones’s discussion of her ongoing relationship with her mother in “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” *Hypatia*, Summer 1987; 2: 3-19.

fashioned<sup>4</sup> a work of art out of a snake lying under an urn. What he did was beautiful and it brings a smile to my heart to this day. But, and as Nussbaum points out and emphasizes (in relation to a different example of course), the moral significance of Ajahn Jayasaro's picture of the situation does not lie "only in its causal relation to his subsequent speeches and acts [(i.e. his bringing the bowl of water and offering it to the snake)], but as a *moral achievement in its own right*." (My emphasis. Nussbaum, 1990c: 151.) Ajahn Jayasaro's viewing things from the perspective of the snake was, on its own, and even before it led to his bringing the bowl of water to it, a moral achievement. As Nussbaum tells us, "picturings, describings, feelings, and communications – actions in their own right – have a moral value that is not reducible to that of the overt acts they engender." (Nussbaum, 1990c: 153) In fact (and in this case at least), the overt acts that they engender can be quite ridiculous (– bringing water to a snake!), but the picture motivating them can still be very meaningful and illuminating. Furthermore, it should also be clear that a strict or simplistic utilitarian interpretation would have difficulty applying here. In the case of Ajahn Jayasaro, one cannot give meaning to his action with regard to its effects: snakes, after all, don't drink water from bowls, and, also, even if the snake had not left, but, rather, had remained under the urn, it is evident that Ajahn Jayasaro's action would have still been illuminating and meaningful to us (– although it would have been a bit less dramatic!).

Picturings, then, *can* be moral achievements. Part of the reason for this, as Nussbaum explains, is that "situations [like persons] are all highly concrete, and they do not present themselves with duty labels on them." (Nussbaum, 1990c: 156) Although we monks had it as our task (indeed, our duty and our 'categorical imperative') to be kind and compassionate, unless we were able to perceive or picture things in certain ways, we would not always have been able

---

<sup>4</sup> What Ajahn Jayasaro did truly was an act of creative interpretation. It required an active and engaged 'moral imagination'. The type of seeing going on in this case was not at all passive...

to perform that task well. As Nussbaum says, “without abilities of perception, duty is blind and therefore powerless.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 156) This leads Nussbaum to conclude that “in good deliberation and judgment, particulars [– concrete perceptions –] are in some sense prior to general rules and principles.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 165) “Without the ability to respond to and resourcefully interpret the concrete particulars of a context,” she says, “[we] could not begin to figure out which rules and standing commitments are operative in them.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 156) In the example of Ajahn Jayasaro, it was his ability to picture things in a certain way, his shift in attitude, that allowed him to act as a true monk should (i.e. compassionately and lovingly towards all sentient beings).<sup>5</sup> As Nussbaum says, we are “responsible... for getting the detail of... the context, for making sure that nothing is lost on [us], for feeling fully, for getting the tone right.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 156) Not doing so – as was the case for all of us monks except Ajahn Jayasaro – and being obtuse, “is a moral failing.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 156) Perhaps my example is a bit extreme, but I do think that it is telling. Certainly, it establishes the importance of abilities of perception in such a way as to work against viewing standard Kantian conceptions of the ethical in a fully sympathetic light. Without “a fine-tuned perception of particulars,” without an awareness of context and situation, without, that is, the ability to “see some new aspect[s] of the concrete case[s] at hand,” it is very difficult to see how a Kantian ethics of duty could ever come into play to begin with. (Nussbaum, 1990c: 157; 160)

The ability to ‘perceive a situation accurately’ requires that one have a ‘fine-tuned perception’ and that one becomes what Nussbaum calls a “‘mistress of shades’, a reader of nuance and complexity.” (Nussbaum, 1990b: 134) Becoming a ‘mistress of shades’, on its part, requires that one have “moral imagination: the ability to shift one’s point of view so as to imaginatively recreate the perspective and emotional tone of others

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course this – at least according to Buddhists – applies to everyone, not just to monks.

with whom we are interacting.” (Mason, 1998: 5) It requires the ability to ‘see some new aspect(s) of the concrete case(s) at hand’. As Sheila Mason notes, “the quality of attention at the center of this view of moral life is one capable of focusing on the ‘inexhaustibly rich’ detail of human situations.” (Mason, 1998: 7)

Interestingly enough, affect, especially love and care, is seen by many contextualists to be crucial if one is going to achieve “fineness of perception” and, *ipso facto*, be a ‘mistress of shades’. (Kekes, 1984: 14) Just as it is when one loves and cares about someone that the “thought that this person is not replaceable,” that he or she is unique, occurs, so too does a loving attention to things/persons/situations/etc., contribute greatly to an awareness of the uniqueness and particularities of those things/persons/situations/etc. (Nussbaum, 1990c: 167) A loving vision, then – and on this take – is a vision that sees particulars. Furthermore, it is a “loving scrutiny of appearances,” a scrutiny informed by “affective engagement,” that will make it such that any of the various features of situations/persons/things/etc. will strike one as being morally salient,<sup>6</sup> and, *ipso facto*, call forth action and the application of whatever moral

---

<sup>6</sup> Here I can’t help but think of Max Weber’s claim that “[e]mpirical reality becomes ‘culture’ because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas.” (Weber, 1949: 76) Or, as he majestically puts it: “[c]ulture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance.” (Weber, 1949: 81) What Weber is pointing to in these statements – fifty years before Thomas Kuhn and almost seventy-five years before feminist philosophers of science would do the same (only across the board, and not just in the social sciences) – is that, at least in the cultural sciences, there is an intimate relationship between the object of study and the perceiving subject. This is true to such an extent that in the cultural sciences the object of study only emerges when the *interests* (i.e. the values, points of view, evaluative norms, biases, etc.) of the subject lead it to focus upon a particular aspect of the “infinite richness of reality.” (Weber, 1949: 111) In other words, *in the cultural sciences biases have a positive cognitive importance*. Whereas discussion of objectivity in the natural sciences has traditionally (i.e. pre-Kuhn and pre-feminist philosophy of science) stressed the importance of the elimination of personal and collective bias, in the social sciences those very biases become a pre-condition for ever having an object of study. As Weber says, “we cannot discover what is meaningful to us by means of a ‘presuppositionless’ investigation of empirical data. Rather perception of its meaningfulness to us is the presupposition of its becoming an object of investigation.” (Weber, 1949: 76) Put differently, Weber thinks that “an attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific ‘objectivity’.” (Weber, 1949: 60) In fact, this leads directly to Weber’s re-definition of ‘objectivity’ as it applies to the social sciences. “The ‘objectivity’ of the social sciences,” he writes, “depends on the fact that the empirical data

principles and concepts one may have.<sup>7</sup> (Nussbaum, 1990c: 162; Little, 1995: 118) To sum up, the epistemological stance of contextualism, its idea of what a ‘finely tuned perception’ entails, is one that is not consonant with a dispassionate and detached stance. In Nussbaum’s terminology, contextualism seeks “perceptive” rather than “reflective equilibrium.”<sup>8</sup> (Nussbaum, 1990d) Part of what’s involved in all of this is the idea that the type of seeing that is called for in contextualism is not a ‘passive’ one, but, rather, an *active* one.<sup>9</sup> On this view, “seeing itself is a task.” (Little, 1995: 118)

The practical outcome of this “intense scrutiny of appearances,” of this paying attention to detail, is that one becomes more and more aware of the “unreality of... sharp distinction (s),” one becomes aware, instead, of the multi-faceted, aspect-lush, Janus-faced nature of things/concepts/persons/situations/etc. (Nussbaum, 1990c: 18; 153) It turns out, in other words, that it is the development of a ‘finely tuned perception’ *itself*

---

are always related to those evaluative ideas which alone make them worth knowing and the significance of the empirical data is derived from these evaluative ideas.” (Weber, 1949: 111) Part of the idea behind this definition is that the social scientist should always (try to) make explicit the values, biases, interests, etc., on which his or her research is *necessarily* based.

<sup>7</sup> This is Margaret Olivia Little’s central argument, namely, that although rules cannot come with a further set of rules telling us how to apply them, affective engagement itself allows one to ‘see aspects’ of situations as being morally salient, and, *ipso facto*, it is affective engagement that acts as the ‘conversion manual’ that allows one to apply one’s moral concepts to the world. As an example, it is loving attention that allows one to picture a situation involving a person’s pain as being one that includes or exudes suffering, and, thereby, as one that calls forth compassion, i.e., more loving attention *and action* (of some sort). (Little, 1995) (The main idea here, namely that rules cannot come with a further set of rules telling us how to apply them, is, we already saw in chapter two, Wittgensteinian to the core.)

<sup>8</sup> In Love’s Knowledge Nussbaum suggested that John Rawls’s account of ‘reflective equilibrium’ (i.e. a state in which our considered judgments and our principles are harmoniously adjusted) has a Kantian bias against emotion. (Nussbaum, 1990d) Such a bias, she there thought, “might have been dispelled by considerations of feminist arguments that show emotions to be intelligent and discriminating ways of considering reality.” (Nussbaum, 2003: 490) But Nussbaum today thinks that “this criticism of Rawls... is not a deep one.” (Nussbaum, 2003: 491) “It just asks him,” she writes, “to reconsider his unfortunate use of dismissive Kantian language about the passions in some methodological contexts in favor of the subtler discriminations he actually exercises in the composition of the text.” (Nussbaum, 2003: 491) Insofar as she suggested more than this in Love’s Knowledge, Nussbaum says, “I hereby retract that suggestion.” (Nussbaum, 2003: 516fn)

<sup>9</sup> After all, if seeing was passive how could it be a ‘moral achievement’ to picture things in certain ways? How could one give praise (or blame) to one who had (or had not) pictured things in, as it were, their ‘best possibility’? Furthermore, the terms ‘scrutiny’, ‘engagement’, ‘loving’, all suggest an active participation on the part of the subject.

that leads to the realization of just how ‘inexhaustibly rich’ the details of our world and life are. Paying attention to detail has the same effect for ordinary folk that being thrown into the world would have on a person who, for the sake of illustration, had been born and raised in a laboratory, studying and performing experiments only in ideal conditions: she wouldn’t be able to fit the world into her intellectual framework unless she quickly began to loosen and open up that framework. In much the same way, Little shows us how, for example, the multifarious nature of cruelty ( – things as diverse as “kicking a dog, verbal taunting, and forgetting to invite the neighbor’s child to your daughter’s birthday party” are all classified as cruel) makes it such that the term ‘cruel’ resists both a strict definition and a universal rule that would tell us how, where, and when to apply it. (Little, 1995: 129) If one approached the world with a fixed universal definition of ‘cruelty’, the limits of that definition would make it such that one would not be able to call ‘cruel’ many of the things that we would want to, and, in fact, already do, call ‘cruel’.<sup>10</sup> Put differently, the ‘real’ world resists fitting into the picture of the universe that a Physics 101 textbook gives you. Indeed, the awareness of just how complicated and multi-faceted our world and life are, the awareness that our world and life are a “mystic lake” and that they are open-ended, leads to the realization that no system of universal principles and fixed concepts can ever serve as an unfailing guide to our actions. (Nussbaum, 1990c: 160) With Aristotle, then, contextualists recognize that even the “best generalizations about how one should behave hold only for the most part,” and that “if one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, [no matter how] subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would

---

<sup>10</sup> To see just how difficult it is to come up with universal definitions of things, look at Plato’s dialogues, especially the ‘early’ ones.

inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong.” (McDowell, 1979: 336) A codified system of rules, as McDowell puts it, always runs into “hard cases”. (McDowell, 1979: 340)

This has led to the conclusion, on the part of contextualists, that just as the world is multi-faceted, just as its “features... are often present in novel or subtle combinations,” i.e., just as the world is open-ended, so too should our general principles (for we do need some sort of principles – like ‘Do not kill’, ‘Keep your promises’, ‘Be kind’ – in ethics)<sup>11</sup> be open-ended and not fixed.<sup>12</sup> (Little, 1995: 122) This lack of fixity, this openness in the framework of one’s life, may make one vulnerable to change, but this vulnerability will also give one the capacity to be touched and to touch life. In Nussbaum’s words, it can be the source of “[an]other kind of strength.” (Nussbaum, 1990d: 183) Although one will no longer, as it were, be like an Indian saint who passes through the world like a duck through water, and although one will no longer be able to

---

<sup>11</sup> As Nussbaum notes, “an Aristotelian defence of the priority of the particular does not mean discarding the guidance of general principles.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 155) We do need general principles to serve us, at least, as ‘rules of thumb’ and to give structure to our experience. Just as “duty without perception is blunt and blind,” so too is “perception without responsibility dangerously free-floating.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 155) In fact, it is this very need for both perception and principles that, as Sabina Lovibond puts it, “should serve as a warning against any facile classification of ethical theories in terms of ‘universalism versus particularism’.” (Lovibond, 2002: 30fn) Indeed, and following the advice of Kai Nielsen, it was just this consideration that led to my choice of the term ‘contextualism’, rather than, say, ‘particularism’, to describe the kind of ethics dealt with in this chapter and thesis. Similarly, and working specifically within a certain version of contextualism – virtue ethics – Hursthouse has emphasised that while it is true that virtue ethics “[rejects] the idea that ethics is *codifiable* in rules and principles that can provide specific action guidance... [v]irtue ethics can [nevertheless] provide a specification of ‘right action’ – as ‘what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances’ – and such a specification can be regarded as generating a number of moral rules or principles (contrary to the usual claim that virtue ethics does not come up with rules or principles).” (My emphasis. Hursthouse, 1999: 17.) So, for instance, “[e]ach virtue generates an instruction – ‘Do what is honest’, ‘Do what is charitable’; and each vice a prohibition – ‘Do not act, do what is dishonest, uncharitable’.” (Hursthouse, 1999: 17) These two elements in virtue ethics – rules or principles, but no codes or algorithms – helps us understand why it is proper to classify it as ‘contextualist’.

