

Wittgenstein at His Word

DUNCAN RICHTER

Continuum

WITTGENSTEIN AT HIS WORD

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To my parents

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INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Wittgenstein is widely regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. Neither his critics nor his supporters, though, agree on what his work means. The purpose of this book is to try to answer that question, to say what Wittgenstein means. My purpose is not to defend or to attack Wittgenstein's work. Before we can attack or defend it, after all, we need to know what it is. Moreover, if the interpretation offered here is right, then what Wittgenstein offers is not so much a body of doctrines or theories but a way to do philosophy. So what he says cannot be true or false, but must instead be judged according to how useful or successful it is in its application. Since its purpose, I will argue, is to remove confusion, I will leave the reader to make such judgements for herself. This is another reason why I will not be passing any judgement for or against Wittgenstein here, but will instead settle for interpretation.

This is itself a controversial enough matter, and seeing what is at issue will be easier if I give an overview of the interpretative battlefield. Interpretations of Wittgenstein's work have always varied, but recent attempts to make sense of it tend to fall into two groups. Orthodox, traditional interpretations concentrate on what Wittgenstein said, or is taken to have said, about such issues as what is required for following a rule, whether a private language is possible, the nature of psychological states, what the foundations of mathematics are, and so on. In other words, they concentrate on what they take to be the content of Wittgenstein's work. Of course there are disagreements about what exactly Wittgenstein meant and to what extent he was right, but there has been little disagreement that these are the kinds of issues that interested Wittgenstein and about which, if anything, he had an important contribution to make to philosophy.

More recently, it has been argued that what Wittgenstein offers is not new theories in the philosophies of mind, language, and the like,

nor important arguments to support these theories, but a kind of therapy. In other words, these ‘new Wittgensteinians’ insist that we should take Wittgenstein at his word when he claims not to be putting forward theses or arguments despite its seeming just obvious to some readers that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, for instance, is filled with such things. What Wittgenstein offers, according to the new view, is therapy for a particular kind of ‘mental cramp’. That is to say, he offers a method, or perhaps a set of methods, for getting rid of problems, not novel or significant ideas about this or that issue. His aim is not to answer philosophical questions but to lead his readers to see that what seemed to be questions are really nothing but nonsense. This group takes more interest in the form of Wittgenstein’s work than its content.

Neither of these camps is at all homogeneous. This is especially true of the orthodox group, partly just because it is so large and therefore almost inevitably diverse. Still, I think it is useful to distinguish these two groups, since the distinction between form and content is important, even if not absolute, and because current debates in Wittgenstein scholarship can be hard to follow without an awareness of what divides the main camps. One of the main things that I propose to do in this book is to defend the view of the second, new group.

In saying that I defend those who concentrate on the frame or form of Wittgenstein’s work I do not mean to imply that I ignore its content. In Chapters 2 and 3 especially I address very traditional questions about what Wittgenstein wrote about rule-following, private language, language-games and forms of life, for instance. I show, though, that what Wittgenstein wrote on these subjects does not betray his methodology, and thus does not undermine the idea that what really constitutes Wittgensteinian philosophy is a certain therapeutic methodology, not any set of theses or arguments. To understand the method it will help to understand its aim. And to understand this it will help to know something about Wittgenstein’s life and times. Wittgenstein’s personality is part of the subject of Chapter 4, which deals with his views on ethics and his personal beliefs. It is worth saying something here though about his pessimistic view of Western civilization, which he famously expresses in his reference to the ‘darkness of this time’ in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*.¹

‘The darkness of this time’

Wittgenstein did indeed live in dark times. He was born in an age of decadence and anti-Semitism. The nationalism and imperialism of the age culminated in the First World War, during which he faced death on the front line and wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The desperation and racism of the age culminated in the Nazi state and of course the Holocaust, which was especially horrifying for Wittgenstein since his family was ethnically Jewish (their religion was Christian) and, unlike some, he had a good idea of what was going on in his native Austria.² It was during the Second World War that he prepared his *Philosophical Investigations* for publication.³

It was not only genocide and unprecedentedly bloody wars to which he objected, though. Wittgenstein shared some of George Orwell’s concern about the political consequences of the misuse of language, and believed that bad use of language went hand in hand with bad thinking on a cultural scale.⁴ The popularity of Hitler and Stalin were not so much what made the times dark, in Wittgenstein’s view, as they were symptoms of a deeper darkness. And this darkness was not limited to totalitarian states. The bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, for instance, would not have found favour with Wittgenstein.⁵ There are other less obvious symptoms of what Wittgenstein perceived as darkness too. For instance, when Wittgenstein thought of his century’s Russell, Freud and Einstein in comparison with the previous century’s Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin, he felt that a ‘terrible degeneration’ had come over the human spirit.⁶

Obviously Wittgenstein would have liked to be able to halt or reverse such degeneration, but there is reason to believe that he felt incapable of doing so. One philosopher is unlikely to change the way a whole culture lives, after all, and we will see evidence later that Wittgenstein thought of philosophy as a means to improve oneself, and perhaps a few likeminded people, not as a large-scale cultural fix. Still, it was Wittgenstein’s aim to work for good within the darkness he perceived around him. There is thus an important ethical or spiritual aspect to his attempt to achieve clarity in philosophy. I do not mean to suggest that the clarification of concepts or rules of language (Wittgenstein’s basic philosophical method, at least in later

years) was in fact a covert part of some wider political or religious goal. He valued clarity for its own sake. But what it means to say that clarity has a value of its own is best understood against a certain political, religious, ethical or cultural background, or else a desire for mere clarity might seem neurotic or pointless. Since clarity is Wittgenstein's goal in philosophy, we will misunderstand him if we assume that his work must have some bearing on this or that philosophical or other issue (although of course his ideas might have such relevance). And since the desire for clarity that I am talking about is not a neurotic obsession with order we are equally likely to go astray if we attempt an exhaustive cataloguing of Wittgenstein's dicta on anything and everything (although such a catalogue might prove useful to scholars). His aim was not to provide a complete description of the workings of our language. Instead he wanted to assemble reminders of how we use words (in the form of questions requiring an honest answer and statements of the undeniably obvious, for instance) for particular philosophical purposes, to relieve this or that particular cramp.

In other words I am claiming that an understanding of Wittgenstein's aim is useful if we are to understand his philosophical work. I am further claiming that this aim is conceptual or intellectual clarity and nothing else. Clear vision or understanding is not valuable because it brings us closer to our fellow creatures, or to God, or because it subverts fascism, or any such thing. Wittgenstein apparently told Rush Rhees that one of his aims was to teach people really to think, and thus work against the government. But the political consequences are incidental. It is the thinking that is important.⁷ Any desirable end that clarity brings is an accidental, albeit welcome, bonus.

In the first chapter of this book I approach this issue negatively, looking at what Wittgenstein opposes, namely confusion. Confusion, as Wittgenstein understands it, is a somewhat subjective mental state or spiritual condition. The confused person, or at least the confused person that Wittgensteinian philosophy can hope to reach, is someone who knows, perhaps only dimly, that he or she is confused. Only those who feel confused, who recognize themselves as philosophically troubled (or perhaps those who can be brought to such a condition) can be led out of their confusion. Wittgenstein's personal confusions

or cramps seem to have been mostly concerned with the nature of thought and its relation to the mind and to language, but philosophical confusion might arise from considering any traditional philosophical issue.

This confusion thus depends somewhat on the individual and what he or she is interested in, but it is not purely subjective. Wittgenstein's aim is not the medical one of removing a certain unpleasant feeling. He was not, apparently, very concerned with the removal of unpleasant feelings, as his fondness for recommending 'the bloody hard way' attests. Wittgenstein's aim is not to make life more pleasant. We are not here, in his view, to have a good time. Confusion is a serious problem because it results from language, which informs and is informed by life. The way we talk about time, for instance, can make time seem to be a very mysterious kind of stuff. Our shared language, therefore, can lead philosophically inclined individuals into a particular kind of confusion, which has the false appearance of mystery. This mystery is merely apparent, though, Wittgenstein thinks. There might be all manner of intriguing questions in physics about time, but distinctively philosophical questions, he believes, are basically just muddles that can be cleared up by careful attention to proper and improper, real and imaginary, uses of language (involving, for instance, 'time' and its cognates).

This confusion is an existential problem, one might say. The philosophically confused individual is a victim of his or her culture, perverted by language. Our language does not make error inevitable, any more than bad town planning makes it inevitable that we will get lost when we drive around. What we need is to see where and how we got lost, and then we will see the way we want to go. Wittgenstein's aim is to provide not so much a map as a course of instruction in how to get by without a map, how to read the road, as it were. What he offers is not a perspicuous overview of the whole of language, but an interactive demonstration of a method for achieving perspicuity. It is because there really is such a thing as this perspicuity, because there are right and wrong ways to go in language, that is to say because there are rules of grammar whose existence and nature is independent of each individual, that confusion is not a purely subjective phenomenon.

Therapy?

Emphasizing this therapeutic goal of Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations raises two important problems. The first is that the objectivity of confusion seems to presuppose some particular theory about language, such as the widespread idea that rules of language are created by 'the community of language users'. If so, then Wittgenstein is not merely demonstrating a therapeutic method but also doing some philosophy of language. Related to this problem is the question of the content of Wittgenstein's investigations. If he is only interested in methodology then why does he seem so fascinated by questions in the philosophy of mind? Perhaps this question could be answered by reference to the connection between mind and language (about which I will say more in Chapter 2). But then why did Wittgenstein take such an interest in ethics, religion, aesthetics, free will and determinism, cause and effect, the philosophy of mathematics, and so on? And, having done so, how could he avoid saying something substantive about at least some of these subjects?

Let me address the question about language first. As we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, Wittgenstein does not in fact advance any theory about what makes language possible or what must be the case in order for there to be language. He does not deny the possibility of a private language or anything else. The concepts that he introduces of language-games and forms of life are so flexible that no attendant theory could be identified (and it would be no surprise if this were deliberate). What Wittgenstein does is to urge us, and by questioning make us, to look carefully at how we use language and think about what we really want to say about it (and about mathematics, free will and the rest). He does not tell us what to say, or what we should want to say.

The second question remains, though, and could be applied to language as well as to anything else. How can Wittgenstein lecture or write on religion, say, without offering any ideas of his own, albeit perhaps unwittingly? I do not deny that Wittgenstein had his own personal views on a host of issues. It would be foolish to try to deny this. More importantly, I think that one needs to have something like a theory or set of theories in order to guide one's use

of Wittgensteinian therapy. This is something I address in Chapter 4, and it is the reason why the orthodox position on Wittgenstein cannot be dismissed completely. For instance, part of Wittgenstein's method is to remind people of the ordinary use of words. It would be madness to remind people at random of the ordinary uses of randomly chosen words. Wittgenstein of course does not engage in anything so futile. Instead he targets the Freudian, the Jamesian, the Platonist, the Cartesian, and so on, and reminds them of the ordinary uses of such words as 'mind'. This is no accident. Clearly Wittgenstein suspects that there is something deeply wrong with the way such people think about the mind. In this sense he must have theories, even if only negative ones about the wrongness of other people's ideas.

I prefer to speak here of suspicions rather than theories though, because Wittgenstein never explicitly articulates his guiding ideas and, more to the point, he does not insist or try to prove that his 'theories' are correct. He makes no claims about what it is that we will or will not want to say when we see all the relevant facts. And if one's Platonism, say, is part of one's religion, then Wittgenstein is not out to subvert it at all, as I explain in Chapter 5. He simply wants us to see our beliefs clearly, which I suppose would involve, among other things, recognizing them for what they are (religious rather than logical, say, or charming rather than necessary).

So Wittgenstein does have beliefs that one might call theories, but that I prefer to call guiding suspicions. These beliefs are the subject matter of most books on Wittgenstein, but not this one. The world does not need another such book, and, as I have said, it is ultimately not possible to say exactly what suspicions guided Wittgenstein's therapeutic remarks. An indefinite number of beliefs might motivate any set of remarks. Furthermore, it seems unfair, however interesting and fruitful it might be, to judge Wittgenstein by the merits of theories he did not publish, or the arguments that he might have had in mind to justify them. Instead I think we should look at what he did offer to the world, that is at what he said he was offering, namely his method. We cannot look only at the form and not at the content (bearing in mind Wittgenstein's observation that 'there is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method') but we can focus on one more than the other.⁸ That

is what I propose to do in the next five chapters, and especially in Chapter 1, which focuses on what Wittgenstein took to be the point of philosophy. Looking at what that point is will lead us naturally on to consider some of the questions and issues that most interested Wittgenstein and provided content for his most important work. These issues will be the focus of the rest of the book.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958.
2. For details on what happened to Wittgenstein's family see Ray Monk *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* Jonathan Cape, London, 1990, especially pp. 397–400.
3. See Rush Rhees's untitled contribution to *Philosophical Investigations* 24: 2 (April 2001): 160.
4. See George Orwell 'Politics and the English Language' in *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage* intro. by Richard Rovere, Harcourt, San Diego, CA, New York and London, 1984.
5. The bombing of Dresden certainly did not. See Monk *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pp. 479–85.
6. See M.O'C. Drury 'Conversations with Wittgenstein' in Rush Rhees (ed.) *Recollections of Wittgenstein* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 112.
7. See Rhees, in *Philosophical Investigations*. p. 162.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, §318.