<sup>12</sup> The same, of course – and as we have been given reason to believe in the previous chapters – also applies to our general terms/concepts as well. As Iris Murdoch notes, “we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty.” (Murdoch, 1970: 29)

possess the autonomous dignity of a Mrs. Newsome,<sup>13</sup> one will – unlike that Indian saint and Mrs. Newsome – be able to triumph in life rather than over it. Indeed, this capacity to touch, and to be touched, can reasonably be construed as leading to the furthering of one’s abilities to have an ‘intense scrutiny of appearances’. It will in all likelihood allow one to see features of things/persons/situations/etc., that one would perhaps not have been able had one remained fixed within a closed intellectual spectrum. And not only that. A view that considers its general principles and concepts to be open-ended and susceptible to change and variation, makes it likely that one will be open to surprises,<sup>14</sup> i.e., to seeing things that one and one’s (open-ended) general principles and concepts would not expect to see. More to the point, it allows one to see things that might call forth a *revision* of oneself and one’s open-ended principles and concepts.<sup>15</sup> To repeat: since one now views one’s general principles and concepts as being open-ended, the “desire for intellectual closure” is not as strong, and not as binding – or *blinding* – as it may be for those who (still) view them as closed. (Little, 1995: 124) In Little’s words, the one who views his general principles and concepts as open-ended will no longer “resist (or miss) what is unique.” (Little, 1995: 124) Unlike Mrs. Newsome, he will not be strictly limited to two types of reaction: “approval or disapproval.” (Nussbaum, 1990d: 177) Instead, he will be open, curious and child-like, having the capacity to be

---

<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Newsome is a character from Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*. Nussbaum uses her to exemplify a highly autonomous Kantian ego. (See Nussbaum, 1990d)

<sup>14</sup> For more on the importance of this element of ‘openness to surprise’ see Nussbaum’s “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory,” *Love’s Knowledge*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990: 168-194). Page 176 is especially forceful.

<sup>15</sup> The thought contained in this last sentence, I believe, gives life to Kekes’s notions of ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’. ‘Breadth’ would here correspond to the open-endedness of one’s general principles and concepts in the sense that one would admit that there are other ways of looking at things. ‘Depth’ would correspond to the recognition that these other ways of looking at things are ‘real possibilities’ and that they may press themselves on us in ways that would make it consonant for us to revise our ideas and even ourselves. Phrased differently, we may come to incorporate these ‘othernesses’ into ourselves and make them our



surprised, bewildered, etc. As Nussbaum notes, “the fine Jamesian perceiver employs general terms and conceptions in an open-ended, evolving way, prepared to see and respond to any new feature that the scene may bring forward.” (Nussbaum, 1990c: 157)

To sum all this up, we could say that it is a ‘fined tuned perception’, one that depends on an openly attentive scrutiny of appearances, that helps us see the various aspects of appearances, and that it is this awareness of the multi-faceted nature of appearances which, in turn, helps us see that our general principles and concepts should be – barring specific purposes – open-ended and that no closed code of rules will ever be adequate when applied to our open-ended world and interests. Furthermore, it is viewing our general principles and concepts in this way (i.e. as open-ended) that makes one welcome to surprises and change, and that allows one to be touched by appearances in ways that those who view their rules as closed and fixed would probably not. In other words, viewing one’s general principles and concepts as open-ended can further one’s ‘abilities of perception’, and, since it was having such ‘abilities of perception’ that was at the beginning of this whole process, we can be seen to have come full circle. ***But this is not a vicious circle, but, rather, a precious one.*** It is one that exhibits all sorts of self-reinforcing tendencies: each part of the process reverberating in, and strengthening the other. To capture what we have come across in one sentence, we could say: “*It is an attentive scrutiny of appearances that softens fixed principles and concepts into open-ended ones, and it is having open-ended principles and concepts that allows one to go deeper into attentiveness.*”<sup>16</sup>

---

own. (Kekes, 1984)

<sup>16</sup> Although not quite identical, Arne Johan Vetlesen has observed that “[p]erception always requires attentiveness, [and] attentiveness is made possible by receptivity, by the capacity to view oneself as ‘addressed’ by some situation or incident.” (Vetlesen, 1994: 8)

## B. Wittgenstein Mirrored in/with Contextualism

We are now ready to point out the traces of Wittgenstein's thought that, as we shall see, permeate contextualism in ethics. This 'permeation' can be found in three main areas. First, just as contextualism focuses on particulars and on developing our 'abilities of perception', so too did Wittgenstein focus on noticing differences rather than similarities, and saw the ability to 'see aspects' as being crucial to doing so. Secondly, just as the type of seeing fostered by contextualists is one that is active and not passive, the type of seeing that is associated with Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing aspects' is also one that includes an active participation on the part of the agent. Finally, just as contextualists showed how increased 'abilities of perception' can lead to the realization that we should view our general principles and our moral concepts as open-ended, Wittgenstein too showed how the ability to see, for example, the different aspects of our words and the grammatical rules that surround the use of our words, leads to an awareness that these rules can have, and often do have, family resemblance structures.<sup>17</sup>

Wittgenstein aimed to 'teach differences'. He once said of himself that whereas "Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same, my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different." (Hacker, 1996: 300fn) As Hacker notes, Wittgenstein resisted the

urge to seek for underlying uniformities misleadingly suggested by common grammatical forms of different expressions, to beware of the homogenizing effects of translation into canonical logical notations, and to attend to the innumerable differences that spring into view once we are reminded of the multifarious uses of expressions with common grammatical forms, of the distinct purposes of grammatically similar utterances, of the quite different roles which syntactically identical sentences fulfill. (Hacker, 1996: 99)

---

<sup>17</sup> Additional connections between contextualism and Wittgenstein will be brought up in chapter four. Here I am only outlining the 'general relationship' between the two.

Wittgenstein, then – and like contextualists – was concerned with particulars rather than universals. In this sense, he too was an Aristotelian; and, in fact, Wittgenstein did – via his influence on the likes of G. E. M. Anscombe and Iris Murdoch – stimulate a resurgence of interest in Aristotle.<sup>18</sup>

In setting out to ‘teach differences’, Wittgenstein aimed to achieve what he called an ‘*Übersicht*’ – a ‘survey’ or a ‘surview’ – of our language. A person possessed of an *Übersicht*, we saw in chapter one, is like a ‘mistress of shades’ in that she is able to see the nuances, the complexities, and the different aspects of words: perhaps their differing usages or the differences between their ‘surface’ and ‘depth grammars’. Without the ability to see differences, i.e., without the ability to see aspects, we would not be able to have an *Übersicht*, and would, *ipso facto*, often be misled by the similarities between the surface grammars of different words into believing all sorts of strange views. So – and to return to an already used example – the similarities between the grammatical rules we use around the words ‘pin’ and ‘pain’ (‘I have a pain’, ‘I have a pin’; ‘I feel a pain’, ‘I feel a pin’; ‘My pain is just like yours’, ‘My pin is just like yours’) can lead to the, according to Wittgenstein, ‘absurd ideas that pains are privately owned and epistemically private.’<sup>19</sup> A further description, and a greater awareness of the aspects of the grammars that surround the words ‘pin’ and ‘pain’, however, would have led to the realization that although “‘To feel a pain’, can be replaced by ‘to have a pain’ – there is no difference

---

<sup>18</sup> For more on this influence see Baker and Hacker’s *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 610-11). John Kerkhoven’s forthcoming M. A. thesis *Simone Weil: A Study in Moral Psychology and Observations on Religious Life* also has an insightful chapter that discloses some of Wittgenstein’s influence on Murdoch, while, at the same time, showing that it was Simone Weil, more than anyone else, that deserves credit for Murdoch’s stress on ‘loving attention’. (Kerkhoven, 2003.) Peta Bowden has also written a paper tracing this ‘Weilian’ presence in Murdoch. She goes a bit further, however, and uncovers Weil’s impact on the likes of Nussbaum and all the way through to the Hispanic feminist philosopher Lugones. (Bowden, 1998)

<sup>19</sup> I used this example already on pages 18-20 of chapter one. It is a good example, and I do not hesitate to

here – ‘to feel a pin’ is not the same as to ‘have a pin’.” (Hacker, 1996: 109) And the awareness of this difference, on its part, would have dispelled the ‘absurd ideas that pains are privately owned and epistemically private’. Clearly, having an *Übersicht*, and being able to see nuances and different aspects of our language, is important. But let us look a bit further into exactly what is meant by Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘seeing aspects’.

The type of seeing that is called for in the seeing of aspects is not done with the eyes; it does not require twenty-twenty vision. This should become clear by one of the examples that Wittgenstein uses to illustrate what he means by the ‘seeing of aspects’: the duck-rabbit picture. (PI \*xi, p. 194) In the duck-rabbit picture, when one’s picture of it changes from a duck to a rabbit (or vice versa), the retinal image, the visual impression made on one’s eye, does not change: only one’s way of picturing *the same* retinal image changes. As Wittgenstein says, “an image is not a picture, although a picture can correspond to it.” (PI \*301) Later he says, “the expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a new perception and at the same time of the perception’s being unchanged.” (PI \*xi, p. 196) The vision that is entailed in the seeing of aspects, then, is one that allows one to shift one’s picturing/perception/understanding of appearances without those appearances having ‘actually’ changed. For instance, it enables one to shift one’s picture of a situation evincing pain, to one that manifests *suffering*. Although the tactile, audible, and visible sensations may not have (physically) changed, the whole way of picturing/perceiving/understanding the situation has. When one sees it solely as involving pain, it may call forth, for example, a simple administration of drugs; but when one sees it as involving suffering it calls forth *compassion*. (See footnote 7 of this chapter.)

The type of seeing that is involved in seeing aspects is clearly not a passive one. As Mary McGuinn notes, “the case of seeing as... draws our attention to the role of an active responding subject in determining the nature of visual experience, or in fixing what is seen.” (McGuinn, 1997: 195) In fact for Wittgenstein, “seeing an aspect and imagining are *subject to the will*.” (My emphasis. PI \*xi, p. 213) As he says, “there is such a thing as an order as ‘Imagine *this*’, and also: ‘Now see the figure like *this*.’” (PI \*xi, p. 213) We can imagine, for instance, being told “now see the duck-rabbit picture as a duck.” Indeed, and in discussing what he calls the “aspect-blind”, Wittgenstein suggests that although it is the case that some people don’t see different aspects to words/concepts/general principles/things/situations/persons/etc., this is not because they are unable to do so, but, rather, simply because *they lack the savvy* to see that words/concepts/general principles/things/situations/persons/etc., can have different aspects to them. (PI \*xi, p. 213-214) The word ‘ought’ pops up in these sections and Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that if we can’t say that the aspect-blind *ought* to see aspects, then “this could not very well be called a sort of blindness.” (PI \*xi, p. 214) We are not very far here from Nussbaum’s contention that being able to picture a situation in a certain way is a ‘moral achievement’. Clearly, just as contextualists view ‘seeing’ as being active, so too does Wittgenstein.

Finally, it turns out that just as contextualists see a ‘fine tuned perception’ as leading to the realization that we should free ourselves from fixed ‘templates’, and that we should view our general principles and concepts as being open-ended, so too does Wittgenstein see the ability to see aspects and the achievement of an *übersicht* as contributing greatly to the realization that our rules can be, and often are, open-ended.

Just as Little recognizes that we often “project our own template of experiences onto others” in an eager attempt to “catalogue and classify others’ experiences... as confirming instances of our favorite generality,” Wittgenstein too warns us that ‘pictures can hold us captive.’ (Little, 1995: 124; PI \*115) Wittgenstein, like contextualists, wants to break the spell of these enchained and enchaining ‘pictures’, and crucial to doing so, he thinks, is the ability to “*look and see*” rather than saying “*must*.”<sup>20</sup> (PI \*66) In fact, we already encountered the bulk of this in the discussion of family resemblance concepts that took place in chapters one and two. There we saw how it was ‘looking [at] and seeing’ the numerous ways in which the word ‘game’ is used that helps dispel the Platonic/logicist view that “[they must have] something in common , or they would not [all] be called games.” (PI \*66) Just as our life is complicated so too is our language – and this makes the logician’s “*preconceived* idea of [the] crystalline purity” of our language, the idea that we can have a logically perfect language with universal definitions and a fixed and complete set of rules for when, where, and how to apply our concepts, a facile and unrealistic one. The logician’s (mis)understanding of language is one that evinces a person who has not yet really ‘looked and seen’. Furthermore, the open-endedness (and incompleteness) of the rules of our language does not prevent us from using it: the rules of tennis don’t cover their ground completely – they don’t tell us how high or how hard we can hit the ball – but, nonetheless, we can and do play tennis. Some of us, in fact, become quite good at it.

Clearly, many of Wittgenstein’s central views have counterparts in ethical contextualism. Just as contextualists see a keen attentiveness to the particularities of

---

<sup>20</sup> Crucial to ‘looking and seeing’ *skillfully*, of course, is the ability to see aspects.

appearances as leading to the awareness that our general principles and moral concepts are (or, perhaps, should be) open-ended, Wittgenstein too sees the capacity to see aspects – a capacity that is crucial if one is going to be able to ‘look and see’ with skill – as leading to a keen appreciation of the various usages of words (i.e. an *Übersicht*), an appreciation which, in turn, leads to his replacement of the long-standing desire (in philosophy) for universal definitions with the concept of ‘family resemblances’, the logician’s closed rules with open-ended and indeterminate ones. Furthermore, I don’t think that it would be going too far to state that Wittgenstein thought that a recognition that our rules are open-ended leads to greater abilities at seeing aspects. If anything, viewing our rules as open-ended would serve as a motivation to become better skilled at seeing alternative aspects. In other words, just as we were able to summarize the dialectical movement of contextualism in one sentence, so too shall we be able to sum up the dialectic of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy in a (paralleling) sentence: *“The ability to see aspects leads to an awareness that our rules can be open-ended, and our awareness that our rules can be open-ended motivates us to develop our abilities to see aspects even further.”*

As we can see, the presence of Wittgensteinian ideas is ubiquitous in contextualism. Just as contextualists place an emphasis on having ‘abilities of perception’, so too does Wittgenstein stress the importance of being able to see aspects. Just as the contextualist emphasis on a ‘loving scrutiny of appearances’ and ‘affective engagement’ indicated a view of ‘seeing’ that was active, so too does Wittgenstein think that ‘seeing aspects’ requires an active participation on the part of the subject. In fact, the presence of the word ‘ought’ in the sections in which Wittgenstein discussed the

seeing of aspects, suggests that he too may have thought that the ability to picture things in certain ways, and in certain cases, was a 'moral task' and a 'moral achievement'.

Finally, just as contextualists thought that a 'fined tuned perception' leads to the realization that our general principles and concepts in ethics should be open-ended, so too does Wittgenstein think that 'looking and seeing', and, thereby, noticing aspects, contributes to the realization that our rules or general concepts can be, and (often) are, open-ended. The dialectical movement of both contextualism and Wittgenstein's later philosophy, therefore, can be encapsulated in the same general way: "*'abilities of perception'/the ability to 'see aspects', allow/s one to see that our general moral principles and concepts/rules or concepts can be open-ended, which, in turn, furthers our 'abilities of perception'/our ability to 'see aspects'.*"



## Chapter 4: Metaphors and Minor Premises

*Language is called the Garment of Thought: however, it should rather be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body of Thought. I said that Imagination wove this Flesh-Garment; and does she not? Metaphors are her stuff: examine Language; what, if you except some few primitive elements (of natural sound), what is it all but Metaphors, recognized as such, or no longer recognized; still fluid and florid, or now solid-grown and colourless? If those same primitive elements are the osseous fixtures in the Flesh-Garment, Language,—then are Metaphors its muscles and tissues and living integuments. An unmetaphorical style you shall in vain seek for: is not your very Attention a Stretching-to? The difference lies here: some styles are lean, adust, wiry, the muscle itself seems osseous; some are even quite pallid, hunger-bitten, and dead-looking; while others again glow in the flush of health and vigorous self-growth, sometimes (as in my own case) not without an apoplectic tendency. Moreover, there are sham Metaphors, which overhanging that same Thought's Body (best naked), and deceptively bedizening, or bolstering it out, may be called its false stuffings, superfluous show-cloaks (Putz-Mäntel), and tawdry woolen rags: whereof he that runs and reads may gather whole hampers,—and burn them.*

**—Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus**

In this chapter I do five main things. First, I re-describe much of the discussion in the last chapter, this time using as my frame the notion of a practical syllogism and focusing especially on the importance of the minor premise. Second, I provide a compressed account of H. Paul Grice and John Searle's attempts to reduce sentence meaning to speaker's meaning. The discussion serves as a preparation to the third section in which I lay-out, compare, criticize, and modify Donald Davidson's and Max Black's accounts of metaphor, only to, in the end, essentially combine them into what I call the 'causal-interaction' view of metaphor. Fourth, I show how this causal-interaction view can be rightly called 'Wittgensteinian'. Lastly, I connect the causal-interaction view to an innovative understanding of moral exemplars and social progress.

The chapter as a whole can be read as a standing commentary on Murdoch's phrase "At deep levels metaphor and perception merge." (Murdoch, 1993: 328)

### A. Minor Premises

One way of characterizing the gist of what we encountered in the last chapter is by saying that both Wittgenstein and contextualists reject the idea of a "mechanically applicable rule," that is, "the idea of an algorithm or decision procedure that would remove the need to exercise one's own judgment in relation to particular cases."

(Lovibond, 2002: 44fn) While Wittgenstein, it is true, normally applies this lesson to language and concepts *in general*, contextualists focus on our *ethical concepts*. So, and if even a category like 'chair', which seems to apply straightforwardly to its instances, can in specific circumstances (electric-'chairs'? wheel-'chairs'? Thrones? Achille & Pier Giacomo Castiglioni's 1965 *Allunaggio* 'chair'? Gaetano Pesce's 1969 *Up 1* 'chair'? Stiletto Studios's 1983 *Consumer's Rest* 'chair')<sup>1</sup> need to be broadened or narrowed, if even the most ordinary categories require judgment, then of course this applies to our ethical categories/concepts too. But that it should so apply in ethics was not always evident. As Hursthouse explains,

[i]t used to be quite commonly held that the task of normative ethics was to come up with a set (possibly one-membered, as in the case of act utilitarianism) of universal rules or principles which would have two significant features: (a) they would amount to a decision procedure for determining what the right action was in any particular case; (b) they would be stated in such terms that any... person could understand and apply them correctly. (Hursthouse, 2001: 39)

Hursthouse calls this the "strong codifiability thesis," and, like the logicism we dealt with in preceding chapters, we have seen enough by now to understand how this hopeful

---

<sup>1</sup> I take these examples from Charlotte and Peter Fiell's *Modern Chairs* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993). The whole book can be interpreted as an undermining of Dr. Christopher Dresser's 1873 attempted definition: "A chair is a stool with a back rest, and a stool is a board elevated from the ground by supports." (Quoted in Fiell, 1993: 7)

view neglects to realize – among other things – that “no one can acquire judgment [simply] by being imparted some kind of formal doctrine.” (Hursthouse, 2001: 40; Larmore, 1987: 15) For no matter how “good our principles, they will not make us act well unless we are alive to the detail that endows them with relevance to this or that lived experience.” (Lovibond, 2002: 28) And this ‘being alive to’ “can be learned only through practice, through being trained in the performance of right actions [or the correct application of our rules/principles/concepts to particular cases].” (Larmore, 1987: 15)

All of which has lead to David Wiggins’s

unfriendly suspicion that those who feel they *must* seek more than all this want a scientific theory of rationality not so much from a passion for science, even where there can be no science, but because they hope and desire, by some conceptual alchemy, to turn such a theory into a regulative or normative discipline, or into a system of rules by which to spare themselves some of the agony of thinking and all the torment of feeling and understanding that is actually involved in reasoned deliberation. (Wiggins, 1980: 237)

Much of the ‘agony and torment’ that Wiggins has just referred to takes place in determining (what Aristotle was the first to construe as) the “minor premise” of our practical syllogisms.<sup>2</sup> (See Aristotle, 1976: 220) Take a major premise of a practical syllogism; say “Murder is wrong.” I use the example of ‘murder’ because I consider it to be *analytic* and uncontroversial that ‘murder is wrong’ *is true*. Anyone who understands the term ‘murder’ understands that it is wrong, and, so, any action described as ‘murder’ is also deemed wrong. The same, however, does not apply for the term ‘killing’. In certain cases, certain people might admit having killed without at the same time admitting having done wrong. Surely, for most of us, describing an action as ‘killing’

---

<sup>2</sup> A ‘practical syllogism’ “differs from the familiar demonstrative syllogism in that (1) the major premise is a judgment of value, ‘all dry food is wholesome’, or an imperative, ‘all dry food ought to be eaten’; and (2) the conclusion following from the combination of such a major premise with a minor such as ‘this is dry food’ is not merely a statement but an action: the subject eats the food.” (Translator’s note. Aristotle, 1976: 359)

does not *necessarily* imply wrongdoing. It doesn't, for instance – and at least in a court of law – imply misconduct when carried out in *self-defense*. But as soon as something is described as 'murder' it is automatically, in and by that very description, condemned. What this shows, in part, is the ethical importance that even mere descriptions of things can have.<sup>3</sup> Seeing something 'as a murder' is very different (although not always) from seeing it 'as killing'. In Richard B. Miller's words, "our optical powers... are never value-free.... Descriptions [ – especially ones that use moral idioms – ] are not morally neutral." (Miller, 1996: 225) To illustrate this further, "if we describe Socrates's drinking the hemlock as honorable, we are thereby committed to a favorable judgment," just as if we describe Henry the VIII's behavior as 'adulterous', we are committed to an *unfavorable* one. (Kekes, 1989: 137) But, of course, much rests on whether 'honorable' is, indeed, the right way to envision Socrates's death at the end of the Phaedo. And the same holds with Henry the VIII. Was he a *really* a 'libertine'? Or did he just rebel against the unduly harsh marital laws of his day? Or consider O. J. Simpson. Is he a 'murderer'? Or is he 'innocent'? Can he be somewhere in between?

With that, we have arrived at "the *crucial* importance of the minor premise of the practical syllogism." (My emphasis. Wiggins, 1980: 233) For if it is true that "there is an unavoidable gap between principles and situations," then it is hitting upon the minor premise – recognizing that a particular situation calls forth or instantiates the principle stated by the major premise – which bridges this gap. (Kekes, 1989: 129) This is what

---

<sup>3</sup> What it also shows is how "ethical disagreements can be seen to lie in disagreements about facts" and not always values. (Hursthouse, 2001: 20) All parties may agree that murder is wrong, they just might not agree about whether this or that particular act constitutes murder. Compare this with Romans and Christians in the fourth century debating about suicide. They may both concur that a certain woman's action is an instance of suicide, but while the Romans may agree – at least if this woman was trying to avoid capture by her enemies – that her action was honorable, the Christians would in all likelihood condemn it as an affront to the Creator who gave her and everything life. (One can only imagine the inner turmoil of a Roman who had converted to Christianity and was about to be taken captive.)

Aristotle was getting at when he said that “the decision [‘discernment’ or ‘judgment’] lies with our perception.” (Aristotle, 1976: 110) Seeing, framing, reading, or discerning something as ‘kind’, ‘generous’, ‘shallow’, ‘pusillanimous’, goes a long way towards producing a set of judgments, decisions and conclusions all of its own. In Wiggins’s “paraphrase-cum-translation” of Aristotle, “the major premise and the generalisable concern that comes with it arise from this perception of something particular.” (Wiggins, 1980: 236) Put differently, a “process of ‘seeing as’ is a necessary prerequisite for action.” (Sherman, 1989: 40)

Nancy Sherman has concluded from all the above that “[e]thical sensitivity will thus be in part a matter of appropriately deploying ethical concepts.”<sup>4</sup> (Sherman, 1989: 31) Such ‘deployments’ will often be uncontroversial – describing Gandhi as ‘patient and non-violent’, Hitler as ‘militaristic’, one’s brother as ‘loving’ towards his children – but they will just as quickly run into hard cases requiring more use of one’s discriminatory powers than is often needed: Are fetuses best construed as ‘persons’, and, *ipso facto*, is killing them an act of ‘murder’? Can homosexuals be ‘married’? Was Napoleon a failed ‘hero’ or an all too successful ‘villain’? Are animals our ‘neighbors’? Would my going to the cinema with my friends be ‘selfish’ if my young niece was hoping to play tennis with me? Applying the concepts ‘person’, ‘married’, ‘hero’,

---

<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, Cora Diamond speaks of “how we may reshape our understanding of a situation by bringing this or that particular word into contact with it.” (Diamond, 1996: 248) But Diamond also wants us to grasp that we can also bring stories, proverbs – even apparently non-ethical terms – to bear on situations and use them in ways that we would have to admit were just as ethical as when we use or used our ‘explicitly’ moral concepts. As such, she would probably criticize this thesis – just as she criticizes Lovibond’s *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* – for being too caught up with moral concepts and virtue-words. I accept this criticism, but also think that both my and Lovibond’s accounts survive the criticism and that both our accounts can be modified in light of it while still remaining fundamentally the same. (That is not to say, however, that Lovibond’s book survives Diamond’s further criticisms, namely, those dealing with whether Wittgenstein was a realist.) Nevertheless, the main text of this thesis does not contain any of these (necessary) modifications, and I mention Diamond’s criticisms only in passing here. (See Diamond, 1996)

‘neighbor’, or ‘selfish’ in these areas is not as much “*a matter of course*” as it may be in other situations. (PI \*238) It may involve either an overextension or an underextension of the range of cases to which the concept is standardly applied. “When the cases are clear and unproblematic,” writes Hursthouse,

so is the application of, for example, ‘Keep promises’, ‘Don’t lie’, ‘Tell the truth’. But as soon as the cases become ‘hard cases’, the understanding and application of even these rules becomes a difficult and delicate matter, once again involving judgment and a grasp of such things as ‘the sort of promise that may be broken, or need not be kept, or (even) should not be kept and should never have been ‘made’. (Hursthouse, 2001: 62)

Probably with something like these last points in mind, Stanley Cavell contends that “when we are hesitant about asserting a concept it is either because we haven’t yet established its criteria for ourselves or because we haven’t got a perfect instance of it.” (Cavell, 1979: 71) And as though she were continuing in this ‘Cavellian’ train of thought, Murdoch states that “here one might need further information before deciding whether an *unusual* use of a word represents a linguistic misunderstanding rather than a moral difference.”<sup>5</sup> (My emphasis. Murdoch, 1997: 94) So, for example, the first time(s) somebody extended the term ‘wrong’ to apply to slavery in 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century Haiti, his (presumably white) compatriots would have been justified in wondering whether or not this person was a competent user of the term ‘wrong’ before they began to take it as actually – let alone *justifiably* – questioning the practice of slavery itself.

What I would like to pursue in the rest of this chapter is an account of metaphor that can – for reasons that shall become clear – be described as ‘Wittgensteinian’, an account that will connect the notion of an *unusual use of words* (just now mentioned by

---

<sup>5</sup> Related to this, Wittgenstein has written: “The *truth* of my statements is the test of my *understanding* of these statements. That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them.” (Wittgenstein, 1969: \*80-\*81)

Murdoch) with metaphor in such a way as to help us understand what those who are skilled at generating minor premises may be up to (at least some of the time), and also how it is that social change – like the abolishment of slavery – can (be made or helped to) come about. What follows, to a certain degree, is an exploration/elaboration/explanation of Murdoch's enigmatic suggestion that 'at deep levels metaphor and perception merge', as well as her remark to the effect that "we are all artists." (Murdoch, 1993: 315) I choose to enter into this elaboration by way of discussing Searle's famous American-soldier example. Such a discussion will introduce us to the concepts of 'sentence' and 'speaker's meaning', both of which provide a good framework with which to come to grips with the view of metaphor I want to put to work.

### **B. Speaker's Meaning vs. Sentence Meaning: Grice and Searle**

The point of Searle's American-soldier example can only be understood in relation to the account of meaning given in Grice's article entitled (appropriately) "Meaning." The central idea/project of this article, as pointed out by Alexander Miller, "is that we can non-circularly define the notion of speaker's meaning in terms of speaker's intentions, and then non-circularly define the notion of sentence meaning in terms of speaker's meaning and convention. The result is supposed to be a non-circular analysis of sentence meaning," an analysis that locates the basic unit of linguistic communication "not, as has been generally supposed [(e.g. by Frege)], in the symbol or word or sentence..., but rather [in] the *production* of the token in the performance of [a] speech act." (Miller, 1998: 233; Searle, 2000: 253) But what is all this talk of 'speaker's meaning', 'speaker's intention', 'sentence meaning' and 'convention'? This is what we shall now look into.