Confusion

[W]hat we say will be easy, but to know why we say it will be very difficult.¹

Wittgenstein's philosophical work, both early and late, is notoriously difficult to understand. As he noted, much of the difficulty lies in understanding not so much what he says but why he says it. A standard kind of answer to this problem is that the goal of Wittgensteinian philosophy is conceptual clarity. It is not entirely clear though, I shall argue, what this clarity is and why we should want it. In an attempt to shed light on this dark but fundamental issue, I will look in this chapter at some of the things Wittgenstein said and wrote about confusion, and the related ideas of nonsense, perspicuity and the value of philosophy. The question of the value of philosophy raises questions of normativity. We might wonder whether Wittgensteinian philosophy can really be as neutral as he implies it is. One might think it is inevitable that a philosophy that rests on particular ideas about what is valuable will be coloured by these ideas or values. Against such a sceptical view I will argue that, while there are close connections between Wittgenstein's ethics and his proposed method for doing philosophy, these are not such as to make Wittgensteinian philosophy unacceptably biased.

I will begin with a brief examination of what Wittgenstein said he took philosophy to be, before moving on to the more difficult question of why he thought of philosophy as he did. In the first part of the chapter I will look at Wittgenstein's conception of what philosophy is, or should be, in his first published work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.² In the second part I will look at Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy in his later work, especially the *Philosophical Investigations*. After this I will consider what the point of philosophy so conceived might be, what Wittgenstein means to attack, and what he supports instead. This will lead into an examination of

Wittgenstein's values. The brief remarks I make about this here will be backed up in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, which deal with ethics and religion respectively.

Philosophy in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Wittgenstein told Ludwig von Ficker that the point of the *Tractatus* was ethical.³ In the preface to the book he says that its value consists in two things: 'that thoughts are expressed in it' and 'that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved'. The problems he refers to are the problems of philosophy defined, we may suppose, by the work of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, and perhaps also Arthur Schopenhauer. These are the philosophers Wittgenstein is known to have studied most carefully, and he explicitly acknowledges the influence of Frege and Russell in the preface. At the end of the book Wittgenstein says, 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical.'⁴ It is no easy matter to know what to make of Wittgenstein as author of the *Tractatus* (whom, apparently, we are meant to understand) and his propositions (which we are to recognize as nonsensical). I will take a preliminary look at this question here and then return to it in more detail in the next chapter.

The *Tractatus* certainly does not seem to be about ethics, as we can see from some important and representative propositions:

1 The world is all that is the case.

4.01 A proposition is a picture of reality.

4.0312 ... My fundamental idea is that the 'logical constants' are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the logic of facts.

4.121 ... Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.

4.1212 What can be shown cannot be said.

4.5 ... The general form of a proposition is: This is how things stand.

5.43 . . . all the propositions of logic say the same thing, to wit nothing.

5.4711 To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world.

Here and elsewhere in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein seems to be saying that the essence of the world and of life is ‘This is how things are.’ This is more banal than ethical, at least superficially, but it is not too far from an expression such as ‘That’s life’, which can express a somewhat stoical ethical view. Wittgenstein also says, though, that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are meaningless, not profound insights, ethical or otherwise. What are we to make of this?

Many commentators ignore or dismiss what Wittgenstein said about his work and its aims, and instead look for intelligible, even important and true, philosophical theories in it. The most famous of these in the *Tractatus* is the ‘picture theory’ of meaning. According to this theory, propositions are meaningful in so far as they picture states of affairs or matters of empirical fact. Anything normative, supernatural or (one might say) metaphysical must, it therefore seems, be nonsense. This has been an influential reading of parts of the *Tractatus*. It is entirely understandable, as the propositions quoted above make clear. Propositions, Wittgenstein certainly seems to be saying, picture how things happen to be. Those that pretend to some other office, such as those that say how things must be (logically or, perhaps, morally) fail to do the work of propositions, and so fail to be propositions. Thus (so-called) propositions of logic say nothing.

Unfortunately, this reading leads to serious problems, since by its own lights the *Tractatus*’s use of words such as ‘object’, ‘reality’ and ‘world’ is illegitimate. These concepts are purely formal or *a priori*. A statement such as ‘There are objects in the world’ does not picture a state of affairs. Rather it is, as it were, presupposed by the notion of a state of affairs. The ‘picture theory’ therefore denies sense to just the kind of statements of which the *Tractatus* is composed, to the framework supporting the picture theory itself. In this way the *Tractatus* pulls the rug out from under its own feet.

If the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical then they surely cannot put forward the picture theory of meaning, or any other

theory. Nonsense is nonsense. I will say more about this in Chapter 2. However, this is not to say that the *Tractatus* itself is without value. Wittgenstein's aim seems to have been to show up as nonsense the things that philosophers (himself included) are tempted to say. Starting from a position derived from Frege and Russell, he reaches the conclusion, by way of apparently logical steps, that one 'must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright'.⁵ Philosophical theories, Wittgenstein suggests, are attempts to answer questions that are not really questions at all (they are nonsense), or to solve problems that are not really problems. He says in proposition 4.003 that

Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.

(They belong to the same class as the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.)

And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all.

Philosophers, then, have the task of presenting the logic of our language clearly. This will not solve important problems, but it will show that some things that we take to be important problems are really not problems at all. The gain is not wisdom but an absence of confusion. This is not a rejection of philosophy or logic. Wittgenstein took philosophical puzzlement seriously, but he thought that it needed dissolving by analysis rather than solving by the production of theories. As we will see, much the same view of what a philosophical problem is and what should be done about it can be found in the later work, especially the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations*

For Wittgenstein, early and late, philosophy is not a science. It is not an investigation into how things are, at least not in the sense that we should expect it to lead to discoveries. Wittgenstein's view on this remained relatively unchanged throughout his life. Thus in the *Tractatus* we find the following:

4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences).

4.111 Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word ‘philosophy’ must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences: not beside them.)

4.112 Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not descriptive, but elucidatory. Or rather, the goal of philosophy is not description, but elucidation. Description is an important means to lucidity for Wittgenstein, but not more than that. Thus in *Philosophical Investigations* §109 he writes:

[W]e may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in spite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.⁶

In a sense the philosopher is a cartographer, charting the ‘bounds of sense’, the limits of what can be said or thought.⁷ It follows that philosophers should not concern themselves so much with what is actual but rather with what is possible, what is conceivable. This depends on our concepts and the ways they fit together in language. What is conceivable and what is not, what makes sense and what does not, depends on the rules of language, of grammar.

This conception of philosophy is clearly expressed in §90 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the ‘*possibilities*’ of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that

is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena. Thus Augustine recalls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration, past, present or future, of events. (These are, of course, not *philosophical* statements about time, the past, the present and the future.)

Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. – Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an ‘analysis’ of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart.

We should beware of the idea of analysis in philosophy, however, if we want to understand what Wittgenstein had in mind. Norman Malcolm observes that Wittgenstein himself did not find analysis of this kind all that useful and hardly ever employed it as a technique.⁸ Indeed Wittgenstein goes on in the very next paragraph (§91) to urge caution here:

But now it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our forms of language, and so a *single* completely resolved form of every expression. That is, as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, unanalysed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light. When this is done the expression is completely clarified and our problem solved.

Wittgenstein also warns against the idea that philosophy’s job is to clean up language, which might be suggested by the *Tractatus*’s idea of charting the limits of language.⁹ Philosophy is not about working through a language bit by bit, making it clearer and more logical as we go. Rather it is concerned with philosophical problems, which typically are manifested in confused utterances and misleading questions, and which are often soluble by means of investigating the grammar of (the correct use of the words involved in) what is being said or suggested.

It is not language that needs clearing up, as Wittgenstein sees things, but philosophical problems arising from language. It ought not to be surprising that the language we use every day does not conceal secrets that only a philosopher can dig out. Nor should we be surprised that there is nothing wrong with this language. Wittgenstein's acceptance of ordinary language, though, is not a rejection of philosophy or a commitment to the beliefs of the person in the street. It is true that Wittgenstein believes that we already know what we mean by sentences of ordinary language without help from philosophers. But it is not true that he insists that anything that 'sounds funny' to the ordinary person must be wrong (although the philosopher is likely to investigate remarks that sound strange in order to see whether they are nonsense or not). He does not believe in what John W. Cook calls 'Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy' which consists partly in

The claim that (as [Norman] Malcolm puts it) 'any philosophical statement which violates ordinary language is false'. In practice [this] involves asking whether something a philosopher says sounds funny, has the ring of oddity, when it is compared with the way people talk at the grocery store. If it does . . . we can be sure that he's gone wrong somewhere.¹⁰

Wittgenstein's emphasis on ordinary language is thus not conservative or limiting, as Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy would be. As Hanna Pitkin puts it:

The same ordinary language that allows the expression of various common-sense beliefs also allows their negation, their questioning, their doubting. What is binding is not ordinary beliefs, but the ordinary language in which they are expressed; and it is not binding because the common man is normative for the theorist, but because the ordinary language is also the theorist's own.¹¹

Being true to ordinary language is important for reasons of good faith and because, as Wittgenstein sees it, philosophical problems are themselves caused by ordinary language. 'Philosophy is a battle

against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.¹² The bewitchment is done by means of language, and the battle against it is to be done by the same means. To use another metaphor, if we have a tangled rope, there is no point in buying a new one only to go back (as we inevitably will with our language) to using the old tangled one. We must untie the knots in the language we use, and that is ordinary language.

To understand the meaning of a word, say 'time', Wittgenstein says we ought to look at the use we make of the word (as we will see in the next chapter). This consists in looking at a variety of circumstances in which the word is used, and perhaps making up hypothetical examples to show what does and does not make sense. In this way we will see, not necessarily *exactly* (since the concept might not have exact limits) but more *clearly*, what the nature of such a concept is. This is not a narrow analysis of one isolated concept, but an investigation into the grammar of a word in context(s). Although none of the territory covered is new, because the language is not new to us, our activity in doing philosophy is more like an exploration than an analysis. If a philosopher is puzzled about imagination, Wittgenstein recommends that

One ought to ask, not what images are or what happens when one imagines anything, but how the word 'imagination' is used. But that does not mean that I want to talk only about words. For the question as to the nature of the imagination is as much about the word 'imagination' as my question is. And I am only saying that this question is not to be decided – neither for the person who does the imagining, nor for anyone else – by pointing; nor yet by a description of any process. The first question also asks for a word to be explained; but it makes us expect a wrong kind of answer.¹³

A philosophical problem, if it is a philosophical problem, is about concepts, not empirical facts. A scientific study of what goes on in the brain during imagination might require clarity about the meaning of the word 'imagination', but that is not all that it requires. Wittgenstein's idea is that those who want to understand imagination, but who are not interested in scientific questions of brain or behaviour,

are likely to be misled into thinking that they are interested in a kind of non-physical parallel science. But there is no such thing, so it will never satisfy their curiosity. Concepts are linguistic, and it is by attending to language that we will understand the concept of imagination, a concept we are all, in fact, quite familiar with.

What makes philosophy possible, though, our intimacy with language, is also what makes it so difficult. The language that leads us astray, making us think of imagination as some ghostly process, for instance, suffuses our life. It entrenches potential confusions and philosophical problems into our thoughts, but also allows us to see, almost to feel, when we are in the presence of sense or nonsense. Nothing could be more familiar to us than the correct use of our language, so we have no need for expert analysis but can rely on the fact that ‘In philosophy it is significant that such and such a sentence makes no sense; but also that it sounds funny.’¹⁴ We should not stop at this point, rejecting whatever sounds funny, but it is a useful warning sign.

We have, and by practice can develop, a nose for nonsense. Nothing can be more deceptive and misleading than language, but also there is nowhere we are more at home. So whenever we get lost, there is hope of finding our way back. The road out of confusion can be a long and difficult one though, hence the need for constant attention to detail and particular examples rather than generalizations, which tend to be vague and therefore potentially misleading. The slower the route, the surer the safety at the end of it. That is why Wittgenstein said that in philosophy, the winner is the one who finishes last.¹⁵

We might wonder, though, what counts as finishing for Wittgenstein, and exactly what activity it is that we win by finishing last. He does provide a kind of answer to these questions, but also implies that finishing, and hence winning, is not really possible:

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. – Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. – Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. There is

not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.¹⁶

This is one of the main differences between the *Philosophical Investigations* and the *Tractatus*, which employed only the method of leading the philosopher to see that his or her propositions are nonsensical. The later work employs a variety of tactics to achieve much the same goal. Malcolm lists four of the main methods employed by Wittgenstein: describing circumstances in which a seemingly problematic expression might actually be used in everyday language, comparing our use of words with imaginary language-games, imagining fictitious natural history, and explaining psychologically the temptation to use a certain expression inappropriately.¹⁷ It is the first of these that Malcolm calls 'the new method' in philosophy:

The new method is to take a sentence that puzzles us philosophically, and *remind* ourselves (*PI* 127) of the occasions and purposes of life, in which and for which it is actually used. The method is *descriptive*, not 'analytic'. The theme of the new outlook is 'Nothing is hidden' (*PI* 435): 'Everything lies open to view' (*PI* 126).¹⁸

The new outlook here described, though, does not present philosophical problems as trivial or easy to solve. Problems arising from language cannot just be set aside – they infect our lives, making us live in confusion. And because problems of philosophy are problems of life (affecting our view of ourselves and others, and the world in which we live) we should not expect them just to go away after a few grammatical reminders. We may find our way back to the right path, but there is no guarantee that we will never again stray, unless we give up thinking about philosophy altogether. In this sense there can be no progress at all in philosophy.

People say again and again that philosophy doesn't really progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. But the people who say this don't understand why it has to be so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions. As long as

there continues to be a verb 'to be' that looks as if it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to drink', as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible', as long as we continue to talk of a river of time, of an expanse of space, etc., etc., people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up.¹⁹

This does not mean, however, that there is nothing that philosophers can do. A philosophical problem can be thought of as being like a disease. Just because it cannot be eradicated and will keep breaking out, it does not follow that there can be no cure. The problem cannot be destroyed, but people can be steered away from it. Hence Wittgenstein's comment:

Language sets everyone the same traps; it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings. And so we watch one man after another walking down the same paths and we know in advance where he will branch off, where walk straight on without noticing the side turning, etc., etc. What I have to do then is erect signposts at all the junctions where there are wrong turnings so as to help people past the danger points.²⁰

Such signposts, though, are all that philosophy can offer, and as with any sign or direction there is no guarantee that it will be followed correctly or even noticed. Moreover, the signpost works only in a particular kind of context. If we are told that understanding is an ability, or that meaning is use, then we should regard these expressions not as revelations to be dogmatized (since we are not to advance any theses) but pointers indicating the way to look. We should not expect them to be equally useful in all circumstances, or even to apply in all cases.

Indeed, anything that seems like a revelation should be treated with caution, for the method Wittgenstein recommends we use is one of *reminding* ourselves about how language is used. In the context of philosophical confusion such reminders can produce clarity; outside such a context they are bound to seem commonplace. 'The solution of philosophical problems can be compared with a gift in a fairy tale:

in the magic castle it appears enchanted and if you look at it outside in daylight it is nothing but an ordinary bit of iron (or something of the sort).²¹

In a sense then there is no such thing as the solution to a problem in philosophy. There is no way of destroying the castle, only ways of shortening the time spent in it. What Wittgenstein described as ‘the real discovery’ is the one that enables one never again to become confused by language, never again to ask the questions, or want to ask the questions, that have troubled philosophers since the Greeks. But Wittgenstein clearly thought that there is no such discovery to be made and that it is a mistake ever to think that one has overcome confusion once and for all. Again Wittgenstein warns us about this:

If anyone should think he has solved the problem of life and feels like telling himself that everything is quite easy now, he can see that he is wrong just by recalling that there was a time when this ‘solution’ had not been discovered; but it must have been possible to live then too and the solution which has now been discovered seems fortuitous in relation to how things were then. And it is the same in the study of logic. If there were a ‘solution’ to the problems of logic (philosophy) we should only need to caution ourselves that there was a time when they had not been solved (and even at that time people must have known how to live and think).²²

What we are looking for when we do philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is right before our eyes. That does not mean that it is easy to find, but it does mean that there is nothing hidden from us which we are trying to reveal. It also means that, whilst we may come to see more clearly, we should not be surprised by what we see. The observations of the philosopher should not be controversial (although there are always likely to be those who misconstrue them or argue about interpretation). The difficulty is to avoid getting lost ourselves, which is no mean feat. For as Wittgenstein said, ‘When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.’²³ We must explore the spaghetti-junction of language without ever mistaking one road for another, or losing our sense of where we are and how to get where we want to go. This is what it

means to get clear about our uses of language. That does not explain, though, why this clarity is so important to Wittgenstein. It is to this question that I now turn.

The use of philosophy

In 1944 Wittgenstein wrote as follows to Norman Malcolm: ‘[W]hat is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life?’²⁴ This makes it sound as though the ‘abstruse questions of logic’ that seem to preoccupy Wittgenstein in his philosophical work are not of real value or importance to him: an idea which is in line with Wittgenstein’s comment that the point of his *Tractatus* is ethical, contrary to appearances. We might also think in this connection of Wittgenstein’s claims to be demonstrating a method for dealing with certain problems, not offering theses, in his later work.²⁵ In other words, a case could be made that the content (or apparent content) of Wittgenstein’s work was not important to him. In the *Tractatus*, according to this view, the point is to ‘see the world aright’, which is achieved by transcending the propositions that the book contains. In the later *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein says ‘we now demonstrate a method, by examples’, from which we might infer that the particular examples chosen are not especially important.

Most commentators, however, focus on the examples and what they take Wittgenstein to have to say about them, and discount the method he demonstrates. As Paul Johnston writes:

Wittgenstein is widely regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of this [i.e. the twentieth] century and yet the central thrust of his work is emphatically rejected by the current philosophical community . . . The one area of Wittgenstein’s work which is still in some measure accepted is the so-called private-language argument, which is treated as separable from Wittgenstein’s implausible and perverse methodological claims.²⁶

Johnston notes that this then makes the private-language argument itself seem suspect, ‘a philosophical jewel in a sea of nonsense’.²⁷ If we try to take what seems to be the content out of the contextual frame in which Wittgenstein has placed it, we end up with something at best fishy and at worst nonsensical. Perhaps we should focus more on the frame, therefore. Such a reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* could be backed up by the following passage, which his friend and student Rush Rhees tells us Wittgenstein wrote in 1948:

These difficulties are interesting for me, who am caught up in them, but not necessarily for other people. They are difficulties of *my* thinking, brought about by *my* development. They belong, so to speak, in a diary, not in a book. And even if this diary might be interesting for someone some day, I cannot publish it. My stomach-aches are not what is interesting but the remedies – if any – that I’ve found for them.²⁸

Against this view, of course, is the fact that Wittgenstein kept writing about abstruse questions of logic, and has widely been considered to have had interesting things to say about them. This is the more orthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work. I will argue that it is a mistake to ignore the frame of Wittgenstein’s methodology, implausible and perverse as it might seem, but equally it would be wrong to write off the ‘content’ as of no more interest than Wittgenstein’s stomach-aches. If Wittgenstein offers us a cure, we need also to attend to the diseases to which he meant it to be applied. So I suggest we recognize (at least) two Wittgensteins. The Wittgenstein (early and late) of the picture-theory, private-language argument, and so on, contrasts with the Wittgenstein of descriptive method and obscure ethics. We have the content (the stomach-aches and their particular resolutions) and the form or frame (the general method for dealing with stomach-aches).

It is tempting to mock those who regard the theorizing, content-focused Wittgenstein as the true Wittgenstein. Such a reading does, after all, require us not to take Wittgenstein at his word, and has led to a reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* according to which, as James Conant puts it: ‘The central thesis of the *Tractatus* [that

philosophy is impossible] is retained, though it matures from a self-refuting contention into a full-blown philosophical theory about the impossibility of philosophical theory. Some progress!²⁹

The particular reading that Conant refers to here is that of Anthony Quinton, who admits that

In practice, even his most loyal disciples treat . . . [Wittgenstein's] passionate revulsion from the idea of himself as a philosophical theorist as an aberration . . . Historically considered, the two generations of British philosophy who have come under his influence have in effect simply ignored these self-denying ordinances. Making the exclusions from the body of his utterances that are needed to make the remainder intelligible, they have derived from each of his books a coherent and comprehensive philosophical system.³⁰

I will argue that Wittgenstein's utterances are intelligible without such exclusions, and thus that the treatment of Wittgenstein's work that Quinton describes is bad scholarship. It might make for good philosophy, however, if Wittgenstein is intelligible but mistaken. The possibility that there is some value in the work of the two generations of British philosophers that Quinton mentions is one we ought to keep in mind.

The other, ethico-methodological Wittgenstein is not undeniably right either. One might, after all, take a different ethical view than Wittgenstein's, about which I will say more below. Moreover, his method seems to depend on several things, notably the thesis that philosophical problems are in fact merely muddles that can, and should, be removed, not solved. It is not necessarily a problem that this is a thesis, even though Wittgenstein says we should advance no theses in philosophy, because a thesis on which a methodology depends is not a thesis that is advanced when employing that methodology. There is a problem, though, in the sense that the method in question cannot work on those who refuse it, and it therefore cannot be proved to be effective. The stomach-ache analogy might help to make this point clear. Imagine a new technique for curing stomach-aches that appeals to some but not to others. The technique might be based on the idea that stomach-aches are all caused by tension in the foot, say,

and that the right kind of foot-massage will relieve even the most painful stomach-ache. This technique has its adherents, who claim that it works for them, but there are others who refuse to try it. Now, how can we be sure that it would work on *their* stomach-aches if only they would try it? Wittgenstein does not, it seems to me, try to prove that all philosophical problems are linguistic. He believes that they are, and offers a technique for dealing with such problems. But that is all he does.

It is not my contention that Wittgenstein was wrong in any way, but his work is not as unassailable as some might suggest. In so far as Wittgenstein merely asks questions, as he often does, or offers analogies or fictitious cases for us to think about, or reminds us of ordinary uses of language, he is not possibly in error, since he is not really asserting anything. But he could be wrong about there being any real point in doing philosophy in this way.

There are some indications that Wittgenstein himself believed that he might have failed. Wittgenstein later rejected the *Tractatus*, after all, and he once wrote that 'I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition* . . . I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.'³¹ The preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* describes the book as an album of only tolerably good sketches that is not likely to bring light into even one brain. In *On Certainty* there is some indication that Wittgenstein's descriptive method might be in trouble as he writes in §501: 'Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described?' If philosophical problems are logical problems, if Wittgenstein's philosophical method is essentially descriptive (see *Philosophical Investigations* §109), and if logic cannot be described, then on the face of it things look bad for Wittgenstein's method.

As admissions of failure with regard to his later work, though, the quotations just given are weak. Wittgenstein does not say that he has failed. To come close to saying that logic cannot be described is not to say that logic cannot be described, and logical problems might be solved by describing something other than logic, such as language use. Still, the content of Wittgenstein's work has a somewhat shadowy existence or importance and cannot be proved right.³² The form has

only a kind of self-evident appeal to recommend it, which clearly does not appeal to everyone, as Wittgenstein knew it would not. Wittgenstein's method is designed for a specific purpose. Whether it achieves this purpose, and therefore whether it is any good, can only be shown over time, and bit by bit. Wittgenstein demonstrates his method, he does not attempt to prove that it is right. It can only be found to work by those who share his goals, i.e. of ridding themselves of a particular kind of confusion. Let us now look at this confusion: what it is; what it is not; who suffers from it; why it matters; and what can be done about it.

Confusion

If the goal of Wittgensteinian philosophy is the removal of confusion, it is worth getting clear just what we are out to remove. Sometimes Wittgenstein seems to regard confusion as almost incredibly spread throughout all people's lives, whether they realize it or not. At other times, only a philosophical few seem to suffer. Confusion appears at times like a deep moral sickness, at times like a superficial intellectual discomfort. At other times it seems to be the very specific (alleged) problem of thinking that one has found something particularly wonderful when in fact, as Wittgenstein sees it, no particular thing is any more wonderful than anything else.

That Wittgenstein's work had a purpose that was ethical, political, or rather cultural (and that the confusion it seeks to destroy is therefore of a cultural nature), is suggested by the remark to Malcolm already quoted (to the effect that philosophy should improve our thinking about the important questions of everyday life, such as political ones), and by the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, which implies that the purpose of the book is to 'bring light into one brain or another' despite 'the darkness of this time'.³³

Beth Savickey emphasizes the idea that Wittgenstein's target of critique is cultural. In a list of influences on his way of thinking, she notes, Wittgenstein includes 'two physicists, three philosophers (who differ greatly in philosophical approach), an architect, two writers and an economist'.³⁴ He also includes Karl Kraus, a well-known

Viennese writer who used satire to expose the ‘hypocrisy, evasion, imprecision and irrelevant ornamentation’ that corrupt language, thought and life.³⁵ Kraus’s grammatical investigations were aimed against, among other things, the violence of the First World War and the rise of the Nazis. At their worst these symptoms of cultural rot left him speechless (he could not ‘think of anything to say about Hitler’)³⁶ but their root causes did not.

Thus, although his grammatical analysis appeared foolish and futile to others amidst the events of the 1930s, Kraus continued to believe that if such grammatical analysis had been effectively practised (if word and deed were carefully attended to) the events of the 1930s would not, and could not, have happened.³⁷

Wittgenstein’s attitude toward the culture of his time certainly seems to have been similar to Kraus’s, and he was equally at a loss to say much about Hitler (‘It isn’t sensible to be furious even at Hitler; how much less so at God’).³⁸ Not thinking it sensible to be furious at Hitler is not necessarily the same thing as having nothing to say about him, of course. An admirer of Hitler’s might say an awful lot, for instance. But given Wittgenstein’s ethical quietism (see Chapter 4) it is hard to imagine what he might have said about Hitler, and there is no evidence that he ever did say much about him.

Wittgenstein is also, though, somewhat critical of Kraus, suggesting that he goes in for ‘speaking without teeth’.³⁹ Savickey also quotes Wittgenstein to the effect that ‘the atrocities of the First World War were not as exceptional as people tended to believe’⁴⁰ (which sounds unlike something Kraus would say), and saying that, ‘For me ... clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves.’⁴¹ Wittgenstein’s desire for clarity for its own sake shows him to be at odds with the utilitarian culture of progress he perceives around him, but clarity for clarity’s sake is not clarity for cultural edification’s sake. Wittgenstein was like Kraus in some ways, sharing some of his concerns about hypocrisy, evasion, imprecision and ornamentation, but his goals were not exactly the same as Kraus’s.

Even so, that philosophy’s enemy is widespread and entrenched is also suggested by the following remark from ‘The Big Typescript’:⁴²

Human beings are profoundly enmeshed in philosophical – i.e. grammatical – confusions. They cannot be freed without first being extricated from the extraordinary variety of associations which hold them prisoner. You have as it were to reconstitute their entire language. – But this language grew up as it did because human beings had – and have – the tendency to think in this way. So you can only succeed in extricating people who live in an instinctive rebellion against language; you cannot help those whose entire instinct is to live in the herd which has created this language as its own proper mode of expression.⁴³

The view we seem to have here is (1) that humanity is in deep trouble because of grammatical confusions, and (2) that only a few can be saved. These two points are theses that, as such, are not part of Wittgenstein's philosophy (see *Philosophical Investigations* §§109 and 128), but do lie behind and, apparently, motivate it. One need not accept them to adopt his method, and their advocacy is no part of that method, but perhaps one would not see the point of using his method unless one shared these beliefs.