Let us start with speaker's meaning. On Grice's view, "speaker's meaning is, roughly, a matter of the information someone uttering a particular token of an expression intends to convey by means of the utterance of that expression." (Miller, 1998: 222) As Grice puts it, "*A* means<sub>mn</sub> something by *x*' is (roughly) equivalent to '*A* intended the utterance *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention'; and we may add that to ask what *A* meant is to ask for a specification of the intended effect...."<sup>6</sup> (Grice, 2000: 133) In other words, Grice reduces speaker's meaning to the speaker's intention. Hence, and if when I say "It is sunny outside," I intend to inform my neighbor to that effect, it is that intention which comprises the meaning of my utterance. And insofar as my neighbor sees or makes out that it is my intention to so inform him, he has understood the meaning of my statement – regardless of whether he subsequently goes on to believe it.

Actually, in that last sentence of mine I made use of a distinction that is made, not by Grice, but by Searle in order to improve Grice's account. This is the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Searle, in his modification of Grice's view, reduces speaker's meaning to what he calls (following J. L. Austin) an "illocutionary intention". (Searle, 2000; see also Austin, 1965) What is an 'illocutionary intention'? As Miller explains, "an illocutionary intention is an intention that is fulfilled simply on the basis of the audience's recognition of the presence of the intention." (Miller, 1998: 231) The precise nature of these illocutionary intentions is captured in the

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Means<sub>mn</sub>' refers to what Grice terms "non-natural meaning". (Grice, 2000: 128) Examples Grice provides of non-natural meaning are: "Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the bus is full"; and "That remark, 'Smith couldn't get on without his trouble and strife,' meant that Smith found his wife indispensable." (Grice, 2000: 128) Grice contrasts this with sentences/expressions that have a "natural sense" or meaning. For instance: "Those spots mean (meant) measles"; "Those spots didn't mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles"; and "The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year". (Grice, 2000: 127)



following illocutionary acts: “I hereby report that the enemy is near”; “I hereby request that you leave the room”. These “performatives” express illocutionary intentions by virtue of the fact that the audience need only recognize that the speaker has the relevant intention (to ‘report’; to ‘request’) in order for that intention to be fulfilled. If the audience recognizes my request that they leave the room, they have – in and by that very recognition – been requested to leave the room (whether they do so subsequently or not).<sup>7</sup>

The last does not hold for perlocutionary acts/intentions. “A perlocutionary intention,” Miller tells us, “is an intention that is not fulfilled simply on the basis of the audience’s recognition of the presence of the intention.” (Miller, 1998: 231) So, for instance, if I want to *convince* someone – rather than just report to them – that the enemy is near, then that convincing is a perlocutionary act. Why? Because for that convincing to occur, it does not suffice that the hearer simply recognize my desire to convince them. Being convinced by someone is not constituted in and by the act of recognizing the other person’s intention to convince you. Rather, and as should be clear, one can remain unconvinced despite recognizing a speaker’s intention to convince. Therefore, things like convincing, frightening, inspiring, etc., are perlocutionary, not illocutionary, acts.<sup>8</sup>

But how does this reduction of speaker’s meaning to illocutionary intentions allow one to appraise the nature of sentence meaning? After all, sentence meaning seems to have more of a fixed flavor to it, one that is independent (*almost* in the Platonic

---

<sup>7</sup> If linguistic idealism is construed as “the claim that some truths or realities are created by our linguistic practices,” then the existence of performatives shows a harmless way in which linguistic idealism is true. (Bloor, 1996: 356) If a conventional way of making a promise is to say “I promise...” then, in and by my use of that phrase as a prefix or suffix when making a statement, I have made a promise and not just said “I promise.”

<sup>8</sup> For a good list of perlocutionary and illocutionary acts see page 89 of Martin’s *The Meaning of Language* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1987).

sense of independent)<sup>9</sup> of individual speaker's intentions when uttering particular tokens of those sentences. Grice offers the following definition of sentence meaning: “‘*x* means<sub>mn</sub> (timeless) that so-and-so’ might as a first shot be equated with some statement or disjunction of statements about what ‘people’ (vague) intend (with qualification about ‘recognition’) to effect by *x*.” (Grice, 2000: 133) As Martin elucidates, what Grice has in mind here is that “the sentence meaning of a particular utterance token can be explained not by the illocutionary intentions of the speaker of that token but rather by the illocutionary intentions people *in general* have when uttering tokens of that type.” (My emphasis. Martin, 1987: 91) To use Martin's example, if someone utters “‘Please pass the salt’, intending thereby to report that one of Wyoming's chief agricultural products is dry edible beans, his intention tells what he means by it, but what his utterance really means [(i.e. its sentence meaning)] is given by the illocutionary intentions people in general have when uttering it, namely, to make a polite request that they be handed the salt.” (Martin, 1987: 91) Although Grice did not develop his account enough in this manner, what he is essentially getting at is that sentence meaning is reducible to speaker's meaning (i.e. illocutionary intention) coupled with *conventional usage*. So, if a conventional way of informing someone that it is sunny outside is to say “‘It is sunny outside,’” that convention (which includes the illocutionary act) is the sentence meaning of the sentence ‘It is sunny outside’.

This is where Searle's American-soldier example (finally) kicks-in. He lays it out as follows:

---

<sup>9</sup> The talk of the role of *convention* in the rest of the paragraph and below it should provide a good hint as to why it is *not* Platonic, and this despite Grice's unfortunate choice of the term ‘timeless’ in his definition of sentence meaning. Conventions, after all, can and do *change*.

Suppose that I am an American soldier in the Second World War and that I am captured by Italian troops. And suppose also that I wish to get these troops to believe that I am a German soldier in order to get them to release me. What I would like to do is to tell them in German or Italian that I am a German soldier. But let us suppose I don't know enough German or Italian to do that. So I, as it were, attempt to put on a show of telling them that I am a German soldier by reciting those few bits of German I know, trusting that they don't know enough German to see through my plan. Let us suppose I know only one line of German which I remember from a poem I had to memorize in a high school German course. Therefore, I, a captured American, address my Italian captors with the following sentence: *Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?* [Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom?] (Searle, 2000: 260)

So what is the purpose of this example? Well, notice that the American's intention is to “produce a certain effect in [the Italians], namely, the effect of believing that [he is] a German soldier.” (Searle, 2000: 260) (This is a perlocutionary intention.) And notice also that he means to produce this effect by means of the Italian's recognition of his said intention. (This is an illocutionary intention.) But if that is the case, note the following gainsaying effect for Grice's theory: insofar as the American soldier intends to make the Italians believe that he is a German officer via recognizing his intention that they take his words ‘*Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?*’ as informing them that he is a German officer, then it follows, from all that was said earlier, that the American soldier's speaker's meaning when he says “*Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?*” is that he is a German officer. Searle thinks that this is ridiculous. Why? Because the American soldier knows that that is not the sentence meaning of the sentence ‘*Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?*’ Grice's account of speaker's meaning, it seems, will have to be modified.

Searle thinks that “what we can mean is a function of what we are saying.” (Searle, 2000: 260) He (eloquently) claims – and his American-soldier example is supposed to support it – that “meaning [(i.e. speaker's meaning)] is more than a matter of

intention, it is also a matter of convention.”<sup>10</sup> (Searle, 2000: 260) Otherwise put, “what is relevant to the speaker’s meaning of what he utters is not only his illocutionary intentions but also what he believes the conventional sentence meaning of his utterance in the language he is speaking to be.” (Martin, 1987: 93) As Martin explains, “when [a speaker] has illocutionary intentions but does not think that the sentence he utters is one of those which the conventions of the language he is speaking designate as a way of achieving those intentions, then those intentions do not tell us what the speaker means by what he says.” (Martin, 1987: 93) All of which culminates in Searle’s emendation of Grice’s theory, an emendation captured in his account of an illocutionary act:

In the performance of an illocutionary act the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and furthermore, *if he is using words literally*, he intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the rules for using the expressions he utters associate the expressions with the production of that effect. (My emphasis. Searle, 2000: 261)

This emendation, however, is problematic to the core. How so? I mentioned at the beginning of this section that Grice’s project was to find a non-circular account of meaning, one that defines the notion of sentence meaning in terms of speaker’s meaning. This was the whole basis of the speech act theory, namely, that it saw the basic unit of linguistic communication, not in ‘the symbol, word, or sentence...’, but rather [in] the *production* of the token in the performance of [a] speech act.’ This project, however, is ostensibly undermined by Searle’s emendation(s) of Grice. On Searle’s account, as Miller insightfully remarks, speaker’s meaning “presuppose[s] the notion of sentence meaning: that is, the speaker’s meaning conventionally associated with tokens of a sentence type.” (Miller, 1998: 233) The account of meaning given now begs the

---

<sup>10</sup> Searle gives this as the reason why Wittgenstein, in the *Investigations*, thought that it was difficult (impossible?) to “say ‘It’s cold here’ and *mean* ‘It’s warm here’.” (PI \*510; Searle, 2000: 260)

question: “we define [sentence meaning] in terms of speaker’s meaning, the definition of which presupposes an account of sentence meaning.” (Miller, 1998: 233) Ultimately, this result may have been reached because the notion of a *private* (speaker’s meaning – but not sentence meaning) convention appears not just impossible but non-sensical. Conventions, as Grice’s talk of ‘people in general’ makes clear, are *interpersonal*. Thus, and while “speaker’s meanings depend on speaker’s beliefs about conventions..., they cannot [in] themselves be conventional.” (Martin, 1987: 95) All of which leads to Martin’s overall assessment of speech act theories: “Insofar as we see conventions regarding illocutionary act potential as the essential core of meaning, we must deny that speaker’s meaning is full-fledged language meaning.” (Martin, 1987: 95)

It seems, then, that we were wrong before to ‘report that the enemy was near’. Instead, and as we gradually modify the speech act theory to the point of practically ridding ourselves of the notion of speaker’s meaning (private language?), we are approaching the Wittgensteinian view of metaphor I keep on referring to. Davidson’s account of metaphor, after all, in many ways founds itself on an attack on the notion of speaker’s meaning. Let me elucidate.

### C. ‘Everyone’<sup>Wittgenstein -</sup><sub>-except</sub> on ~~W~~H Roll: *Of Metaphor*

In his “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” Davidson makes the following important remarks: “[N]othing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker’s meaning and literal meaning [(i.e. sentence meaning)]”; “[There is a strict distinction] between what a speaker, on a given occasion means, and what his words [actually] mean.” (Davidson, 1986b: 434) He also provides us with the following ‘definition’ of sentence, literal, or ‘standard’ meaning: “[I]f the occasion, the

speaker, and the audience are ‘normal’ or ‘standard’ (in a sense not to be further explained here), then the first [(i.e. the sentence/literal/standard)] meaning of an utterance will be what should be found consulting a dictionary based on actual usage.” (Davidson, 1986b: 435) Joining these three statements, we can see how Davidson’s sharp distinguishing between literal and speaker’s meaning rests on an equally pointed division between standard and *occasional* use. It is on this last distinction that Davidson’s original account of metaphor rests.

On Davidson’s take, “metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more.” (Davidson, 2000: 333) “The central mistake against which I shall be inveighing,” Davidson keeps on, “is the idea that a metaphor has, in addition to its literal sense or meaning, another [figurative] sense or meaning.” (Davidson, 2000: 333) The reason that Davidson thinks that this is a mistake, Richard Rorty clarifies, stems from his “fixation” with the “explanatory power of standard sense.” (Rorty, 1991: 163) And this, Rorty continues,

is because [Davidson] thinks that semantical notions like ‘meaning’ have a role only within the quite narrow (though shifting) limits of regular, predictable, linguistic behaviour – the limits which mark off (temporarily) the literal use of language. In Quine’s image, the realm of meaning is a relatively small ‘cleared’ area within the jungle of use, one whose boundaries are constantly being both extended and encroached upon.<sup>11</sup> (Rorty, 1991: 163-4)

Phrased otherwise, Davidson – like (among others) Rorty and Ian Hacking – takes notions like ‘meaning’, ‘correctness’, ‘rule’, and ‘social practice’ to kick-in only “where

---

<sup>11</sup> The image comes from W. V. O Quine’s “A Postscript on Metaphor.” In that two page article Quine writes: “Metaphor, or something like it, governs the growth of language and our acquisition of it. What comes as a subsequent refinement is rather cognitive discourse itself, at its most dryly literal. The neatly worked out inner stretches of science are an open space in the tropical jungle, created by clearing tropes away.” (Quine, 1978: 160)

we have lots of people (not just two) exhibiting the same regularities in behaviour.”<sup>12</sup> (Rorty, 1991: 166fn; Hacking, 1986) Metaphor, on the other hand, does not belong to these established regions of regular discourse. Rather, Davidson thinks, “metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use.”<sup>13</sup> (Davidson, 2000: 334) Why? Because Davidson believes metaphor is something that is brought off by the “imaginative [(i.e. the non-standard)] employment of words and sentences.” (Davidson, 2000: 334)

According to Davidson, metaphor involves creative or novel (mis)uses of language. Insofar, then, as to have a meaning, for Davidson, is to have a customary place in a language-game, metaphors – especially ‘newborn’ ones – by definition have no semantic content. They are non-cognitive or, in Hacking’s phrase, are not “truth-value candidates” at all.<sup>14</sup> At most, Davidson claims, we can say of metaphors that they are, “in the ordinary [(i.e. literal)] sense,” either trivially true (‘Man does not live on bread alone’; ‘No man is an island’) or – as is normally the case – obviously false (‘The world is a bubble’; ‘The human body is a dungeon’).<sup>15</sup> (Davidson, 2000: 343) If this is so, however, does it follow that Davidson agrees with the logical positivists that metaphors are merely “decorative”? (Black, 1962: 34)

No. Davidson – and here he aligns himself with Black, whom he otherwise wants to distance himself from – underlines that he takes it as a fact that “metaphor is a

---

<sup>12</sup>In a footnote, Rorty adds to this the following interesting remark: “Davidson would... have no difficulty accepting this ‘anti-private language’ point – since it leaves open the possibility of understanding (translating) noises regularly made only by one person, and takes away only the possibility of saying that this person has used a language correctly or incorrectly.” (Rorty, 1991: 166fn)

<sup>13</sup> Here one might think of Wittgenstein’s suggestive remark that “Not every *use*... is a meaning.” (Wittgenstein, 1990: \*289)

<sup>14</sup> I could not find the location where Hacking says this, but Rorty – without citing a reference – credits Hacking with having coined it. (See Rorty, 1989: 18)

<sup>15</sup> Davidson sees this as being the main difference between the ‘semantics’ of metaphors (‘My love is the morning sun’) and similes (‘My love is like the morning sun’). Whereas “all similes are true... most metaphors are false.” (Davidson, 2000: 343) This follows from his contention that “everything *is like* everything, and in endless ways.” (My emphasis. Davidson, 2000: 340)

legitimate device not only in literature but in science, philosophy, and the law.”<sup>16</sup>

(Davidson, 2000: 334) Put differently, while Davidson is in agreement with logical positivists on the question of the cognitivity of metaphor (i.e. both think they are *non-cognitive*), he differs from them in that he would have no qualms with Quine when he writes that “[metaphor] flourishes in playful prose and high poetic art, [and] it is vital also at the growing edges of science and philosophy.” (Quine, 1978: 159) But if metaphors are non-cognitive, one might ask, how can they play an important role in the sciences and other fields that claim to give us knowledge (or cognitivity)?