However, we also find Wittgenstein suggesting that ordinary ways of speaking are all right, and that only metaphysics is the enemy.

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.⁴⁴

What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.⁴⁵

When . . . we disapprove of the expressions of ordinary language (which are after all performing their office), we have got a picture in our heads which conflicts with the picture of our ordinary ways of speaking . . . [*T*]his is what disputes between Idealists, Solipsists and Realists look like.⁴⁶

It is clear that every sentence in our language 'is in order as it is'.⁴⁷

The person with a 'healthy human understanding' who reads a former philosopher thinks (and not without right): 'Mere nonsense!' If that person hears me, he thinks – rightly, again – 'Nothing but boring truisms!'⁴⁸

Wittgenstein's view in these remarks seems to be (1) that ordinary speech and thought are all right as they are, and (2) that the metaphysically inclined (i.e. those who are not grammatically correct) can be saved by being reminded of 'boring truisms'. This view, it seems to me, is the view of Wittgenstein's method, not the view behind it. Behind this method might lie pessimistic, tragic, grand or even pretentious beliefs about the decline of the West. Within the method, all is humble, down-to-earth, inarguable common sense.

Perhaps Wittgenstein had a hard time deciding whether humanity at large was in deep trouble or basically all right, but there is no contradiction between the two views described so far. People might be confused even though their language is not, and those who can be saved by means of truisms might well be few in number, if only because few will choose to take this boring medicine. Wittgenstein's view seems to be this: our language itself is not wrong, and is indeed the only way out of our confusion, but it is misleading. It makes words and expressions that are quite different appear to be rather similar, and it does this because the people whose language it is, whose lives it expresses and informs, tend to think of these words and expressions (and what they stand for) as being rather similar. Thus we tend to think of the mind as being rather like, or even exactly the same as, the brain. We tend to think of time and consciousness as being rather like a stream of water. And so on. Yet the differences are deep, even in our own thinking and use of the words 'time', 'consciousness', and so on. There is a tension, almost a hypocrisy one might say, in our uses of these and other terms. 'The civil status of a contradiction, or its status in civil life: there is the philosophical problem.'⁴⁹ In most people, Wittgenstein apparently believes, these contradictions or tensions reflect the condition of their own selves and are scarcely noticeable. In others the tension feels wrong and they rebel, wanting order and consistency. Wittgenstein's belief is that the order is already there, we just need to recognize it. This is hard because it is not the kind of order we expect or think we want. One of Jackson Pollock's drip-paintings might seem utterly disordered, but some rule or formula could be constructed according to which just those drips would be exactly what was required by the rule. If our language seems to make no sense, we need to look again. All the order that is needed is

there. Metaphysical theories might then be regarded as legitimate attempts to impose a certain order on the world combined with the mistaken idea that what has been done is not to invent a new way of thinking but to discover new truths about the 'ultimate' nature of reality. It is this mistake that makes metaphysics bad, in Wittgenstein's view, because it makes it something other than its supporters want it to be.

Our first two views of what Wittgenstein means by confusion, then, can be seen to be consistent with each other. Wittgenstein says that our language is all right, but it tends to mislead us. Those suffering as a result of this can be helped by a boring kind of therapy, but this will not appeal to many, and not everyone is conscious that there are tensions in their thought or language.

One can also get the feeling, though, that Wittgenstein's target is something else, something more specific. Perhaps the confusion he means to attack is not linguistic entanglements, or even metaphysics in general, but the particular idea that some limited part of the world is especially important or wonderful. Wittgenstein himself seems to have been tempted to think that logic, language, experience, or 'the world' were special in this way. These ideas, I think, were the 'stomach-aches' that troubled him. Thus in the *Philosophical Investigations* he offers critiques of such thoughts as 'A proposition is a queer thing!'; 'Thought must be something unique'; 'Language . . . is something unique'; and the idea that there is such a thing as a 'leading problem of mathematical logic'.⁵⁰ Against the urge to think that one is dealing with something unique or queer (in a good, interesting sense), on the cutting-edge of existential study, Wittgenstein reminds himself that, 'Whereas, of course, if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door".'⁵¹ The grammatical investigator studies words, and no word is more queer than any other. And just as 'experience' is no queerer than 'door' so too is experience no queerer than doors. Some particular door might be queer, but the possibility of this queerness is parasitic on the banality of ordinary doors. So too some particular experience might be queer, but only relative to run-of-the-mill experiences. Neither doors in general nor experience itself can be evaluated in this way. The important difference between doors

and experience in this regard is that doors can at least be compared with other kinds of object and found to be relatively banal or otherwise. The same does not go for experience, however. That is to say, the statement 'Experience is queer' is not the same kind of statement as 'This is a queer experience'. To say experience is queer is not to distinguish experience from anything else (what could that be?), but to express a general attitude to life or the world.

According to some commentators, Wittgenstein's reason for wanting to shift our attention from the metaphysical to the ordinary is to awaken us to the wonder of ordinary objects such as doors. Thus Philip R. Shields:

When, instead of reducing puzzles and peculiarities to things that appear common and plausible, Wittgenstein shows us the strangeness of the familiar, he is trying to shift our perspective from the mundane to the religious and to recapture the special sense of wonder and awe which he felt was extinguished by the prevailing scientific *Weltanschauung*.⁵²

Similarly, James C. Edwards writes that 'Wittgenstein's later philosophy is at its core a return to an important moment of the western religious vision, namely, that moment which exalts the essential sacredness and mystery of all things.'⁵³ Such remarks might be surprising, especially since Wittgenstein even goes so far as to refer to the 'banality of the world',⁵⁴ but the Edwards/Shields reading certainly seems to be in line with things Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus* and his 'Lecture on Ethics' about wondering at the existence of the world, or considering its existence to be mystical. This reading provides a suitably lofty goal for the diagnosis of mankind's ills offered in the first conception of confusion outlined above, but it is still somewhat speculative, as Edwards acknowledges ('Wittgenstein's published work contains nothing like the account I have given', he says).⁵⁵

I have outlined some possible meanings of 'confusion', but so far have got little further than this. The first two such possible meanings, I have argued, are compatible with each other. The third is also compatible with the others, as long as the idea that one thing, or kind of thing, is especially peculiar is not the *only* kind of confusion that

Wittgenstein acknowledges and, important as it may be, it is not. Wittgenstein is also clearly concerned with confusion about language, psychology, mathematics, religion and a host of other issues. These other confusions take a variety of forms. Certainly the *Philosophical Investigations* emphasizes the idea that philosophical problems are multiple and diverse, requiring different kinds of treatment.⁵⁶ Confusion, then, is not only the idea that some things are queerer than others in some 'special' unspecifiable way. What confusion is might become clearer still if we look at the related idea of nonsense.

Nonsense

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes: 'When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.'⁵⁷ Such exclusion, he says, 'bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason.'⁵⁸ If certain combinations of words are withdrawn from use for various reasons, we may expect that these reasons will not always apply. In this case, no sentence will be absolutely nonsensical. What we call senseless will depend on our purposes. If the 'liberating word'⁵⁹ is the one that brings us peace, so too the sentences to be excluded from our language are those that cause trouble. Which these are cannot be specified a priori. Any sentence, after all, can be given a meaning, and any sentence that has been given a meaning is all right. Which sentences give rise to confusion and so are best discarded depends on our psychology, and this, while often being the same from one person to another, can be quite an individual matter. It is therefore un-Wittgensteinian to argue against such philosophical staples as 'Cartesian dualism', 'proofs of the existence of God', 'scepticism about the external world', 'the possibility of a private language', and so on. We might share Wittgenstein's suspicion that those who want to speak (in favour) of such things are suffering from some illusion, but (a) Wittgenstein does not (even try to) prove that such things are impossible or nonsensical – rather he casts doubt on what these expressions mean⁶⁰ – and (b) if we do not know what

René Descartes, Jerry Fodor et al. mean, then we cannot be sure that they mean nothing, or that nothing will satisfy their desire to call *something*, say, a ‘private language’.⁶¹ I will say more about this in Chapter 2.

This is one reason why philosophy, or grammatical investigation, is best practised on oneself or on friends. It is inevitably a somewhat parochial method. As James Conant has written: ‘Whether someone’s belief is (properly termed) religious will show up in the way it informs the entire character of that individual’s life.’⁶² If someone talks about the sacred, for instance, they might be religious, or merely superstitious, or confused, or consciously borrowing a religious word despite their own atheism, or using the term ‘sacred’ as shorthand for ‘what other people call sacred’, to name just some of the possibilities. We cannot know the true nature of a person’s belief, or describe it accurately, unless we know the entire character of that individual’s life. We need to know what else that person would say and do, and how they would say it or do it, and so on. Sayings or sentences cannot be analysed out of the blue. It makes a difference who says them. Thus O.K. Bouwsma records:

August 7 [1949]

On Thursday evening we met at Black’s. It was my turn to introduce the subject. I introduced: *Cogito, ergo sum*. After I had finished, W[ittgenstein] took it up. ‘Of course, if ____ now told me such a thing, I should say: Rubbish! But the real question is something different. How did Descartes come to do this?’⁶³

Wittgenstein was very interested in the audience for his work in his teaching and writing. Malcolm tells us that ‘It was important to him [Wittgenstein] that there should be some ‘friendly faces’ in his classes.’⁶⁴ Savickey observes that ‘Anyone could attend Wittgenstein’s gatherings . . . but it was not possible to do so anonymously.’⁶⁵ She also points out that in his ‘Sketch for a Foreword’ (for the book he was working on in 1930) Wittgenstein indicates that he is ‘really writing for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe’.⁶⁶ His grammatical remarks will not work on people who are not thinking in the way he is thinking. Whatever his diagnosis of

Western civilization, he aims his therapy at a few individuals only, and not necessarily the best (or worst), merely those like himself, ‘because they form my cultural milieu, my fellow citizens as it were, in contrast to the rest who are *foreign* to me’.⁶⁷ Wittgenstein’s target is Wittgenstein and his ilk, not Plato, Descartes or anyone else, except in so far as they are like Wittgenstein. In the following section I will address the question of who these people are, of what attitude distinguishes them. It is Wittgenstein’s goal to remove from his readers and students the desire to say, think and write words that do not mean what they want them to mean. He does not tell us, though, what we should want to say or mean, so his aim is to bring his readers back to themselves, to their true desires and the words that truly express them. Who these readers really are, then, their particular attitude, defines the goal of grammatical investigation as well as its target audience.

The wonder of the world

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes, ‘It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.’⁶⁸ What we are invited to wonder at, as in the later ‘Lecture on Ethics’, is not this or that within the world (a door, a child, consciousness, language), but just the world itself, existence or being. Wittgenstein, however, labels such sentences as senseless, and they do not appear in his later work. This, I think, is no coincidence, and it is not properly, strictly Wittgensteinian (should one care) to write, as Stanley Cavell does, about ‘the uncanniness of the ordinary’.⁶⁹ Such attempts to say what Wittgenstein did not, especially in hands less capable than Cavell’s, can lead to such (presumably unintentional) comedy as this: ‘Wittgenstein himself very properly refrains from any attempt either to explicate or to argue his vision; in chapter six I will attempt an account of its major themes.’⁷⁰ What is ‘very proper’ for Wittgenstein is blithely ignored by some of his commentators. More seriously, such impropriety can lead us to say the exact opposite of what Wittgenstein would say. The ‘chapter six’ promised in the quotation above tells us that if Wittgenstein’s later philosophy has worked successfully on us, then ‘No longer is there an easy confidence in one’s perceptions or

self-perceptions; one is always looking for hidden, manifold significances.⁷¹ Wittgenstein himself said, on the contrary, that ‘What is hidden . . . is of no interest to us.’⁷²

We are dealing here with a misstatement of Wittgenstein’s meaning, as I will try to show in the next couple of pages, but not a stupid one, and not necessarily a misunderstanding. The wonder of the world and the banality of the world are two sides of the same coin. Within the world we can pick out things that are relatively wonderful or banal, but the world itself is beyond compare, just because there is nothing else to compare it with. Since no comparison can be made, we can just as well say it is banal beyond compare as that it is wonderful beyond compare. Wittgenstein had a certain attitude, which he was tempted to express by saying ‘I wonder at the existence of the world’, but he repeatedly criticized and resisted this temptation.

In his lectures on aesthetics, Wittgenstein says: ‘Suppose Negroes dress in their own way and I say I appreciate a good Negro tunic – does this mean I would have one made, or that I would say (as at the tailor’s): “No . . . this is too long”, or does it mean I say: “How charming!”?’⁷³ His attitude towards the world is not ‘How charming!’, and indeed the remark just quoted suggests that we ought not to say that Wittgenstein appreciates the world, or believes that we all should appreciate it, because it is not clear what ‘appreciate’ means here. If a person ‘appreciates’ the world, does this mean that he or she is an environmentalist, a grateful theist, a hedonist, merely sentimental or something else altogether? Mere appreciation in this context has no clear or definitive meaning. It is not clear what the ‘uncanniness’ of ordinary things is, either, it seems to me, although one might feel, as I do, that one knows what Cavell means, and even feel that one agrees with him. However, there is a basic contradiction between the notions of uncanniness and ordinariness. Of course Cavell is aware of this, but it means that ordinary things can only be uncanny in a problematic, metaphorical way.

It is an idea similar to Cavell’s that Friedrich Nietzsche seems to be trying to get across when he writes that ‘What is familiar is what we are used to; and what we are used to is most difficult to “know” – that is, to see as a problem; that is, to see as strange, as distant, as “outside us”.’⁷⁴ Wittgenstein is similar to Nietzsche in some ways.⁷⁵ But we

should remember also that Wittgenstein said, ‘One *can* step twice into the same river.’⁷⁶ Might he not equally say that it is *not* difficult to know ordinary things, that the things around us are *not* distant, and so on? There is no reason why we *should* see these things as a problem. Indeed, Wittgenstein implies that there is something wrong with seeing things as uncanny in *Philosophical Investigations* §420. There, commenting on the so-called problem of other minds, he says: ‘Say to yourself, for example: “The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism.” And you will either find these words becoming quite meaningless; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort.’ A feeling of uncanniness here is presented as the result of a kind of mistake, not the proper goal of philosophical investigation.

‘Dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic’

Wittgenstein’s (personal, not philosophically grounded) acceptance of the world, of all that is not himself or subject to his will or understanding, has, quite rightly, been compared to the attitude of the Christian ‘cosmic patriot’ G.K. Chesterton.⁷⁷ But to counterbalance the idea that Wittgenstein is a jolly Chestertonian, ‘frightfully fond of the universe’,⁷⁸ we might attend to his ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*’. For instance, consider the ‘dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic’ story of the King of the Wood of Nemi.⁷⁹ The king in question is a priest who guards a sacred oak tree with a sword until someone kills him, whereupon his murderer becomes the new priest-king. Wittgenstein’s reaction to this story as ‘magnificent’ shows how far he is from being a Christian, as does his remark in connection with Jesus that he could ‘call no one *Lord*’ because that meant nothing to him.⁸⁰

Wittgenstein lacks faith. As T.P. Uschanov puts it, ‘Wittgenstein can be seen as a kind of high priest of contingency.’⁸¹ The bees we thank for their honey might also sting us, Wittgenstein says.⁸² Anything might happen, good or bad. There is no more basis for hope than for despair. The possibilities impress Wittgenstein, but he does not say that one *should* be impressed. In the midst of his ‘Remarks on

Frazer's *Golden Bough*' Wittgenstein says, 'One would like to say: This and that incident have taken place; laugh, if you can.'⁸³ This does not proscribe laughter. Similarly, Wittgenstein says, 'Believe whatever you can', and, 'Say what you choose.'⁸⁴ No doubt Wittgenstein himself does not laugh, but there is not much one can say about his attitude. It is beyond words. Here is what I am tempted to say about it:

Morally, people can be measured by what they will. A small person says 'My will, not thine, be done.' A bigger person cares about others, and perhaps the biggest person of all is the one who says, and means, 'Thy will (God's, the world's), not mine, be done.' The small person gets smaller still when his/her wilful actions disturb the lives of others.⁸⁵ A big person, on the other hand, having no individual will, almost disappears. Philip Larkin expresses the attitude of such a person when he writes that, should the empty pages of his diary be filled, then

Let it be with observed
Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And when the birds go.⁸⁶

But no doubt Wittgenstein would say that the temptation to which I have yielded in the last paragraph, too, should be resisted. It is not for philosophers to choose our poets or religion. It is much closer to the truth to say that Wittgenstein found life wonderful than to say that he found it hateful, and no doubt he would have liked to help others see the world in the same way.⁸⁷ However, his view of philosophy is that it cannot perform any such noble task (as we will see again in Chapters 4 and 5). It cannot justify ethical, aesthetic, or religious beliefs, attitudes, or judgements. Nor can it prove them to be unjustified. All it can do is to offer bits of language that the audience will accept in the hope of bringing some light into one brain or another. This small favour might be motivated by a certain ethical view, but the motivation is distinct from the method. As Chesterton points out, since there is nothing to compare the cosmos with, it is just as sensible to call it small as to call it large. 'One is as good as the other; they are both mere sentiments.'⁸⁸ One might say the same of

calling the world wonderful and calling it banal. Sentiments matter, but it is not philosophy's job to indulge in sentiment. Of such things we philosophers must be silent.

Philip R. Shields thus goes too far when he writes that:

At the root of Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics I found not accidental or capricious philosophical assumptions, but the outline of a religious picture of the world – a picture that is broadly Judeo-Christian, usually Augustinian and frequently Calvinist. The attack on our metaphysical tendencies rests not merely on unacknowledged and hidden assumptions, but on the moral force and adequacy of a particular religious tradition.⁸⁹

Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics might be – no doubt is – motivated by a particular view that might be called religious, but nothing, with the possible exception of the psychological motivation to employ his philosophical techniques, depends on one's accepting his particular view. That is to say, one might not see the point of Wittgensteinian philosophy unless one shares something like Wittgenstein's view, but the ability to investigate grammar and the clarity this might bring about do not depend in any way on the moral force or adequacy of any religious tradition. Even seeing value in such 'therapy' is not likely to be hard for *this* reason, given that a broadly and not necessarily theistic Judeo-Christian view is hardly rare among those likely to be exposed to Wittgenstein's work.

So, what is the point of philosophy as Wittgenstein conceives it? Is it, as Alice Crary has written of the 'new Wittgensteinian' view, 'to help us work ourselves out of confusions' that arise from 'our tendency, in the midst of philosophizing, to think that we need to survey language from an external point of view'?⁹⁰ Crary is surely right that Wittgenstein believes we have a tendency in philosophy to essentialize language or thought, instead of looking around at our everyday uses of language. We feel that ordinary language will not do and that there is something beyond its reach that is what we really mean or need to find. The problem I see with Crary's idea is that the description she provides of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of philosophical problems does not seem to apply to all of his work. Were this only the

case with regard to, say, his remarks about Shakespeare or music, which need not be treated as philosophical at all, there would be no problem. But Wittgenstein's writings and lectures on aesthetics, ethics and religion, for instance, do not appear to be aimed against problems that arise from obscure movements of the mind that might helpfully be described as attempts *per impossibile* to get outside language. I would rather say that his target is the kind of thing we are tempted to say when we try to adopt a certain kind of objectivity in philosophy (which is not to say that he endorses its opposite instead). We should not say these things, not because they are false or even meaningless but because they are not what we want them to be. Wittgenstein is not interested in proving claims false, and no sentence is meaningless or confused in any absolute sense. The only way for philosophical therapy to get anywhere is to show the philosophically minded that if we mean anything by our philosophical assertions then it is not something that will satisfy the desire that motivated our saying them.

But why does this matter so much? Wittgenstein is surely not all that concerned that some desires might go unsatisfied or that they might only seem to be satisfied. Philosophical confusion is important because the impulses that lead to it are important. Metaphysics might be nonsense, but the metaphysical urge is profoundly important, as Wittgenstein sees it. It is, after all, akin to the religious urge. If in no other sense, it matters deeply to (some of) us, so philosophical error is deep error, that is error deep within us. It is error in that part of us that can do all that has been done sincerely in the name of religion, all that is dreadful and magnificent in this way. It is error in what we might call the soul.

What a healthy soul will see or do, Wittgenstein does not claim to know, although it is clear enough what kind of thing he takes to be a symptom of soul-sickness. A symptom, though, is not a disease. So, for instance, Wittgenstein seems clearly not to believe in Cartesian minds, and to think that Cartesian philosophers are in error. But he says, 'If someone can believe in God with complete certainty, why not in Other Minds?'⁹¹ This sounds like a joke, but it is true. Any doctrine that is adhered to with complete certainty will not be dislodged from its adherent by Wittgenstein's method, and this is all right with him.

It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition; but it is equally true that we *always* eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of all our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition.⁹²

Our deepest beliefs, or thought patterns ('pictures') not only will not be removed by Wittgenstein's methods, but are not meant to be. Which these beliefs are, it might be said, can be determined precisely by seeing which beliefs or 'superstitions' remain after a Wittgensteinian analysis. Once the process is over, we may say what we choose, as long as we see the facts before our eyes. An inability to see the facts would be a kind of sickness or handicap, of course. Wittgenstein does not seek to discover new facts, nor to make controversial or dogmatic claims about what is a fact. Nor does he assert dogmatically that certain things can be said without error but others cannot. Rather he tries to get us to look around and see what we can see, to investigate what uses of language, what thoughts, we do or would accept and what we do not. Whatever we find we have to remove from our eyes in order to see, in order to acknowledge all that we want to acknowledge, is what he wants to help us to remove. What this is, though, Wittgenstein leaves us to find out for ourselves. The importance of language to this project should already be obvious, and it is to language, and specifically questions of sense and nonsense, that I will turn in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932–1935* ed. Alice Ambrose, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982, p. 77.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961.
3. See Ludwig Wittgenstein 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker' trans. Bruce Gillette, ed. Allan Janik, in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* ed. C.G. Luckhardt, Harvester Press, Hassocks, Sussex, 1979, p. 94.
4. *Tractatus* 6.54.
5. *Ibid.*

6. Emphasis in the original.
7. Although in another sense there are no such things as the bounds of sense, as we will see in Chapter 2.
8. Norman Malcolm *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, p. 106.
9. In the preface to the *Tractatus* (p. 3) Wittgenstein writes that ‘the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts’.
10. John W. Cook *Wittgenstein, Empiricism, and Language* Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2000, p. 107. Cook refers here to the essay ‘George Edward Moore’ in Norman Malcolm *Knowledge and Certainty* Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963.
11. Hanna F. Pitkin *Wittgenstein and Justice* University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1972, p. 19.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, §109.
13. *Ibid.*, §370.
14. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Zettel*, 2nd edn, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, §328.
15. See Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* trans. Peter Winch, ed. G.H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p. 34e.
16. *Philosophical Investigations* §133.
17. Malcolm *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden*, pp. 106–7.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 116. (*PI: Philosophical Investigations*.)
19. *Culture and Value*, p. 15e (from 1931).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 18e (from 1931).
21. *Ibid.*, p. 11e (from 1931).
22. *Ibid.*, p. 4e (from 1930).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 65e (from 1948).
24. Norman Malcolm *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1984, p. 35.
25. See *Philosophical Investigations* §§109–33.
26. Paul Johnston *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner* Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. ix.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Rush Rhees ‘Correspondence and Comment’ in *The Human World* 15–16 (1974): 153, quoted in David G. Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995, p. 6.

29. James Conant 'Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for their Work as Authors' in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, St Martin's Press, New York, 1995, p. 294. See pp. 293–5 for more along these lines.
30. Anthony Quinton 'Contemporary British Philosophy' repr. in George Pitcher (ed.) *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, University of Notre Dame Press, South Bend, IN, 1968, pp. 9–10, quoted in Conant 'Putting Two and Two Together', pp. 294–5.
31. *Culture and Value* p. 24e. This remark is dated 1933–4.
32. See, for instance, Richard Eldridge's careful examination of the private-language argument in *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, and London, 1997, pp. 256–64, in which he concludes that

Taken as a proof or demonstrative argument then, the considerations about private languages that are advanced in *Philosophical Investigations* are impotent to undo commitments to either phenomenological–Cartesian research programs (Nagel, Ayer) or explanatory naturalist research programs (Chomsky, Fodor, connectionism). Simply asserted as transparently true, the premises of the so-called private-language argument beg crucial questions. (p. 264)

33. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. viii.
34. Beth Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation* Routledge, London and New York, 1999, p. 9. The people in question are Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Loos, Weininger, Spengler and Sraffa. The list is from *Culture and Value*, p. 19e.
35. Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, p. 20.
36. Karl Kraus *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* quoted *ibid.*, p. 38.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
38. *Culture and Value*, p. 46e (c. 1945).
39. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
40. Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, p. 47.
41. *Culture and Value*, p. 7, quoted *ibid.*, p. 41.
42. The 'Big Typescript' was written in the early 1930s as Wittgenstein's attempt to write a 'proper' book with chapters. As an abandoned project whose contents Wittgenstein later mostly rejected, it is of limited use in shedding light on his considered views. However, much of the chapter on philosophy did survive, and Wittgenstein's remarks on what philosophy is (for) and how it should be done changed little from 1930 to the

- end of his life. See David G. Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995, pp. 18–19.
43. Quoted in Anthony Kenny (ed.) *The Wittgenstein Reader* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, pp. 272–3.
 44. *Philosophical Investigations* §124.
 45. *Ibid.*, §116.
 46. *Ibid.*, §402.
 47. *Ibid.*, §98.
 48. Ludwig Wittgenstein TS 219, p. 6, quoted in Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, p. 28.
 49. *Philosophical Investigations* §125.
 50. *Ibid.*, §§94, 95, 110, 124.
 51. *Ibid.*, §97.
 52. Philip R. Shields *Logic and Sin in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, and London, 1993, p. 111.
 53. James C. Edwards *Ethics without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life* University Presses of Florida, Tampa, St Petersburg, Sarasota, Fort Myers, FL, 1982, p. 240.
 54. In *The Big Typescript*, quoted in Kenny, *The Wittgenstein Reader* p. 276. The full sentence reads: ‘The banality of the world is evident in the fact that language means it alone, and can mean only it.’
 55. Edwards, *Ethics without Philosophy*, p. 240.
 56. See, for instance, §133.
 57. *Philosophical Investigations* §500.
 58. *Ibid.*, §499.
 59. Kenny *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 264.
 60. On private language, for instance, see Stanley Cavell *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1979, pp. 343–54. See also Cora Diamond ‘Rules: Looking in the Right Place’ in D.Z. Phillips and Peter Winch (eds) *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars* St Martin’s Press, New York, 1989. I discuss Diamond’s view of the private-language argument in Chapter 2.
 61. See for instance Jerry A. Fodor *The Language of Thought* Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1975.
 62. Conant, ‘Putting Two and Two Together’, p. 266.
 63. O.K. Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949–1951* ed. J.L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1986, pp. 12–13.
 64. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, p. 27.

65. Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, p. 59.
66. *Culture and Value*, p. 6, quoted *ibid.*, p. 60.
67. *Culture and Value*, p. 10e.
68. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.44.
69. Stanley Cavell 'The Uncanniness of the Ordinary' *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Volume VIII University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, UT, 1988. Cavell uses 'uncanniness' in a rather technical way, so it is more some of his followers than Cavell himself that I mean to criticize, but it is worth noting that Wittgenstein does not employ any such concept. Cavell's romantic aims are not quite Wittgenstein's, as I try to show in this chapter and in Chapters 3 and 4.
70. Edwards *Ethics without Philosophy*, p. 154.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
72. *Philosophical Investigations* §126.
73. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* ed. Cyril Barrett, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1966, p. 9.
74. Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science* trans. Walter Kaufman, Vintage, New York, 1974, p. 301.
75. For similarities between Nietzsche and Wittgenstein see Gordon C.F. Bearn *Waking to Wonder: Wittgenstein's Existential Investigations* State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1997.
76. *The Big Typescript*, quoted in Kenny *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 266.
77. See G.K. Chesterton *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* Doubleday, New York, 1990, p. 67, and William H. Brenner 'Chesterton, Wittgenstein and the Foundations of Ethics' in *Philosophical Investigations* 14:4 (1991). I will say more about the distinction between the personal Wittgenstein and the philosophical Wittgenstein in Chapter 4.
78. Chesterton *Orthodoxy*, p. 63.
79. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1993, p. 121.
80. *Culture and Value*, p. 33.
81. T.P. Uschanov 'On Ladder Withdrawal Symptoms and One Way of Dealing with Them' unpublished, p. 9.
82. *Culture and Value*, p. 29e.
83. *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, p. 123.
84. See Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations*, p. 56, and *Philosophical Investigations* §79.
85. In this sense, Hitler's tremendous smallness is brought out at the beginning of *The Dam Busters* when Barnes Wallis, the happy family man, is

dragged from his family, as countless others are too, into war. The true heroes of *The English Patient*, similarly, it seems to me, are not the destructive protagonists but the marginal nurses and bomb-disposal experts.

86. Philip Larkin 'Forget What Did' in his *Collected Poems* ed. Anthony Thwaite, The Marvell Press and Faber & Faber, London, 1988, p. 184.
87. Wittgenstein's last words, 'Tell them I've had a wonderful life', are interesting here. Presumably he was not advocating a noble lie, but it is not enough, seemingly, that Wittgenstein had (or felt himself to have had) a wonderful life. Others are to be told.
88. Chesterton *Orthodoxy*, p. 63.
89. Philip R. Shields *Logic and Sin in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, and London, 1993, p. x.
90. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds) *The New Wittgenstein* Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 1.
91. *Culture and Value*, p. 73e (from 1948).
92. *Ibid.*, p. 83e (from 1949).

Nonsense

My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.¹

The idea of nonsense is central to Wittgenstein's philosophical project. He does not, generally, seek to show that certain ideas are false. Rather, he tries to show that they are senseless or nonsensical (or at least that they lack the sense that we want them to have). Since Wittgenstein claims to offer no positive doctrines or theories of his own, it might well be thought that his sole aim is to attack what he takes to be nonsense. Wittgenstein is not, though, openly *against* all nonsense. Indeed, as I will argue, he at least allows for the possibility of nonsense that is important and beneficial. What such nonsense might be, what it is not, and what this tells us about Wittgenstein's philosophy more generally is the subject of this chapter. This investigation of nonsense will lead us into the heart of Wittgenstein's work on mind and language, including his remarks on private language, rule-following and solipsism. If, though, we are to understand his conception of nonsense and meaninglessness we would do well to look first at what he said about sense and meaning.

Sense and meaning

§43 of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* famously says that '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.'² The alternative views of what meaning is that Wittgenstein considers at length, namely that meanings are objects of some kind (concrete or abstract) and that they are particular feelings associated with words, lack the *prima facie* plausibility that might make one

turn to them before looking at Wittgenstein's conception of meaning. It does not follow, of course, that Wittgenstein is right. On the other hand, one might wonder whether he *could* be wrong here. He does not, after all, insist that we must define the meaning of a word as its use. Nor does he claim that such a definition will always be right. So his claim here is rather more limited than it is often taken to be. Even so, we should test the 'rule' that meaning is use, both to see whether Wittgenstein is right at all about this and to see what he might have meant and why he suggested that meaning is not always use (i.e. that for some cases in which we employ the word 'meaning' it cannot be defined as the use of a word in the language).

Commonly it seems that some of our most cherished concepts are regarded as the most likely exceptions to the conception of meaning as use. Thus Garth Hallett writes:

What resistance there is to the idea that truth, justice, beauty, knowledge, meaning are what people call truth, justice, beauty, knowledge, meaning! Somehow it never occurs to many people that these words do not mean what I choose them to mean, that usage – messy, complex, arbitrary usage – has prior rights which should be respected.²

Here there is something right and something that seems to be confused. ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is not true just because people say it is, any more than the planet would change shape if people were to go from calling it round to calling it flat. On the other hand, if everyone always called 'flat' what we call 'round' then 'flat' would *mean* round. When people say 'bad' meaning good, they are changing the language, not getting it wrong. Or rather, since by conventional standards (which grammar leaves us free to follow or reject) they are misusing the word 'bad', the neutral describer of language use should say that they are not making a *mistake*. Whether they are wrong *per se* is not decided by grammar. Perhaps they are wrong in an ethical or aesthetic sense, but they do know what they are doing. What people do with words clearly is a big part, at least, of their meaning.

What, then, are the exceptions to the rule that meaning is use? Newton Garver claims that two sets of examples are to be found in

Investigations §§543–5 and §§558–68, the latter being more serious because they drive a wedge between meaning and use.³ Let us examine these, starting with the first, less serious, alleged exceptions to the rule that meaning is use.

§543 runs as follows: ‘Can I not say: a cry, a laugh, are full of meaning? And that means, roughly: much can be gathered from them.’ A cry or a laugh would not generally be *meant* in any particular way, but they can be understood; much can be gathered from them. In this sense they have a role in the structure of our thought and activity and can thus have meaning. They are not (generally) used but they can be useful; they are not (generally) meant, but they can be meaningful.

We do not, though, see any real digression from the idea that meaning is use here. A cry has meaning only to the extent that something can be got from it, that it can be used, that it informs our behaviour. When someone cries alone would we say the cry has meaning? Well, what if someone speaks alone? To answer these questions we should distinguish between individual words and the sentences in which they are used. Words are given meaning by being used generally; sentences have meaning, when used in a particular situation to some particular end. When someone speaks alone the individual words still have meaning, but what I say may have meaning (if I am practising a speech, thinking aloud or talking to myself to ward off fear) or it may be quite senseless. Hence Wittgenstein says in §544 of the *Investigations*:

When longing makes me cry ‘Oh, if only he would come!’ the feeling gives the words ‘meaning’. But does it give the individual words their meanings?

But here one could also say that the feeling gave the words *truth*. And from this you can see how the concepts merge here.

Only in certain circumstances is it appropriate to say certain things. Inappropriate articulations may be tactless, immoral, foolish, incorrect, senseless, and so on, depending on the particular case and the degree of inappropriateness. In the example above, the feeling of longing makes the cry appropriate, rendering it both true and meaningful. It certainly does not give the individual words their meanings.

Is it, though, this feeling, rather than the use, that gives the sentence its meaning? The sentence expresses the feeling (when articulated in the appropriate way in the appropriate circumstances); this is its role, this is its use. Without the feeling it might be insincere or it might be meaningless. That is to say, without the feeling, the use of the words ‘Oh, if only he would come!’ would be different – they might be used to mislead, to entertain, to practise one’s pronunciation of English – or they might have no use, in which case to utter them would be nonsensical. And what is it to say something with feeling? Surely we would only say something was said with feeling if said in a particular way (with appropriate tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, etc.) in particular circumstances. The feeling is part of the meaning, part of what we would call the use of the sentence.

All three – feelings, meanings and use – are inseparable. So we need not give up the ‘definition’ of meaning as use.

Wittgenstein goes on in §545 to consider a similar case, this time applied to just the word ‘hope’ in the sentence, ‘I hope he’ll come.’ He says here: ‘The feeling does perhaps give the word “hope” its special ring; that is, it is expressed in that ring. – If the feeling gives the word its meaning, then here “meaning” means *point*. But why is the feeling the point?’ Much the same applies to this case as did to that in §544. Hoping is not some pattern of behaviour that I can deliberately execute, nor is it some bodily state which I might find myself in, nor a particular sensation. The phenomena of hope are ways of behaving (e.g. pacing the room expectantly), of talking (not just saying ‘I hope . . .’ but doing so in a certain way and in particular contexts) and of thinking. When the circumstances and behaviour are right, then we say that someone hopes such-and-such.

So why is the feeling the point? Because said with this feeling, said in this way, in the absence of contradictory evidence (e.g. a film-crew and director giving the speaker instructions on his tone of voice), the exclamation ‘I hope he’ll come’, is a criterion of the person’s hoping just that. It is not an inner feeling or sensation that is the point, but the feeling in his voice, the way he speaks, which amounts to the use he makes of the sentence. Pronounced differently he would be expressing something else, we would react towards him differently, and so on.

The role of the sentence, and of the word 'hope', would be different. So again we can stick to the idea that meaning is use.

Let us now turn to §§558–68 to see whether we find any exception to our rule there. One of the most crucial of these sections is §561, where Wittgenstein says:

Now isn't it queer that I say the word 'is' is used with two different meanings (as the copula and as the sign of equality), and should not care to say that its meaning is its use; its use, that is, as the copula and the sign of equality?

One would like to say that these two kinds of use do not yield a *single* meaning; the union under one head is an accident, a mere inessential.

Here we see the two meanings and two uses of the word 'is'. Why not simply say that its meaning is this and this, i.e. this and this kind of use? Because these uses are so different. It would be misleading to regard them as two parts of a single use or meaning.

Sometimes it is important that we use one word to cover a number of things, that we do not see a need to distinguish between them by using different words. We might think in this connection of a word such as 'democracy' and all the constitutionally various states we would include under this heading. Something like the essence of a concept can be seen by looking at the various things to which we apply the same name. There are no strict rules for this, so there is often room for argument and disagreement about what is essential or which words are appropriate to a given case. It is not essential that the same word be used as the copula and as the sign of equality. Hence Wittgenstein prefers to say that the word 'is' has two meanings, not one consisting of two kinds of use.

What we have seen in the case of 'is' is an example of how the definition of meaning as use might be misleading. And this is what matters. Wittgenstein is not offering a dictionary definition, but a pointer for philosophers. The 'definition' is a tip, something to bear in mind to help one avoid falling into confusion. It is not a theory that may or may not be disproved by counterexamples.

Thus we should not be surprised that G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker observe that:

Wittgenstein advances a bewildering variety of seemingly irreconcilable dicta about meaning. The meaning of a word is its use in a language (*PG* 60; *PI*43); its use in practice (*BB* 69); its role in the language-game; its place in grammar (*PG* 59). The meaning of a word is what is explained in explanations of its meaning (*PG* 59; *BB* 1). The meaning of a word is its purpose (*PR* 59, cf. *PLP* 157ff.). The meaning of a sentence is its use (*PI*421); its method of verification (*WWK* 47, 243ff.; *PR* 200ff. , 289; *BT* 60; *PG* 127; cf. *PI*353); what is explained in explaining its sense (*PG* 131). The justification or grounds of an assertion constitute its sense (*PG* 81, cf. ζ 437).⁴

The variety of dicta is not evidence of confusion or inconsistency. Not only are the sources quoted here a variety of manuscripts and typescripts, varying with regard to date and degree of completeness, but also Wittgenstein's method throughout this period in his work is to give pointers or rules of thumb, not absolute definitions or theories.

One thing Wittgenstein points to is the importance of grammar or linguistic practice and the rules that govern, describe or inform it. The importance of rules to the making of sense is brought out in the following:

a rule can lead me to an action only in the same sense as can any direction in words, for example, an order. And if people did not agree in their actions according to rules, and could not come to terms with one another, that would be as if they could not come together about the sense of orders or descriptions. It would be a 'confusion of tongues', and one could say that although all of them accompanied their actions with the uttering of sounds, nevertheless there was no language.⁵

A further remark of Wittgenstein's from the same manuscript might seem to diminish the significance of agreement in following a rule. He writes: 'That a rule *requires* this step, can be a psychological fact. Namely, that we proceed in *this* way, without reflection or

doubt. But it can also lie in this, that we can agree with one another, and that all of us proceed in *this same way*.⁶

If the requirement of a rule can be a psychological matter then it cannot surely be a social matter at the same time. But if an individual 'follows a rule' without reflection or doubt, what sense could it make to speak of her breaking the rule? If what does and does not accord with the rule is dictated psychologically to her, then surely she is just doing as she feels. This is hardly what we would normally call following a rule. One cannot make a mistake in such a case. It only makes sense to speak of making mistakes in certain contexts. Outside such contexts it makes no sense to speak of following rules, be they grammatical, mathematical, ethical or of some other kind.