It is perhaps surprising – given the uniqueness of his view – but Davidson eventually agrees with Aristotle when he says, in the *Rhetoric*, that “metaphor leads to ‘a perception of resemblances’.”<sup>17</sup> (Davidson, 2000: 347) Davidson writes that “[m]etaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight”; “metaphor makes us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things”; and “[m]etaphor and simile are merely two among endless devices that serve to alert us to aspects of the world by inviting us to make comparisons.” (Davidson, 2000: 348; 335; 342) Nevertheless, Davidson is also adamant that “*seeing as is not seeing that.*” (My emphasis. Davidson, 2000: 348) This, once again, results from his contention that metaphors have no special cognitive or semantic or propositional content of their own. Davidson, then, thinks that metaphor does not *say* anything (apart from its either trivially true or obviously false literal interpretation(s)), it does not give us a *reason* to see something as something else,

---

<sup>16</sup> Along with Davidson, Black insists that “a prohibition against [the use of metaphor] would be a willful and harmful restriction upon our powers of inquiry.” (Black, 1962: 47)

<sup>17</sup> ‘Perception of resemblances’, I believe, is Davidson’s own translation. My text reads “clearly seen to be akin.” (Aristotle, 1967: 359)



rather, it *causes* us to make connections between two things never before connected in whatever way the metaphor connects them.<sup>18</sup> In Davidson’s terminology: “Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact.” (Davidson, 2000: 347) Using a metaphor is akin to “suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a face, or pulling a photograph out of your pocket and displaying it, or pointing at a feature of the surroundings, or slapping your interlocutor’s face, or kissing him. Tossing a metaphor into a text is like using italics, or illustration, or odd punctuation or formats.” (Rorty, 1989: 18) With Hyman, we could say that “the use of a metaphor is like a *perlocutionary* act, though its utterance does not so much prompt an auditor to perform an action as simply cause a change in her perspective.” (My emphasis. Hyman, 1996: 7)

Rorty favors this ‘causal’ view of metaphor over more ‘cognitive’ ones. Why?

Because he believes

it gives us a better account of the role played in our lives by metaphorical expressions which are not sentences – scraps of poetry which send shivers down our spine, non-sentential phrases which reverberate endlessly, changing ourselves and our patterns of action, without ever coming to express belief or desires. (Rorty, 1991: 163)

Granting this, Rorty is nonetheless also at pains to point out that there is nothing in Davidson’s causal view that prevents us from saying that metaphors “may not, in time, *become* truth-value candidates” (or, phrased differently, that *seeing as* can be(come) a *seeing that*). (Rorty, 1989: 18) We can “savor or spit out a metaphor,” says Rorty, but

[i]f it is savored rather than spat out, the sentence may be repeated, caught up, bandied about. Then it will gradually acquire a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor – or, if you like,

---

<sup>18</sup> This is Rorty’s distinction. He writes: “[Don’t] think that logical changes in belief are the only respectable ones.... ‘Creative misuses’ of language are *causes* to change one’s belief, even if not *reasons* to change them.” (Rorty, 1998: 213fn)

it will become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. (Rorty, 1989: 18)

Davidson himself refers to this phenomenon of ‘literalization’, noting that, “once upon a time..., rivers and bottles did not, as they do now, literally have mouths [(or necks)].” (Davidson, 2000: 339) Of interest in this, Davidson thinks, “is that when ‘mouth’ applied only metaphorically to bottles, the application made the hearer *notice* a likeness between animal and bottle openings,” whereas now, supposedly, it no longer does. (Davidson, 2000: 339) “Once one has the present use of the word,” states Davidson, “with the literal application to bottles, there is nothing left to notice.” (Davidson, 2000: 339) “‘He was burned up’,” Davidson observes (switching examples), “now suggests no more than that he was very angry, [but] [w]hen the metaphor was active, we would have pictured fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears.” (Davidson, 2000: 339) More importantly though, we can now – thanks to the original metaphorists and those who followed them in putting the metaphors to use – make true and false applications of the terms ‘mouth’, ‘neck’ and ‘burning up’ that we were not able to before. Just as it is now true to say that some bottles have longer or shorter, narrower or thicker, necks, it is also (somewhat of) a commonplace to describe someone as ‘burning up’ when they are angry;<sup>19</sup> and if they are not so angry such a statement would be taken as false (unless they were spontaneously combusting!). In fact, and as it turns out, Quine uses something very much like this overall account of the birth and death of metaphors to explain their role in science:

The molecular theory of gases emerged as an ingenious metaphor: a gas was likened to a vast swarm of absurdly small bodies. So pat was the metaphor that it was declared literally true and thus became straightaway a dead metaphor; the

---

<sup>19</sup> And we don’t take such statements as trivially true (when true) either. In this example, we are informed about something very important to human beings, namely, their state of mind or mood.

fancied miniature bodies were declared real, and the term “body” was extended to cover them all. In recent years the molecules have even been observed by means of electron microscopy; but I speak of origins.<sup>20</sup> (Quine, 1978: 159)

And with that last extended quotation of Quine’s, we can finally realize what position metaphors can play in bringing about knowledge (or intellectual and conceptual change), even though they are themselves, on Davidson’s approach, non-cognitive. Davidson, it seems, has forged a powerful understanding of the nature and function of figurative speech. Yet one question lingers: is his account convincing? As it stands, I see two (connected) problems with the causal view of metaphor – neither of which, I should add, is devastating.

One problem lies with the strict division that Davidson makes between novel or new uses of terms and regular or established ones. Contra Davidson – and here I am in agreement with Hymers – it appears that such a distinction, as well as the sharp distinction between speaker’s meaning and sentence meaning that, as we saw, Davidson founds upon it, can only be *one of degree and not of kind*. (See Hymers, 2002; 1998; 1996) In part, this has to do with the truism that “since every occasion of use differs in some way from every other occasion of use,” it follows that with every use of a term there is always “some deviation from its standard use” as evidenced so far. (Hymers, 1998: 272) To repeat: “Distinct occasions of utterance or inscription always differ in one way or another, but we [normally] ignore those differences in the service of

---

<sup>20</sup> Quine offers another illustration of this:

Or consider light waves. There being no ether, there is no substance for them to be waves of. Talk of light waves is thus best understood as metaphorical, so long as “wave” is read in the time-honored way. Or we may liberalize “wave” and kill the metaphor. (Quine, 1978: 159)

And he concludes with this overall assessment:

Along the philosophical fringes of science we may find reasons to question basic conceptual structures and to grope for ways to refashion them. Old idioms are bound to fail us here, and only metaphor can begin to limn the new order. If the venture succeeds, the old metaphor may die and be embalmed in a newly literalistic idiom accommodating the changed perspective. (Quine, 1978: 159)

whatever ends lead us to apply the same term to distinct cases.” (Hymers, 1998: 271)

What this means, however, is that “the use to which a word is put... always contains the seeds of deviant usage such as we find in metaphor. The literal [(the cognitive)] and the metaphorical [(the non-cognitive)] go hand in hand. Standard use always holds the chance of metaphor, and metaphor always shows some promise of being literalized.”<sup>21</sup>

(Hymers, 1998: 271) One way of putting this, is to say that to have a metaphor it is not enough simply to have novelty; in metaphor novelty must be “what *matters*.”<sup>22</sup> (Hymers, 1998: 272) Furthermore, embracing the importance of novelty – the non-standard – in metaphor, is itself consistent with claiming that metaphor *only* “tend[s] toward the non-cognitive,” i.e., it is compatible with going against Davidson and disclaiming the notion that ‘nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker’s meaning [(non-cognitivity)] and literal meaning [(cognitivity)].’ (Hymers, 1998: 280)

That Davidson may have misjudged the character – although not the significance – of novelty in his account of metaphor is seen in other ways as well. One gets the feeling when reading Davidson – with all his talk of ‘consulting dictionaries based on actual usage’ and his focusing on ‘regular, predictable, linguistic behavior’ – that *repetition* should be enough to kill a metaphor. And, indeed, it is true that “all our words have this much in common with dead metaphors: they have had to traverse the distance that separates being used on a single occasion from having a standard use.” (Hymers,

---

<sup>21</sup>Here we commence to see why Murdoch would be tempted to say ‘We are all artists’: “the effects of language are never purely cognitive or purely non-cognitive. Literal use has metaphorical overtones, just as words used as metaphors have standard uses, and the line between the cognitive and the non-cognitive varies with contexts of utterance.” (Hymers, 1998: 273)

<sup>22</sup>We could spell this out by distinguishing between using a word in a context it had never been used before (something which is almost always (triflingly) true) and using it in an *unusual* way (something much rarer). Both require some degree of imagination and judgment, but the latter more.

1996: 10) But is repetition – being ‘caught up and bandied about’ – all that is required to traverse the distance from Camelot to Cambridge? It appears not. “Say ‘Architecture is frozen music’ as much as you like,” Hymers rightly comments, “the metaphor will persist.”<sup>23</sup> (Hymers, 1998:277) What is needed in addition to make a metaphor die is that one “build up its inferential connections” and integrate it into the rest of the language in question’s “inferential economy.” (Hymers, 1998: 277; 2002: 5)

Interestingly enough, this brings us to Black’s “interaction view” of metaphor. (See Black, 1962; 1993) According to this view, metaphors work by bringing “two distinct subjects – a ‘principal’ and a ‘subsidiary’ one [–]” into juxtaposition with one another. (Black, 1962: 44) Each subject carries with it a “system of ‘associated implications’” or “commonplaces”, namely, “a set of standard beliefs... (current platitudes) that are the common possession of... members of some speech community.” (Black, 1962: 44; 40) In Hymers’s words, “competent users of a term [(subject)] will [usually] recognize an array of standardly acceptable or legitimate inferences that can be drawn regarding anything to which the term is typically applied.” (Hymers, 2002: 6)

Black illustrates the above by means of the metaphor “Man is a wolf”. (Black, 1962: 39-41) In this case, ‘man’ is the principal subject and ‘wolf’ the subsidiary one. To get at the system of associated commonplaces surrounding the term ‘wolf’, Black thinks we need only “[i]magine some layman required to say, without taking special thought, those things he held to be true about wolves.” (Black, 1962: 40) Thus, “[a] speaker who says “wolf” is normally taken to be implying in some sense of that word that he is referring to something fierce, carnivorous, treacherous, and so on”; and “[t]o

---

<sup>23</sup> Does this mean that Paul Joseph Goebbels was wrong when he said: “If you repeat something often enough it becomes a fact.” (I quote this from memory and believe it comes from somewhere in William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1960).

deny such commonplaces (e.g. by saying that wolves are vegetarians – or easily domesticated), [would be] to produce an effect of paradox and provoke a demand for justification.” (Black, 1962: 40) The *metaphor* ‘Man is a wolf’, in its turn, “works by applying to the [term ‘Man’ the] system of associated implications characteristic of [the term ‘wolf’].” (Black, 1962: 44) So, and in this instance, if ‘Man is a wolf’, then man “preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on.”<sup>24</sup> (Black, 1962: 41) The metaphor, it can be said, “filters” or renders prominent “[a]ny human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in ‘wolf-language’,” and it pushes others – i.e. those “*normally* implied by literal uses of man” – “into the background.” (Black, 1962: 39; 41) As Black sums it up: it “*organizes* [ – perhaps even changes – ] our view of man.”<sup>25</sup> (Black, 1962: 41)

In effect, what Black is putting forward is that metaphors or metaphorists, by encouraging that we apply a *different* implicative complex to the principal subject, “effectively propos[e] a new *use* for the term that plays the role of [principal] subject.” (Hymers, 2002: 7) On Black’s account we view metaphors as uses of words that *disturb the inferential economy* (what Rorty calls the “logical space of reasons”) and literal uses as ones that keep things running smoothly. (Rorty, 1998: 203) This is interesting insofar as it is compatible with Davidson’s view. Davidson, after all, says that “the unexpected or subtle parallels and analogies it is the business of metaphor to promote need not

---

<sup>24</sup> Although Black thinks that “the important thing for [a] metaphor’s effectiveness is not that the commonplaces shall be true, but that they should be readily and freely evoked,” I nonetheless feel compelled to mention that current science has largely dispelled the stereotype that wolves are ‘treacherous’ and ‘fierce’ and that such illusions are even beginning to be dismissed at the level of popular culture. (Black, 1962: 40) This adds force to Black’s comment to the effect that “a metaphor that works in one society may seem preposterous in another [(or in the same one only at a later date)]. Men who take wolves to be reincarnations of dead humans will give the statement ‘Man is a wolf’ an interpretation different from the one I have been assuming.” (Black, 1962: 40)

<sup>25</sup> And vice versa: “If to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would.” (Black, 1962: 44)

depend, for their promotion, on more than the literal meaning of words,” and, in fact, according to the interaction view, metaphor functions by coinciding two (or more) words’ systems of associated commonplaces (i.e. their literal meanings) in such a way that it promotes insight, potentially – if it is widely adopted and buried into the logical space of reasons – even changing their system of associated implications or their literal meanings. (Davidson, 2000: 342) But this is where Black, in his original paper, makes an unfortunate move. Black “takes the imagined new use *itself* to constitute a *figurative meaning*, and, on this ground, he judges metaphor to be *cognitive*.” (My emphases. Hymers, 1998: 278) Davidson, for reasons already encountered, rejects this.

Like Davidson’s view, however, Black’s too can be modified. Hymers notes that “to *suggest* a new set of inferential connections is, by virtue of sheer newness and mere suggestiveness, not thereby to *change* the meanings of the terms involved.” (Hymers, 2002: 7) Instead – and this is a Davidsonian point – “the adoption of the metaphor by a *whole linguistic community* would... constitute a change in its meaning,” and this only insofar as (and now we are making a ‘Blackian’ point) “that adoption included an acceptance of an array of new standard inferential connections characteristic of the secondary [subject].” (Hymers, 2002: 7) Unless that happened, we would not have “shifts in meaning”, but, as Black himself later clarifies, only “a shift in the *speaker’s* meaning – and the corresponding hearer’s meaning.”<sup>26</sup> (Black, 1962: 45; 1993: 28) But – yet again – allowing this does not necessitate keeping the line between speaker’s meaning and sentence meaning sharp:

We might better think of standard or literal meaning and speaker’s meaning as points on a pragmatic continuum, relative to which standard meaning is

---

<sup>26</sup> This is Hymers’s insight and I give him full credit for it – especially for noticing the subtle – but crucial – shift in Black’s own position. (Hymers, 2002; 1998; 1996)

separated from speaker's meaning in large measure by the degree to which a term has an implicative complex that has been articulated and accepted by other speaker's. (Hymers, 2002: 7)

To do so is to give testimony to the potential of metaphor – so fundamental to its ability to bring about conceptual change – to be assimilated into everyday linguistic life, i.e., to acquire a literal meaning.

#### **D. Wittgenstein and Metaphor**

We have just finished outlining a solid, if not a stolid, view of metaphor. (Let's call it the 'causal-interaction' view of metaphor.) Before showing how this view can be used to give us a novel account of how to bring about social and moral progress, as well as how it helps us understand what might be going on (at least some of the time) in those whom we take to be moral exemplars, I'd like to first take a step back and explain to what extent the view just fashioned can justly be described as 'Wittgensteinian'. Other than bluntly asserting that the debate so far can be interpreted as a long footnote to section 43 of the Investigations ("For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language"), I think that the best places to look for such justification are Wittgenstein's concept of "secondary sense," and, surprise surprise, his notion of family resemblances. (PI\* xi, p. 216) I make no claim, however, that the 'causal-interaction' view is at all *Wittgenstein's own* view of metaphor. I only suggest that the account given above overlaps with, and has (most likely) been influenced by, things Wittgenstein has said enough to be properly dubbed 'Wittgensteinian'.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Diamond makes similar points – but solely in the context of ethics – in her article "Wittgensteinian Ethics." (See Diamond, 2001) I suppose she might want to include this thesis under that heading too. It certainly wouldn't belong to an article entitled "Wittgenstein's Ethics."



Let me begin by looking at Wittgenstein's sketchy ( – he only talks about it in four sections in the Investigations) notion of secondary sense. “Central to the idea of a secondary use [(i.e. sense)],” Diamond informs us, “is the distinction between a matter-of-course use of an expression and [one] which may be natural enough yet not just a matter-of-course use.” (Diamond, 1967: 207) This passage resonates very well with large portions of the causal-interaction view of metaphor, and I found it very disappointing when Diamond concluded her article only to confess “I have left [that central idea] pretty much in the dark.” (Diamond, 1967: 207) Luckily, Stanley Cavell sheds some light on just the distinction Diamond was pointing to, along with its relationship to secondary senses *and metaphor*. I quote the relevant passage in its entirety:

It is of immediate relevance to what I have been asking about Wittgenstein's view of language, and indicates one general and important limitation in my account, to notice that in moving, in Part II of the Investigations, to ‘figurative’ or ‘secondary’ senses of a word..., Wittgenstein is moving more concentratedly to regions of a word's use which cannot be assured or explained by an appeal to its ordinary language games (in this sense, these uses are *like* metaphorical ones). Such uses have consequences in the kind of understanding and communication they make possible. I want to say: It is such shades of sense, intimations of meaning, which allow certain kinds of subtlety or delicacy of communication; the connection is intimate, but fragile. Persons who cannot use words, or gestures, in these ways with you may yet be in your world, but perhaps not of your flesh. The phenomenon I am calling “projecting a word” [to new cases or language-games] is the fact of language which, I take it, is sometimes responded to by saying that “All language is metaphorical”. Perhaps one could say: the possibility of metaphor is the same as the possibility of language generally, but what is essential to the projection of a word is that it proceeds, or can be made to proceed, *naturally*; what is essential to a functioning metaphor is that its “transfer” is *unnatural* – it breaks up the established, normal directions of projection.<sup>28</sup> (Cavell, 1979: 189-90)

---

<sup>28</sup> Compare that splendid passage with this one written by Quine one year earlier:

Besides serving us at the growing edge of science and beyond, metaphor figures even in our first learning of language; or, if not quite metaphor, something akin to it. We hear a word or phrase on some occasion, or by chance we babble a fair approximation ourselves on what happens to be a pat occasion and are applauded for it. On a later occasion, then, one that resembles that first occasion by our lights, we repeat the expression. Resemblance of occasions is what matters, here as in metaphor. We generalize our application of the expression by degrees of subjective resemblance of occasions, until we discover from other people's behavior that we have pushed

I stumbled upon this passage as a godsend. Unfortunately, I was again only disappointed to learn that Wittgenstein would probably oppose Cavell's interpretation and that instead he unequivocally states: "The secondary sense is not a 'metaphorical' sense."<sup>29</sup> (PI \*xi, p. 216) (But – and given all the merits we've come across in the causal-interaction view so far – one might wonder whether we need accept Wittgenstein's appraisal here. Surely he had a different understanding of the term 'metaphor' than we do. Perhaps (however unlikely) this was even one area where he was still overly under the influence of his earlier self and the logical positivists. I don't know.) Let us turn, then, to family resemblances.

Following standard exegetical practice, I have repeatedly used the term 'game' to illustrate what Wittgenstein meant by family resemblance concepts. I now shift to 'number'. Consider section 67 of the Investigations:

And for instance the kinds of number form a family in the same way. Why do we call something a 'number'? Well, perhaps because it has a direct-relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.

In this excerpt we can see how the concept of family resemblances, while it attacks static essences, also offers us a dynamic picture of conceptual change or the way in which our concepts can come to be enriched or extended to apply to new cases. As Hymers aptly phrases it, "Wittgenstein's story about family resemblances can be read as a story about

---

analogy too far and exceeded the established usage. If the crux of metaphor is creative extension through analogy, then we have forged a metaphor at each succeeding application of that early word or phrase. These primitive metaphors differ from the deliberate and sophisticated ones, however, in that they accrete directly to our growing store of standard usage. They are metaphors stillborn. (Quine, 1978: 160)

<sup>29</sup> This is what Cavell, in the extended quotation, referred to as the 'one general and important limitation in my account'.

conceptual change in the light of heretofore unremarked similarities.” (Hymers, 2002: 8)

Even more significantly, given our present purposes, “it lies within the plot outlines of this story that such newly remarked similarities may be figurative. That is, they may diverge quite remarkably from an established network of similarities – so much so that a metaphorist’s co-linguists may initially balk at her proposed comparisons.” (Hymers, 2002: 8)

Hymers puts flesh on this last point via the history of mathematics. Again I quote in full:

That changes in our concept of number... began as metaphors is suggested by the great reluctance that mathematicians felt about accepting these extensions in their literal interpretations.... [S]uch claims initially ‘sounded crazy’ to the *numerati*. The production of negative integers and their imaginary roots, for example, seemed more than a little strange to many European mathematicians (as they had to some mathematicians in India, where negative numbers were used as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century). Pascal (writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) remarked sarcastically, “I have known those who could not understand that to take four from zero there remains *zero*.” Antoine Arnauld – best known to philosophers as the author of the Fourth Objections to Descartes’s *Meditations* – argued that negative integers entailed patent absurdities, such as that  $1/-1 = -1/1$ . How could a ratio of a larger number to a smaller number be equal to the ratio of a smaller number to a larger number? The English mathematician, John Wallis, in a similar vein, contended in 1655 that negative numbers must be both less than zero and greater than infinity, for if  $1/0$  is an infinite quantity, then  $1/n$  where  $n < 0$  must be even greater. Many mathematicians were not prevented by their qualms from *using* negative integers, but they did so either with a guilty conscience or in the conviction that such talk was a mere *façon de parler*, which could in principle be eliminated. (Think here of the decorative view of metaphor.) As late as 1837 William Rowan Hamilton, the inventor of Hamiltonian mechanics, expressed similar misgivings about the “imaginary” roots of negative integers. They could not be greater than nothing, because the square of a positive integer is another positive integer. They could not be less than nothing, because (a) no number is less than nothing, and (b) the squares of alleged negative integers are supposed to be greater than nothing. And they could not be equal to nothing, since the square of nothing is nothing. “It must be hard to found a SCIENCE on such grounds as these...” Hamilton complained. (Hymers, 2002: 9)

Today, at least for anyone who has studied mathematics beyond high school, such quibbles present themselves as amusing and entertaining, and the nature of this

amusement lies in the fact “we are acquainted with an area of discourse – a language game – in which there are accepted procedures for drawing inferences about negative integers and imaginary roots.” (Hymers, 2002: 9) There were not always such established procedures or language games, but now that there are, negative integers and imaginary roots fit easily into our concept of ‘number’. Similar stories can be said of rational numbers, real numbers, complex numbers, transcendentals, quaternions, etc. Moving away from natural numbers, mathematicians have suggested “change[s] to the way in which the concept of ‘number’ is employed; [they] have proposed... new set[s] of norms to be observed in the activity of mathematical calculation.” (Hymers, 2002: 8) Some of those norms accept the law of commutativity, others do not.

And likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for our other concepts too. In the case of ‘work’, “we did not begin with a whole field of possible human activities laid out before us and then select the word [‘work’] as a name for a discrete subset of those activities.” (Hymers, 2002: 4) Our ancestors instead, we are entitled to suppose, “began with some word that is the ancestor of the word [‘work’] and applied it... to a tiny handful of activities.” (Hymers, 2002: 4) What Wittgenstein is suggesting is that our forbearers then “*extended* the application of the term [‘work’] (or its ancestor) to include new instances that were not foreseen in the initial usage of the term.” (Hymers, 2002: 4) “In doing so,” Hymers progresses, “they judged that these new instances were in some way similar to older instances, but the dimension of similarity was not held fixed.” (Hymers, 2002: 4) Thus today things as diverse as farming, mechanical repair, marketing, writing, teaching in a university, doing ‘housework’ (for which there is no pay) – even prostitution (‘sex workers’) – can be described as ‘work’. And as the example of ‘sex

workers' brings to light, such extensions can well be understood as (at first) *metaphorical*. Indeed, such a reading has even achieved the status of 'science' in the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who, under the title of "prototype theory," have 'established' that "metaphoric reasoning makes this projection [to non-clear cases] possible because non-prototypical cases are often metaphorical extensions from core cases within a radial category."<sup>30</sup> (Johnson, 1993: 31; Lakoff, 1987) Lastly, there is no reason to suppose that in so extending our term 'work' "we have merely grown acquainted with some pre-existing reality of ['work'], whose instantiations we have [merely] learned to recognize where before we could not." (Hymers, 2002: 4) Wittgenstein's anti-Platonic spirit of nominalism (see chapter two), could agree wholeheartedly with Black when he asserts that "[i]t would be more illuminating... to say that... metaphor *creates* the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing." (My emphasis. Black, 1962: 37) Not only, then, does Wittgenstein's initial discussion of 'meaning and use' and his notion of 'secondary sense' fit well with the causal-interaction view of metaphor, but so too does his whole discussion of family resemblances. In that sense, I conclude, the causal-interaction view of metaphor can be described as 'Wittgensteinian'.

## **E. Social Change and Moral Exemplars**

I now aim to show how the Wittgensteinian causal-interaction view of metaphor (and language) can provide us with insight into how social change can come about<sup>31</sup> as well as into what is so special (if anything) about our moral exemplars. My account

---

<sup>30</sup> A 'radial category' "is one where there is a central case and conventionalised variations on it which cannot be predicted by general rules." (Lakoff, 1987: 84) This type of category shall receive further attention in the concluding chapter.

<sup>31</sup> It is casting light on how 'proposals' for societal change can come to be instantiated, and not just the character of the proposals themselves, that constitutes much of the merit and novelty of this view.

relies substantially on Rorty's writings – even though he himself makes heavy use of an *uncorrected*, strictly non-cognitive, Davidsonian causal story of metaphor. We now know the changes needed in such an account, and they should be kept in mind when reading what follows.

In his “Feminism and Pragmatism”, Rorty makes the thoroughly Davidsonian (and Wittgensteinian – perhaps even Hegelian) point that

Individuals – even individuals of great courage and imagination – cannot achieve semantic authority, *even semantic authority over themselves*, on their own. To get such authority you have to hear your own statements as part of a shared practice. Otherwise you yourself will never know whether they are more than ravings, never know whether you are a heroine or a maniac. People in search of such authority need to band together and form clubs, exclusive clubs. (Rorty, 1998: 223)

What Rorty is driving at here is that along the road from non-cognitivity or speaker's meaning to cognitivity and sentence meaning, there will be gradations or steps; and if you take these steps, you will increase your chances of attaining the level of full-fledged linguistic meaning. One such step is the formation of (exclusive) clubs, unions, societies, associations, organizations, etc.

Like Davidson, Rorty locates the worth of metaphor in its (tendency towards) non-cognitivity, i.e., in the fact that metaphors “do not fall within the purview of rules and norms in the way that literal uses of language do.” (Hymers, 1996: 7) Insofar as this is true, metaphor allows us to get outside of areas of discourse “where there are generally accepted procedures for fixing belief,” making it possible for us to alter “ourselves and our patterns of action” – perhaps even our societies as a whole. (Rorty, 1991: 163) The problem is that until this happens, until, that is, one's “new language” with its malapropisms and fresh re-descriptions, becomes widespread, one risks the chance of – especially in the beginning – “sound[ing] crazy.” (Rorty, 1998: 204) “When Olympe de

Gouges appealed in the name of women to the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens,” Rorty reminds us,

even the most revolution-minded of her male contemporaries thought she was crazy. When Canadian feminists argued, in the 1920’s, that the word ‘persons’ in an act specifying the condition for being a senator covered women as well as men, the Supreme Court of Canada decided that the word in that context should not be so construed, because it never had been. (Rorty, 1998: 204fn)

More recently, Marilyn Frye has spoken of her feminist work as “a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness – dancing about a region of cognitive gaps and negative semantic spaces, kept aloft only by the rhythm and momentum of my own motion, trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist.” (Frye, 1983: 154) And this comes as no surprise to Rorty, for, as he poignantly remarks, “meaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices – unwilling to take part in the old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one.”<sup>32</sup> (Rorty, 1998: 217) Indeed, and according to the causal-interaction view, senselessness is merely an (initial) expected consequence of novelty.