Cora Diamond brings this out in her paper 'Rules: Looking in the Right Place', in which she says that

When we ask what Wittgenstein takes the significance to be of agreement in following a rule, we tend to have in mind simply the fact of people agreeing in what they take to be the application of the rule to this and that case, and we treat that sort of agreement in isolation from the role in people's lives of following rules. We think of one person saying '1002' after '1000' in applying the rule 'Add 2', and everybody else also saying '1002' in the same circumstances: that, we think, is 'agreement'. What we are ignoring, then, is the place of this procedure in a life in which following rules of all sorts comes in in enormous numbers of ways. In fact, of course, we are not just trained to go '446, 448, 450', etc., and other similar things; we are brought into a life in which we rest on, depend on, people's following rules of many sorts, and in which people depend on us: rules, and agreement in following them, and reliance on agreement in following them, and criticising or rounding on people who don't do it right – all this is woven into the texture of life; and it is in the context of its having a place in such a form of human life that a 'mistake' is recognisably that.⁷

As Rush Rhees has said: 'rules of grammar are rules of the lives in which there is language'.⁸ Imagine a different form or way of life and

you imagine a different language with different concepts, different rules and a different logic. It is partly for this reason that Rhee doubts whether an individual solitary from birth could ever speak anything recognizable as language. This has been the subject of much debate, and is worth looking into further, because if Rhee is right then we might, it seems, be able to chart some of the logical limits of language, and hence of the border between sense and nonsense.

Logical possibility and the solitary individual

The trouble with the case of the permanently solitary individual is that when considering such a person it is easy to forget about the kind of life he or she would lead. This can seem irrelevant. All we want, we might say, is to consider an imaginary case for the purpose of illustrating a logical point, namely that it is not essential to language that it be shared. What is so problematic about that?

It might seem easy to conceive of someone just like ourselves but who has never had any contact with anyone else, and it may seem easy to imagine such a person inventing and following rules. But as Norman Malcolm points out: ‘If you conceive of an individual who has been in solitude his whole life long, then you have cut away the background of instruction, correction, acceptance – in short, the circumstances in which a rule is given, enforced, and followed.’⁹

That is not to say that Malcolm is wholly right. The whole debate can be questioned. As Cora Diamond says: people who focus on the issue of whether there can be a language for just one person tend to

read Wittgenstein as concerned with what makes it possible for there to be talk of ‘right’ in following a rule, and thus as having some view on the question whether communal agreement on what counts as following a rule correctly is conceptually necessary or whether it is only the possibility of such agreement that is necessary. The possibility of going right or wrong in following a rule has turned into a sort of logical achievement, for which we want to know the necessary conditions.¹⁰

The aim of the philosopher is to escape puzzlement and confusion by describing language as it is, reminding ourselves of the ways in which words are actually used, looking at what our life with certain concepts is like. It is only likely to lead to further confusion if we seek to ask what makes language possible. One could say that language is possible because we share certain primitive reactions, etc. Certainly we would have no language if this were not the case, if we had nothing significant in common with each other; but does it help to say that it is logically impossible to have a language without a common form of life? The notion of logical possibility is one to which I will turn presently.

Having criticized one reading of Wittgenstein on rules and communal agreement, it is worth turning to Wittgenstein himself to see just what he said on the subject. In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* he writes:

The word 'agreement' and the word 'rule' are *related*, they are cousins. The phenomena of agreement and of acting according to a rule hang together.

There might be a cave-man who produced *regular* sequences of marks for himself. He amused himself, e.g., by drawing on the wall of the cave:

--- . ---- . ----- . ----- .

or

--- . --- . ---- ---

But he is not following the general expression of a rule. And when we say that he acts in a regular way that is not because we can form such an expression.

But suppose he now developed π ! (I mean without a general expression of the rule.)

Only in the practice of a language can a word have meaning.

Certainly I can give myself a rule and then follow it. But is it not a rule only for this reason, that it is analogous to what is called a 'rule' in human dealings?

When a thrush always repeats the same phrase several times in its song, do we say that perhaps it gives itself a rule each time, and then follows the rule?¹¹

Agreement is not a logical precondition of rule-following but something that hangs together with it. Mere regularity does not constitute rule-following, nor is there such a thing as agreeing with oneself. This point is brought out in further remarks of Wittgenstein's:

Could there be arithmetic without agreement on the part of calculators?

Could there be only one human being that calculated? Could there be only one that followed a rule?

Are these questions like, say, this one: 'Can one man alone engage in commerce?'¹²

It is not a logical impossibility for one man to engage in commerce, or at least I do not find it helpful to say such a thing. Rather there is simply no such thing as solitary trade. Nor can we imagine it, except as a sort of joke. Similarly with calculation. Mathematics is no different from rearranging furniture, unless its signs are used in civil life (that is to say, unless this happens it is not mathematics). But the solitary individual has no civil life. If one were biologically constituted so as to behave like a normal English-speaking person, her 'calculations' would not be what we mean when we speak of calculations, and a 'conversation' with her would be more of a game than a conversation. She would be a kind of automaton, not a human being we would be likely to engage with as a fellow being. If we are still tempted to call what she does 'calculating' or 'speaking' then this might be a convenient form of expression, but we would be foolish to regard this as an important discovery about language or revelation of what is 'logically possible'. We can call it speaking or whatever else we like, after all.

As a final challenge to the idea that Wittgenstein is concerned with what is possible with regard to language it is worth considering §243 of the *Investigations*, the passage that has helped to fuel much of the debate about the role of communal agreement in language and rules

of grammar. Here Wittgenstein says quite explicitly that we *could* imagine people who spoke only in monologue. He even says that an explorer who came upon these strange people might be able to translate their language into ours, and thereby predict their actions by listening to them making resolutions and decisions.

Diamond comments on this as follows:

What exactly is Wittgenstein saying is possible? Nothing at all. It is important that he does not use the word ‘possible’ there but ‘sich denken’. Elsewhere he says that to say that something is imaginable is to say, roughly, that we can make an image of it, and he adds that we can always substitute for an image a painted picture or some such thing. In the kind of case we are considering, it is helpful to think of substituting a movie. We can imagine, we can have a movie of, mice singing to Cinderella. There is such a movie. Is it *logically possible* or *conceptually possible* for mice to sing ‘Cinderella, Cinderella’ and so on? One might take *On Certainty* to show how philosophically unfruitful questions in that form would be. Terms like ‘logically possible’, ‘conceptually possible’, when they occur in philosophy, often indicate some kind of confusion. It is misleading to use them in giving Wittgenstein’s views, if we are concerned with passages in which he did not use them.¹³

So much, we may say, for logical possibility. But does this mean we should not speak either of logical impossibility? The phrase ‘logical possibility’ is something of a philosophical construction, a technical term, but don’t we sometimes quite naturally say that something is a logical impossibility, for example if it contains a contradiction of some sort? Indeed it is often thought that Wittgenstein showed that a ‘private language’ is logically impossible.

Wittgenstein is not trying to remove phrases from our language, merely to show how things are and thereby to suggest which expressions are useful in philosophy and which are likely to lead to confusion. This is not the place for a thorough examination of the concepts of logical possibility and impossibility. All we can do here is to consider the relation of these concepts to what Wittgenstein says about language. Perhaps the best way to do this is to look at the famous

private-language argument, which should also provide further clarification of the concepts of meaning and rule-following.

Private language

One incarnation of the private-language argument postulates that an individual who was solitary from birth could not have a language of her own, which is closely related, of course, to the question of solitary rule-following which I just discussed. The idea that the philosophers' Crusoe *could not* have a language will not quite do as an interpretation of Wittgenstein, though, since Wittgenstein does not believe in philosophers telling us what must (or cannot) be the case. A.J. Ayer is generally taken to have won his debate with Rush Rhees on this subject, because he pictured a kind of Robinson Crusoe behaving in a law-like, seemingly linguistic manner.¹⁴ After falling several times into the same hole he might, for instance, erect a sign, distinguished from other signs marking the location of eggs, or firewood, by the mark 'ДАИГЕЯ', say. He might also develop vocalized signs. So, at least, it seems to Ayer and many others.

Rhees disagrees. Crusoe might behave in ways that look like language use, but in order for him really to use language he would have to *invent meaning*, and this he could not do. The plausibility of Ayer's picture is superficial. Meaning is either smuggled in, or else is really absent.

Indeed, Ayer does seem to treat language as altogether something much too easy to come by. He seems blind to the problems that Rhees emphasizes. However, meaning did arise somehow. *Must* it have involved multiple people? Wittgenstein is silent on this point, and it would contradict his merely descriptive methodology if he were not. As a matter of fact, an Ayerian Crusoe might exist (created miraculously perhaps). Whether we would be right to call such a person a language user (or a person, for that matter) depends on the grammar of our language, and so far its rules have not had to cover such unlikely cases. Thus there is an absence of rules here. So we do not know. The fact that Ayer won the debate, in the sense of winning more supporters, suggests that perhaps we should call this language

use. On the other hand, much would no doubt depend on our ability to communicate with him, relate to him, understand him. One thing Rhees brings out is how hard it is to imagine us doing so at all easily. It is hard to settle the matter a priori. So we should not say that we definitely never would (be right to) call such behaviour language use. We can, after all, say what we choose as long as we keep the facts in view.

As I have said, the debate about solitary individuals is sometimes referred to as the debate about ‘private language’. Wittgenstein himself, though, uses this expression in another context, to name a language that refers to private sensations. Such a private language by definition cannot be understood by anyone other than its user (who alone knows the sensations to which it refers). Wittgenstein invites us to imagine a man who decides to write ‘S’ in his diary whenever he has a certain sensation. This sensation has no natural expression, and ‘S’ cannot be defined in words. The only judge of whether ‘S’ is used correctly is the inventor of ‘S’. The only criterion of correctness is whether a sensation feels the same to him. There are no criteria for its *being* the same other than its *seeming* the same. So we *might* say that he just writes ‘S’ when he feels like it, and thus that he might as well be doodling: the so-called ‘private language’ is no language at all. We should look at Wittgenstein’s description of the ‘language’ in question before jumping to any conclusions about it, however.

In §256 of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein, having moved on from considering such examples as imaginary monolinguals, asks:

Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand? *How* do I use words to stand for my sensations? – As we ordinarily do? Then are my words for sensations tied up with my natural expressions of sensation? In that case my language is not a ‘private’ one. Someone else might understand it as well as I.

The idea here is that it might be suggested that there could be a language that was private in the sense that no one else but the user could understand it, not simply that it in fact had only one user. So nobody could ever succeed in translating this ‘language’ into any other. The

quotation above suggests that this is an empty notion, but the idea is important enough to be worth investigating further.

Wittgenstein goes on to discuss the notion of a 'private definition' of a word, having in mind a word for a sensation such as pain or the imaginary 'S'. In §262 he says:

It might be said: if you have given yourself a private definition of a word, then you must inwardly *undertake* to use the word in such-and-such a way. And how do you undertake that? Is it to be assumed that you invent the technique of using the word; or that you found it ready-made?

Of course the technique for using a word would not be found ready-made. Nature does not dictate language, nor concepts, nor their use. But where is the problem, one might ask, with inventing the technique for the use of a word? This is simply inventing the meaning, and new words are invented all the time. But of course it must be remembered here that we are considering a word such as 'S', which supposedly names a sensation, a word which *ex hypothesi* cannot be defined in words (§258) and which has no natural expression (§256). Such a word could never be used to communicate anything, hence, surely, no technique for its use could be invented.

It might be objected though that perhaps one just might, by chance, use such a word only in the same circumstances as those prevailing when the so-called 'ostensive definition' was made, i.e. when and only when the same sensation occurred. The 'S'-user could then at least use the word for her own purposes (in a diary, say). Here, though, we must ask, 'What is the same sensation?' It has no definition, no features which can be recognized or described. It is something, as it were, purely phenomenal, not physical. It can only 'appear'. It is a kind of impression, a 'seeming'. Only what *seems* the same as it can be the same. Hence sameness here amounts to nothing but the same feeling, identifiable only as the inclination to write 'S' in the diary or do some such thing. One could only use 'S' when one felt like it, which is to say randomly, so 'S' has no meaning.

Wittgenstein relentlessly impresses on us the complete absence of any criteria for the correct use of a word like 'S'. Consider §265:

Let us imagine a table (something like a dictionary) that exists only in our imagination. A dictionary can be used to justify the translation of a word X by a word Y. But are we also to call it a justification if such a table is to be looked up only in the imagination? – ‘Well, yes; then it is a subjective justification.’ – But justification consists in appealing to something independent. – ‘But surely I can appeal from one memory to another. For example, I don’t know if I have remembered the time of departure of a train right and to check it I call to mind how a page of the time-table looked. Isn’t it the same here?’ – No; for this process has got to produce a memory which is actually *correct*. If the mental image of the time-table could not itself be tested for correctness, how could it confirm the *correctness* of the first memory? (As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true.)

What Wittgenstein stresses here is the need for *independent* checks in order to justify a judgement. This is not a Wittgensteinian theory of justification. It is our ordinary conception of justification. It seems that there can be no such thing as a private language. But this is not quite what Wittgenstein says.

A crucial passage to consider for anyone wanting to argue that there could be something which we might call a ‘private language’ is §269 of the *Investigations*, which I will quote in full:

Let us remember that there are certain criteria in a man’s behaviour for the fact that he does not understand a word: that it means nothing to him, that he can do nothing with it. And criteria for his ‘thinking he understands’, attaching some meaning to the word, but not the right one. And, lastly, criteria for his understanding the word right. In the second case one might speak of a subjective understanding. And sounds which no one else understands but which I ‘*appear to understand*’ might be called a ‘private language’.