But it is also consistent with this view that we can try “to actualize hitherto-undreamt-of-possibilities by putting new linguistic and other practices into play.” (Rorty, 1998: 208) Just as metaphors can catch on and become part of familiar ways of using words – i.e. can come to have semantic content – so too may the language of new social movements become part of – while at the same time changing – ‘mainstream society’.

“One way to change instinctive emotional reactions,” writes Rorty,

is to provide new language that will facilitate new reactions.... Something traditionally regarded as a moral abomination can become an object of general satisfaction, or conversely, as a result of the increased popularity of an

---

<sup>32</sup> Was it something like Frye’s sentiments, then, that inspired Wittgenstein when he wrote: “For a philosopher there is more grass growing down in the valleys of silliness than up on the barren heights of cleverness”? (Wittgenstein, 1980: 80)

alternative description of what is happening. Such popularity extends logical space by making descriptions of situations that used to seem crazy seem sane. Once, for example, it would have sounded crazy to describe homosexual sodomy as a touching expression of devotion or to describe a woman manipulating the elements of the Eucharist as a figuration of the relation of the Virgin to her Son. But such descriptions are now acquiring popularity. (Rorty, 1998: 204)

Here, one might think of Paul K. Feyerabend's "epistemological anarchist" who "assert[s] anything he wants and often will assert absurd things in the hope that this will lead to new forms of life." (Feyerabend, 1978: 210fn) Indeed, Rorty is convinced that "a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument for cultural change," and that "neither knowledge nor morality will flourish unless somebody uses language for purposes other than making predictable moves in currently popular language-games." (Rorty, 1989: 7; 1991: 169) The only thing that Rorty adds to Feyerabend's vision is the recommendation that these ('linguistic') 'anarchists' get together in groups. There they can speak to each other and test out their special descriptions or re-descriptions amongst one another. In so doing they can begin to see themselves as members of a "possible community, rather than as a lonely, and perhaps crazed, outcast from the actual one." (Rorty, 1998: 215) As Frye puts it, "[feminists must] dare to rely on ourselves to make meaning and we have to imagine ourselves capable of... weaving the web of meaning which will hold us in some kind of intelligibility." (Frye, 1983: 80) Gaining such semantic authority over themselves, moreover, can go a long way towards bringing about the eventual literalization of their voices within the community at large. It may force – or nudge – the "larger society... [to come] to terms with something new." (Rorty, 1998: 225) "Insofar as this sort of thing happens," Rorty sums up,

eyes become less arrogant and the members of the group cease to be treated as wayward children or as a bit crazy (the ways in which Emily Dickinson was



treated). Instead, they gradually achieve what Frye calls “full personhood” in the eyes of everybody, having first achieved it only in the eyes of members of their own club. They begin to be treated as full-fledged human beings rather than being seen, like children or the insane, as degenerate cases – as being entitled to love and protection, but not to participation in deliberation on serious matters. (Rorty, 1998: 223-4)

Concerning this, but now speaking from the vantage point of those within the cleared area in Quine’s jungle, Lovibond has justly remarked that

we will not always have the resources to say of any given “recalcitrant” act which of two possibilities it exemplifies: is it a case of individual [or group-wide] failure to comply with the requirements of an essentially benign process of socialization? Or is it one in which a less than benign process of socialization is meeting the resistance that, in one way or another, it deserves?... ([F]or who can claim expert knowledge of the *potential*, or lack of it, for new “language games” to come into existence?) (Lovibond, 2002: 189)

The problem, then, for those in the mainstream is how to reconcile a realization that the reasoned “pursuit of change demands that we intervene, from time to time, in the practice which constitutes the approved use of certain sensitive terms: in particular, the ‘essentially contested concepts’ of moral and political discourse,” with the equally true – but this time also dangerously tempting – awareness that “our success in abolishing the unwelcome uses would imply success, also, in modifying the life of the community at large in accordance with our desires.” (Lovibond, 1983: 216) This problem could be described as the problem of political leadership. But I think that it can be also be aptly construed as an exemplification of the type of courage that most likely will be required in those who risk proposing alternatives to the status quo. Not all social reformers will have the flippant style of a Feyerabend.

Which brings us to moral exemplars. What I want to put forward is the idea that moral exemplars too can be described as individuals who are especially skilled at finding “new homes for our words.” (Scheman, 1996: 385) When Mohandas K. Ghandi put the

words ‘non-violent’ and ‘resistance’ together for the first time (?), he connected whole areas of discourse in a way that people at first blush could not take seriously – but as it seeped in, inspired, and even, in the end, triumphed in India, ‘non-violent resistance’ became a model for other movements of liberation, influencing the likes of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in America. Or take Francis of Assisi. When he prayed “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love – for it is in giving, that we receive; in pardoning, that we are pardoned...” he inverted almost ‘natural’ chains of inference and roots of interest in such a way that people still seek means to actualize in their own lives today almost a millennium later. One way of putting this is by saying that Nussbaum got it only partly right when she wrote that

this means that the person of practical wisdom lies surprisingly close to the artist and/or the perceiver of art, not in the sense that this conception reduces moral value to aesthetic value or makes moral judgment a matter of taste, but in the sense that we are asked to see morality as a high type of vision of and response to the particular, an ability that we seek and value in our greatest artists, and especially our novelists, whose value for us is above all practical and never detached from our questions about how to live. Fine conduct requires above all correct description; such description is itself a form of morally assessable conduct. “To ‘put’ things is very exactly and responsibly to do them.” The novelist is a moral agent; and the moral agent, to the extent to which she is good, shares in the abilities of the novelist. (Nussbaum, 1990a: 84)

She was only partly right because she chose the wrong form of art. Insofar as *re-description*, and not just plain description, is what is paramount in moral agents, then it is poetry and the poet – in Rorty’s “wide sense of... ‘one who makes things new’ – that/who is the most ethically informative of arts/artists. (Rorty, 1989: 12)

At this point, however, Murdoch registers the following objection: “The idea of such an exceptional and godlike power might be felt to be inappropriate in a strict account of morality. As moral agents, we are not called upon to be original geniuses but

to be good persons.” (Murdoch, 1993: 310) “In Kant’s extended metaphysical picture,” she notes, “morality concerns what an ordinary man may be expected to be able to do.” (Murdoch, 1993: 311) But this is where the causal-interaction view of metaphor is helpful. After all, we saw earlier how the application of even our most ordinary concepts, even in ordinary situations, requires judgment and imagination. And this is in part because every context of utterance differs slightly from every other one. But we also saw that this makes every application of our concepts in some sense novel, hence, sharing in a key way an element with metaphor. Put differently, ‘we are all artists’. We are poets even if we don’t know it. The difference between the ordinary person and the genius or the moral exemplar is (also) a *difference in degree, not in kind*. In Murdoch’s own assessment, “the concept of genius itself emerges from an appreciation of the deep and omnipresent operation of imagination in human life.” (Murdoch, 1993: 316)

## Conclusion

*My heart leaps up when I behold  
 A rainbow in the sky:  
 So was it when my life began,  
 So is it now I am a man,  
 So be it when I shall grow old  
 Or let me die!  
 The Child is father of the Man:  
 And I could wish my days to be  
 Bound each to each by natural piety.*  
 –**William Wordsworth, My Heart Leaps Up**

What, then, has been achieved? First of all, I think that it can safely be said that this thesis has established a firm affinity between contextualism in ethics and views Wittgenstein held in the philosophy of language. Both argue against codifications; both stress the importance of particulars and abilities of perception; and both emphasize the importance of judgment. While Wittgenstein centered his arguments against the logicism of his earlier self (i.e. the view that rules can by themselves – and without the need for any exercise of judgment – indicate where, when and how they should be applied), as well as against a concomitant – but not equivalent – Augustinianism/Platonism (i.e. the view that sees the grasping of a (formalized) rule as sufficient for attaining meaning, whether or not one is then actually also able to apply or use it to or in particular circumstances), contextualists focus on the ethical need to picture situations in ways such that they call forth the application of whatever moral principles, rules or concepts we may have. And these picturings or renderings are seen as *necessarily* involving a certain amount of judgment, discernment and/or imagination so that one can come to recognize ‘a this as being a that’.

That Wittgenstein's insights in the philosophy of language have their counterparts in ethics comes as no surprise. The force of his notion of family resemblance concepts – which forms the core, as we saw in chapters one and two, of his attack on both logicism and Augustinianism/Platonism – applies to *all* concepts including ethical ones. Furthermore, his anti-Augustinian/Platonic grounding of meaning in *use*, i.e., in agreement in judgments, practices, customs, language-games, or forms of life, ties his philosophy of language very neatly to the lived life that ethics so concerns itself with. (It brings meaning, so to speak, down to Earth from the Platonic Heaven – making Wittgenstein, somewhat ironically, more Socratic than Plato.) Indeed, embracing the family resemblance structure of our concepts and the connected 'doctrine' of meaning as use spawns a novel account of intellectual and moral progress that identifies metaphor – understood in an equally Wittgensteinian manner – as vital.

Metaphors, according to this causal-interaction view, suggest relations or resemblances between subjects that hitherto had not been so tied together. They allow one to see something as another for the first time. Indeed, and if the kinship hinted at by the metaphor is picked up and built upon, what was initially only metaphorical may come to be literalized: "I begin to calculate with complex numbers on the basis of an analogy with calculations that involve real numbers, and as the new set of techniques is developed I learn to comport myself in accordance with a new norm of calculation." (Hymers, 2002: 11) These new norms or extended meanings, moreover, are not considered as simply having been there in the relevant concept(s)/practice(s) all along, only latently and waiting to be unpacked. Rather, argue Black, Davidson, Rorty, and Hymers, they are better viewed as having been created or invented than discovered. One

will praise movements that bring about intellectual and moral change, then, “not for the accuracy of their diagnoses [or descriptions] but for the imagination and courage of their proposals.” (Rorty, 1998: 214) On this take, when feminists first extended the terms ‘equal’ and ‘person’ to apply to women as well as men, we should understand them, and they should have understood themselves, as “*creating* such an experience by creating a language, a tradition, and an identity.” (Rorty, 1998: 212) The image that comes closest to matching the bent of this view is that of the scientific genius, social reformer, or moral exemplar as an imaginative poet and not as a logician analyzing and revealing the meaning or implications of our already held concepts and/or our established practices. The contrast is that “between the attempt to represent or express something that was already there and the attempt to make something that never had been dreamed of before.” (Rorty, 1989: 13)

With that romantic representation, however, the ugly head of relativism once more makes its appearance. Realists – as encountered in chapter two – would want to argue that “women were everything they are now, and *therefore* were entitled to everything they are now trying to get – even when they did not know, and might even have explicitly denied, that they were entitled to it.” (Rorty, 1998: 219) And this they can argue because they believe in the existence of (timeless?) essences or ‘truth-makers’ in virtue of which the applications we make of our concepts are said to be objective or un-objective. Presumably it was always part of the essence of women that they were equal to men and, so, recent developments in society are merely actualizing what was always, in fact, (at least potentially) the case. And the same could be said of our understanding of ‘number’ (complex numbers, quaternions, logarithms – were always

part of our concept of number even if we did not so recognize them), ‘game’ (video games were always part of – or implied to be part of – our concept of ‘game’ even before they existed and we applied the concept to them), and so on and so forth.

The necessity of such essences for our concepts to be meaningful and useable, on the other hand, has been effectively undermined by Wittgenstein’s discussion of family resemblances. Indeed, the notion that our concepts often have *paradigm* examples adds a further element of implausibility to the realist’s view. Wittgenstein’s example of ‘number’, Lakoff points out, “suggests that integers are central, that they have a status as numbers that, say, complex numbers or transfinite numbers do not have.” (Lakoff, 1987: 17) Or take the concept of ‘bird’. Lakoff notes that “some category members are better examples of the category than others”: a pigeon might be a better example than a penguin. (Lakoff, 1987: 56) This poses difficulties for the realist’s view, since if all birds are rightly called ‘birds’ only because they share in the same essence of ‘birdhood’, it is difficult to see why there should be better and worse examples of birds. But the Wittgensteinian does have a ready answer to this problem. For her a concept

has its meaning only in relation to a culture’s shared, evolving experience and social interactions, and it is the existence of stable structures of such interactions that lends stability to the concept. In other words, the fact that there is a core to the concept is not typically a result of properties alleged to be inherent in the concept, but, instead, it is a result of continuity within the social background of a culture’s shared experience by virtue of which the concept can mean what it does. (Johnson, 1993: 90)

Cultures and social backgrounds, however, are not fixed. They change. And so do our concepts along with them: “the extent to which females are regarded as prototypical persons varies from culture to culture and from period to period.” (Johnson, 1993: 269) But if our concepts gain their meaning only by being part of a practice – if “when language-games change... there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts

the meanings of words change” – one might wonder whether it follows that we cannot criticize our present cultural practices, or those of our past, or even those of foreign cultures? (Wittgenstein, 1969: \*65) That this may be so is suggested by Wittgenstein’s minimal constraint on objectivity, encountered in chapter two, that made it out that a classificatory system is objective insofar as it can be taught or learned or lived by. What I would like to now argue is that one can construct a stronger account of objectivity that avoids the relativism that such a view permits ( – given that there is a plurality of such classificatory systems) while remaining, nevertheless, Wittgensteinian.<sup>1</sup>

Susan Hurley has fittingly commented that for Wittgenstein “the existence of certain shared practices, any of which might not have existed, is all that our having determinate reasons... to do [or think] anything rests on.” (Quoted in Rorty, 1998: 205) In agreement with this, Lovibond notes that “according to Wittgenstein’s conception of language objective discourse ‘rests upon’, or ‘is grounded in’, a consensus within the speech community – an agreement initially in judgments, but ultimately in actions.” (Lovibond, 1983: 54) One might worry, however, that this ‘sociological’ picture may be in the process of (relativistically) reducing warrant to community agreement. But, as Hymers insightfully points out,

no such reduction is needed to claim that if, on careful reflection, all members of a community, C, agree that some statement, S, is justified, then S *is* justified according to the norms of C. Understanding a norm just *is* understanding how it applies to particular cases, and if, on careful reflection, all or a majority of C’s members hold S justified then protests to the contrary are (a) expressions of misunderstanding or insufficient reflection, or (b) expressions of a desire to *change* the norms of C in some way, or (c) expressions of systematic ambiguity in the interpretation of norms – or put another way – of the existence of distinct, rival norms within a single community. (Hymers, 1996: 18fn)

---

<sup>1</sup> We already moved away from this minimal standard of objectivity when we saw, in chapter four, that for full-blown linguistic meaning to occur a concept needs to acquire an established place in our language-games. One way of portraying this is to say that for categories to be objective they need not just be *learnable*, but in fact *learned* and (widely) used.



This last diversity, together with the fact that there might be those who are not so willing to comply with the social practices which constitute playing certain language-games in a given culture, has important bearings on the issue of relativism in another way as well.

“The conceptual scheme in which we grew up,” writes Quine, “is an eclectic heritage.” (Quine, 1964: 77) Or, as Kai Nielsen puts it, it would be wrong to consider our practices as “*balkanized* practices.” (My emphasis. Nielsen, 2001: 384) Instead,

we have a bunch of practices serving different purposes – a bunch of language-games that answer to different interests. Other peoples, often in many respects, though not in all, very different peoples, have their more or less distinctive practices and language-games too. They in certain places overlap with ours while in certain respects it is still the case that they are very different from ours, but where they do not overlap with ours, their very different language-games overlap with other language-games of theirs which overlap with language-games of ours. So there is always a bridge which allows us and... any other culture to gain some common understanding. (Nielsen, 2001: 384)

This is important. It shows us that different belief systems are not “analogous to axiomatic systems such that... two world-views are isomorphic or cut off from each other so that we are inescapably reasoning and conceptualizing things internal to a framework and that we do not, nay cannot, even understand [let alone criticize] things in some radically different framework.” (Nielsen, 2001: 384) In fact, “nothing like this either on Wittgenstein’s view or in actuality is the case or even could be the case.” (Nielsen, 2001: 84) Here we need only refer to the work of Davidson, starting with his “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” to see that the relativist’s commitment to holding that we can identify true statements in the language of a cultural other without our being able ever to understand those statements, is nonsensical. For, as Davidson explains, once one identifies statements to which speakers give their assent – i.e. statements which they hold true – one is already well on one’s way towards translating their language. Identifying which statements a person holds true is the first step towards

“knowing either what the sentence, as spoken by him, means, or what beliefs are expressed by it.” (Davidson, 1986a: 315) In sum, the conceptual relativist’s wanting to hold that we can characterize alternative schemes as “largely true but not translatable” is a fatal conceit: “nothing could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behavior.” (Davidson, 1984: 194; 185)

The relativist’s conceit emerges in a different form as well. He can grant all that was just said against the idea of entirely incommensurable conceptual schemes while still holding the equally relativistic claim that we are stuck in whatever conceptual scheme we may have been born into and that we can never have any basis to criticize or dismiss any social practice that is in existence. He could even quote Wittgenstein – “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*” – in support of this contention. (PI \*xi, p. 226) But this too would depend on a false – let alone non-Wittgensteinian – picture of our cultural practices as making up one seamless web. For insofar as our practices form “clusters” and not “systems,” “we can, using other of our practices, and, never standing free of all practices, relevantly criticize any of our practices or any determinate cluster of our practices.” (Nielsen, 2001: 384; 386) Nielsen characterizes this procedure as follows:

Where one practice or cluster of practices (say some type of practice [perhaps religious ones]) conflicts with the great mass of our other practices, most of which are unproblematic for us, and where they conflict as well as with other practices which are problematical but still less problematical than the first cluster of practices, then we have good reasons, internal to our language-games and practices, for altering or sometimes even jettisoning these conflicting strongly problematical language-games and practices. (Nielsen, 2001: 386)

In Quine’s words:

we must not leap to the fatalistic conclusion that we are stuck with the conceptual scheme that we grew up in. We can change it bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher's task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea. We can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit, while continuing to depend on it for support; but we cannot detach ourselves from it and compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality. (Quine, 1964: 78-79)

One can, then, be a Wittgensteinian and be critical. By setting up our practices one against the other we can reach considered judgments that may result in a new but temporary reflective equilibrium, with perhaps its own new and also ephemeral language-games. Furthermore, this new reflective equilibrium can, as it stands, count as being objective. However, it is not considered objective in virtue of having been reached from – or because it somehow reaches to – a viewpoint (or a ‘foundation’) beyond and outside of all our practices. The very notion of all at once standing free of all our practices and therewith deliberating and choosing what practices to have is itself incoherent. As Wittgenstein says: “... a language-game does not have its origin in consideration. Consideration is part of a language-game.” (Wittgenstein, 1967: \*391)

What Wittgenstein is getting at in this passage is that there is no reasoning, choosing, considering, deliberating, acting, doubting, etc., except within already held language-games or practices. It is in that sense, and that sense only, that ‘what must be accepted, the given, is forms of life’.

Wittgenstein was no arch-conservative. But he was not a revolutionary either. In fact, on a Wittgensteinian understanding the idea of ‘total revolution’ is logically impossible. This is not to say that our practices could not eventually be found to be generally quite wrong or bad. What it does deny is that “we could [ever] find this out or fix up... new [or] correct one[s] *quickly*.” (Hursthouse, 2001: 166) Wittgensteinians, in

other words, are reformers who fix Neurath's ship *piecemeal*. But the important point is that the ship is or can be fixed, repaired, or even (slowly) rebuilt. A Wittgensteinian view of language, metaphor – and ethics too – it seems, offers us substantial insight into the nature of intellectual, social, and moral pursuits. This insight can help us know where to focus our efforts: on getting the minor premise of our practical syllogisms right; in establishing clubs so as to gain semantic authority over ourselves and thereby helping generate new practices and norms; in considering these various practices and norms in such a way as to attain a modicum of ever fleeting reflective equilibrium; and *et cetera*, *et cetera* – we need only imagine more. Is it then true that 'philosophy leaves everything as it is'? Or is this perhaps a last vestige from the Tractatus that, after having been climbed up upon, should now be left behind?

## Bibliography

- Albritton, Rogers. "On Wittgenstein's Use of the Term 'Criterion'." Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations. Ed. George Pitcher. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1968.
- Aristotle. Ethics. Revised edition. Trans. J. A. K. Thomson. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.
- . The "Art" of Rhetoric. Trans. John Henry Freese. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Austin, J. L. How To Do Things With Words. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Baker, G. P. and P. M. S. Hacker. Language, Sense and Nonsense. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.
- . b) Scepticism, Rules and Language. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.
- . Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- Bambrough, Renford. "Universals and Family Resemblances." Universals and Particulars: Readings in Ontology. Ed. M. J. Loux. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970. 109-125.
- Black, Max. "More about Metaphor." Metaphor and Thought. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Andrew Ortony. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 19-41.
- . "Metaphor." Models and Metaphors. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962. 25-47.
- Bloor, David. "The Question of Linguistic Idealism Revisited." The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein. Ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 354-382.
- Bowden, Peta. "Ethical Attention: Accumulating Understandings." European Journal of Philosophy. April 1998; 6 (1): 59-77.
- Carlyle, Thomas. Sartor Resartus, Heroes and Hero-Worship, Past and Present. London: Ward, Lock & Co., Limited, no date.
- Cavell, Stanley. The Claim of Reason. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

- . "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." Must We Mean What We Say? Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976. 44-72.
- Dancy, Jonathan. An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.
- Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean." Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: A Concise Anthology. Ed. Robert J. Stainton. Peterborough: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000. 333-350.
- . a) "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson. Ed. E. Lepore. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 306-319.
- . b) "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson. Ed. E. Lepore. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 433-446.
- . "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. 183-198.
- Diamond, Cora. "Wittgensteinian Ethics". Encyclopedia of Ethics. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eds. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker. New York: Routledge, 2001. 1813-1815.
- . "Wittgenstein, Mathematics, and Ethics: Resisting the Attractions of Realism." The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein. Ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 226-260.
- . "Secondary Sense." Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. 1967; 67: 189-208.
- Dupré, John. The Disorder of Things. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Eliot, George. The Mill on the Floss. New York: Collier, 1917.
- Feyerabend, Paul K. Science in a Free Society. London: New Left Review Editions, 1978.
- Fogelin, Robert J. "Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophy." The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein. Ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 34-58.
- Fiell, Charlotte and Peter. Modern Chairs. Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993.

- Frege, Gottlob. "On Concept and Object." Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege. Eds. Peter Geach and Max Black. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970.
- Frye, Marilyn. The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983.
- Garver, Newton. "Philosophy as Grammar." The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein. Ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 139-70.
- Grice, Paul H. "Meaning." Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: A Concise Anthology. Ed. Robert J. Stainton. Peterborough: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000. 127-136.
- Hacker, P. M. S. Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- . Insight and Illusion. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Hacking, Ian. "The Parody of Conversation." Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives in the Philosophy of Donald Davidson. Ed. Ernest Lepore. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Huff, Douglas. "Family Resemblances and Rule-Governed Behaviour." Philosophical-Investigations. Summer 1981; 4: 1-23.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. On Virtue Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Hymers, Michael. "Metaphor and Number." Unpublished manuscript, 2002.
- . "The Problem of Universals Dissolved?" Unpublished manuscript, 2001.
- . "Metaphor, Cognitivity, and Meaning-Holism." Philosophy and Rhetoric. 1998; 31 (4): 266-282.
- . "Truth and Metaphor in Rorty's Liberalism." International-Studies-in-Philosophy. 1996; 28 (4): 1-21.
- . "Wittgenstein on Names and Family Resemblances." Eidos. June 1990: 11-30.
- Johnson, Mark. Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993

- Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Pure Reason. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company: 1996.
- "On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use." Perpetual Peace and Other Essays. Trans. Ted Humphrey. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983.
- Kekes, John. Moral Tradition and Individuality. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- "Moral Sensitivity." Philosophy. January 1984; 59: 3-21.
- Kerkhoven, John. Simone Weil: A Study on Moral Psychology and Observations on Religious Life. M. A. thesis, Concordia University, 2003. Forthcoming.
- Kolak, Daniel. Wittgenstein's Tractatus. Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998.
- Kripke, Saul. On Rules and Private Language. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.
- Lakoff, George. Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Larmore, Charles E. Patterns of Moral Complexity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Little, Margaret Olivia. "Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology." Hypatia. Summer 1995; 10 (3): 117-137.
- Locke, John. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Vol. 2. Collated and annotated, with prolegomena, biographical, critical, and historical by Alexander Campbell Fraser. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.
- Lovibond, Sabina. Ethical Formation. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Realism and Imagination in Ethics. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
- Lugones, Maria. "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception." Hypatia. Summer 1987; 2: 3-19.
- Martin, Robert M. The Meaning of Language. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1987.
- Mason, Sheila. "Narrative Ethics." Unpublished manuscript, 1998.
- McDowell, John. "Virtue and Reason." The Monist. July 1979; 62: 331-350.



- McGuinn, Mary. Wittgenstein and the *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Miller, Alexander. Philosophy of Language. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1998.
- Miller, Richard B. Casualty and Modern Ethics: A Poetics of Practical Reasoning. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Murdoch, Iris. Existentialists and Mystics. Ed. and with a preface by Peter Conradi. Foreword by George Steiner. London: Chatto & Windus, 1997.
- . Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals. New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1993.
- . The Sovereignty of Good. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Nielsen, Kai. Naturalism and Religion. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2001.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "Rawls and Feminism." The Cambridge Companion to Rawls. Ed. Samuel Freeman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 488-520.
- . a) "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality." Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. 54-105.
- . b) "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy." Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. 125-147.
- . c) "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination." Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. 148-67.
- . d) "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory." Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. 168-194.
- Passmore, John. A Hundred Years of Philosophy. Revised edition. New York: Basic Books, 1966.
- Plato. Euthyphro. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Quine, W. V. "A Postscript on Metaphor." On Metaphor. Ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. 159-160.

- . "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis." From a Logical Point of View. Revised edition. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964. 65-79.
- Ramsey, Frank Plumpton. "Philosophy." The Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays. Ed. R. B. Braithwaite. New York: The Humanities Press, 1950. 263-269.
- Rorty, Richard. "Feminism and Pragmatism." Philosophical Papers Volume 3: Truth and Progress. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 202-227.
- . "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor." Philosophical Papers Volume 1: Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 162-172.
- . "The Contingency of Language." Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Russell, Bertrand. "Descriptions." Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: A Concise Anthology. Ed. Robert J. Stainton. Peterborough: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000. 65-74.
- . "On Denoting." The Philosophy of Language. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. A. P. Martinich. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. 203-211.
- . A History of Western Philosophy. London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1984.
- . My Philosophical Development. London: Allen and Unwin, 1959.
- . "The Cult of 'Common Usage'." Portraits from Memory and Other Essays. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1951. 166-172.
- . "On Scientific Method in Philosophy." Mysticism and Logic. London: Longmans, 1918. 97-124.
- Scheman, Naomi. "Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground." The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein. Ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 383-410.
- Sherman, Nancy. The Fabric of Character. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Searle, John R. "What Is A Speech Act?" Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: A Concise Anthology. Ed. Robert J. Stainton. Peterborough: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000. 253-268.
- Strawson, Peter F. "On Referring." Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: A Concise Anthology. Ed. Robert J. Stainton. Peterborough: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000. 289-311.

- Vetlesen, Arne Johan. Perception, Empathy, And Judgment. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.
- Weber, Max. "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy." Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences. Ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1949. 49-112.
- Wiggins, David. "Deliberation and Practical Reason." Essays On Aristotle's Ethics. Ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. 221-240.
- Winch, Peter. The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 1990.
- "Introduction: the Unity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy." Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein. Ed. Peter Winch. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969. 1-19.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951. Eds. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I. Ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman. Trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximillian A. E. Aue. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Culture and Value. Ed. G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman. Trans. Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Eds. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.
- Philosophical Grammar. Ed. R. Rhees. Trans. A. Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.
- On Certainty. Ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969.
- Zettel. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- "Some Remarks on Logical Form." Essays on Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus'. Eds. I. Copi and R. Beard. New York: Macmillan, 1966. 31-37.
- Philosophical Investigations. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.

Wordsworth, William. "My Heart Leaps Up." English Poetry. Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Enterprises, 1980. 136.