So here we have a word which is not at all understood, a word which appears to be understood, and a word which is understood. A language consisting of words of the second type ‘might be called a “private language”’. As an exegetical point, we should note that

this is ambiguous. The quotation marks around the phrase ‘private language’ could simply mean that this is what we call the language. Alternatively, Wittgenstein might be using this notation to express suspicion of the very notion of such a thing really being a language at all. This interpretation is supported by the phrase ‘*appear to understand*’ and the emphasis Wittgenstein gives it.

However, it is also worth noticing that Wittgenstein does not say that there could be no such thing but rather that this ‘might [indeed] be called a “private language”’. Perhaps too we should note that it is not suggested that no one else *could* understand the language (which would imply that it was nonsensical, i.e. not a language at all), but only that only one person in *fact* understands, or appears to understand, it. Wittgenstein does not grant the full status of language proper, but neither does he write it off as nonsense.

What are the criteria, though, for appearing to understand a word? Of course people speaking foreign languages, or using words we do not know, appear to understand their words. The circumstances of the use of ‘S’, however, are not apparent, and so could never seem to be either consistent or inconsistent. It is hard to imagine what sentences could contain such a word. The sensation cannot be described and has no characteristic expression. It is not at all clear, therefore, whether anyone could even appear to understand a word like ‘S’. Hence this ‘private language’ does not seem likely to qualify as what Wittgenstein says might be called a ‘private language’.

Rather, this phrase seems more properly applied to cases when, like Humpty Dumpty, we use words in our own unique way.¹⁵ This is perfectly possible and the words do have meaning as long as we use them in a consistent way (always saying ‘hat’ when we mean ‘table’, for instance). Such uses, though, are parasitic on common language and can be learned by other people, as with codes. There is nothing ‘internal’ or ‘private’ in that sense here.

The point of this is not to show that a private language is impossible (I have not proved that), but to show that certain things one might want to say about language are ultimately incoherent. That is, to get certain philosophers, perhaps including Wittgenstein himself in some moods, to see that there is really nothing that they thought they wanted to call a private language. If we really try to picture a world

of private objects (sensations) and inner acts of meaning, and so on, we see that what we picture is either regular public language or incomprehensible behaviour (the man might as well quack as say or write 'S'). It does not follow that nothing comprehensible might be meant by the words 'private object' or 'inner act of meaning'. On the contrary, anything comprehensible might be meant by such words if we give them the relevant meaning.

Wittgenstein does not prove anything, and certainly not that certain words must always be nonsense. Rather, what he does is to prompt one to wonder how the usual criteria for understanding might be applied in the case of the so-called 'private linguist'. The answer appears to be that they break down, or that it is not clear how we are to apply them. The man appears to understand his 'language', even to himself, I suppose. The rest of us do not. The question, 'Does he *really* understand it?' means are we really correct to apply the word 'understand' in this case? The answer is, it seems to me, that the rules for the correct use of the word 'understand' just do not cover this kind of case. We might as well wonder whether a team would really have won a football game if at some point during it one of its players developed superhuman powers, thus giving them an unfair advantage. We might argue about what would be fair, or most in keeping with the spirit of the rules of the game, but there can be no argument about how to apply rules that do not exist to a situation they were never intended to cover.¹⁶

Wittgenstein is not doing metaphysics here. This is not a priori psychology. Wittgenstein is not telling us that there is something we cannot do. His target is the philosopher who is tempted to talk in a certain way. And Wittgenstein rubs his nose in the nonsense he wants to spout. See §261:

What reason have we for calling 'S' the sign for a *sensation*? For 'sensation' is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands. – And it would not help either to say that it need not be a *sensation*; that when he writes 'S', he has *something* – and that is all that can be said. 'Has' and 'something' also belong to our common language. – So in the end when one is

doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would just like to emit an inarticulate sound. – But such a sound is an expression only as it occurs in a particular language-game, which should now be described.

There is no theory here about the essence of language or the necessary ingredients of a language. The theories of René Descartes and John Locke, for instance, are not proved wrong. But one might be less inclined to agree with them after having read the *Philosophical Investigations*. Presumably Wittgenstein thinks he is dealing with some fairly widespread philosophical temptations, but he is not committed to the idea that this is so, and he never tries to specify just how widespread these ideas might be. So he cannot be criticized on this score, and there is no point trying to defend him on it either. Whether there can be a private language depends on what one means by that term. If one means anything, then there can be.

His apparent attack on the idea of private language does not, as has been alleged, make Wittgenstein a behaviourist. He does not deny the existence of sensations or experiences. Pains, tickles, itches, etc. are all part of human life, of course. In *Philosophical Investigations* §293 Wittgenstein says that ‘[I]f we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of “object and designation” the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.’ This has been variously interpreted. Some have taken it as an expression of logical behaviourism, the idea that psychological terms such as ‘pain’ refer to publicly observable movements, or some tendency or inclination to move in certain ways, not private experiences, objects or events. In this vein, others, such as Iris Murdoch, have taken it as a symptom of Wittgenstein’s denial that we have inner lives or experiences at all.¹⁷ On the other hand some, supported by *Investigations* §304, have taken Wittgenstein to be implying that we should not construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of ‘object and designation’.¹⁸ If we want to understand a concept such as pain we should not think of a pain as a private object referred to somehow by the public word ‘pain’. A pain is not ‘a something’, just as love, democracy and strength are not things, but it is no more ‘a nothing’ than they are either (see *Philosophical Investigations* §304). Saying this is hardly

satisfactory, but there is no simple answer to the question 'What is pain?' Wittgenstein offers not an answer but a kind of philosophical therapy intended to clear away what can seem very obscure. To judge the value of this therapy, the reader will ultimately have to read Wittgenstein's work for herself.

What though if we take Wittgenstein's 'if' seriously, and read him as not telling us how we should construe the grammar of the expression of sensation? Where does this get us? One thing it does is to open up a door back to behaviourism, although it is important that this is the logical behaviourism of someone like Gilbert Ryle (i.e. a theory about the meaning of words) and not a metaphysical denial of consciousness. At the same time, though, the 'if' implies that we need not adopt such a theory, and thus that it is not *the* truth. It might be useful, or valuable in some other way perhaps, but it is not a complete solution to the kind of problem Wittgenstein is concerned with. So the invitation to behaviourism is rather lukewarm. The grammar of the expression of sensation can be construed behaviouristically, but need not be. So behaviourism is not right in any final or absolute sense, if it is right at all.

What about the object that has dropped out of consideration as irrelevant if we use the object-and-designation model? Irrelevant to what, we might ask? To a grammatical investigation into expressions of sensation, or just sensation; but perhaps not to other investigations. Consider the following train of thought: even if we cannot say anything about this object, it seems almost like the mystical in the *Tractatus*; it is what we cannot talk about, but also what is most important; the contents of other minds, construed on the model of objects, cannot be picked up by our language; they are unknowable to us; they might be just like our own (if we could *per impossibile* compare them with our own) or wholly different, or non-existent; so, there is no necessity that two people will feel or react the same way to any stimulus; no stimulus is necessarily or intrinsically x-provoking, where x is some sensation, reaction or feeling; there is no necessary universality in aesthetics or ethics. We might seem to be on the trail of some important truth here.

We should be careful though. If the mind is conceived as a bundle of contents, and if other minds so construed are beyond our ken, then we seem to approach a kind of solipsism. Wittgenstein has, of course,

been labelled a solipsist, at least in his early years. David Stern refers to Wittgenstein's 'deep sympathy for what the solipsist wants to say',¹⁹ which manifests itself in such remarks as 'what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest'.²⁰ This surely is a kind of joke, though. For what does the solipsist mean? No one can say.

H.O. Mounce finds this to be the obscurest part of the *Tractatus*.²¹ Quite rightly, Mounce points out that Wittgenstein cannot mean that solipsism is true. There might be some truth *behind* it, but there can be none *in* it. That is to say, Wittgenstein seems to Mounce to be saying that the solipsist is onto something, but this something is not solipsism. Solipsism is a confusion arising from the attempt to articulate a genuine insight. But what, then, is this insight? Mounce says, 'The truth is not that I alone am real but that I have a point of view on the world which is without neighbours.'²² This, I find, does not help.

Mounce is right to move in this direction, away from the idea that solipsism is somehow, mysteriously, right. He does not go far enough though. This is hinted at by the fact that Mounce concedes that, if his reading is correct, then Wittgenstein has expressed himself misleadingly. It is also suggested by the fact that Wittgenstein says that what the solipsist means is 'quite correct', rather than, say, partly true, insightful, profoundly important, or confused. He has got to be kidding. I do not mean, 'Come off it!' I mean that the only plausible interpretation of Wittgenstein's remark on solipsism is that it is ironical. We are not meant to take it seriously. This is confirmed by *Tractatus* 6.54: 'My propositions . . . [are] . . . nonsensical.'

This is not to deny that Wittgenstein took solipsism seriously, or that he was tempted to believe in it. If I am right, what we have in this part of the *Tractatus* is an attempt to resist such a temptation using humour. If we miss the humour, or irony, or whatever we want to call Wittgenstein's tactic here, then we are left in something like Mounce's position (or, worse, with solipsism, which is nonsense). What can it mean to say that I have a point of view on the world that is without neighbours? Obviously Mounce does not mean this literally (that I have a look-out place unadjacent to human dwelling-places). His point is meant to be necessary, not contingent (because

'I' is supposed to mean also 'you', in the way that Descartes's *cogito* is meant to be true for all of us). So I have a point of view that *cannot* have neighbours. But then what could 'neighbour' mean here, or 'point of view'? In trying to give the solipsist his due, Mounce has slipped into the solipsist's mire of nonsense. What the solipsist means is not true, because he does not mean anything. So it is not that he must give something up or reject his 'beliefs' as false. Rather he should read carefully such remarks as §261 quoted above and see what he is left believing. He will not, Wittgenstein seems confident, be left believing anything he wants to call 'solipsism'.

Recently, Mounce himself has leant support to this reading of Wittgenstein's view of solipsism by saying that

A world analysable purely in terms of sense experience could not be *my* world. For in pure sense experience there is no *me*. The subject disappears; it reappears only by contrast with a world that transcends it. That is why Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* that solipsism, when properly analysed, will coincide with pure realism.²³

In other words what the solipsist means is not distinctively solipsistic at all. Nothing meaningful is.

So how does all this fit in with the monolinguists I considered earlier, and the role of communal agreement in using a language? What we have is a clear contrast between the monolinguist (or Crusoe) and the 'S'-user with a private 'language' for his own inner experience. We can imagine the monolinguist, we could even make a movie of such a person. This is not true of the private linguist. All we have here is someone who from time to time says 'S' or something of the sort, with no indication that the word means anything even to him, and so no reason to think of it as a word at all. A movie of someone like this would be indistinguishable from a movie of a madman, not someone with what I would want to call a private language. Thus the difference between the two cases is clear, and it does not depend, as Diamond points out

on any answers to the questions: 'If there really were a person who made sounds which resembled those of a language, but who had

never spoken with another person, could he be *using language*? Is that logically possible? Could he be *following rules*? Or is that conceptually ruled out? Could he have terms which *had the same grammar* as terms in our language? Is that logically possible?²⁴

I have denied the idea behind the claim that some form of private rule-following is logically possible, and criticized the use of the concept of logical possibility. But haven't I shown precisely that a private language is a logical impossibility? Again the answer is 'No', and again Diamond explains why:

If the character is given words of our language to use when he gives himself the definition of 'S', the rules for the use of 'S' are not his private rules; but the only other thing we might imagine him coming out with is inarticulate sounds . . . If we have the character make such sounds, and then, on occasion, write down 'S' in a diary, what we have in our movie is a character who behaves with some of the characteristic tokens of using a word he understands, but that isn't quite the movie that we had thought we wanted. *Nothing* is. Wittgenstein's argument is designed to let us see that there isn't anything we want. There not being any movie that would satisfy us does not show that *something* is 'logically impossible' or 'conceptually impossible' (in contrast, as we might suppose, with those people talking in monologues in §243); it shows us that there wasn't anything at all that we were imagining.²⁵

The idea of a private language, then, is nonsense in the sense that it is really no idea at all. Whether an individual could ever behave as if he or she spoke English without ever having learned it is an empirical question, as is the question of what we would say should we encounter such a person. Philosophical reflection might help us to imagine a situation like this, or to appreciate just how hard it is to imagine it, but it does not answer the questions. Solipsism (and private language as Wittgenstein defines it) is quite different, however. It simply is an incoherent notion, a prime example of what Wittgenstein means when he talks about nonsense. On Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein, this conception of nonsense changed little throughout his career. It is to this reading that I turn next.

Nonsense early and late

According to Diamond (or according to Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* according to Diamond) nonsense is nonsense. There is no such thing as important nonsense, or nonsense that is important because of the sense it would have if it made sense which, because of the logical limits on meaning, it cannot. Logically all nonsense is on a par with 'piggly wiggle tiddle'. Psychologically, though, this is not the case. 'Piggly wiggle tiddle' is not even thought to be an important claim by anyone. Other bits of nonsense might be, such as those offered by philosophers. This psychological difference means that different bits of nonsense can have different uses.

This helps to make it clear that meaning is not always the same thing as use. Consider 'piggly wiggle tiddle', which I made use of above, or ' 'Twas brillig'. Paradigmatic nonsense like this might amuse children, or frighten an animal (when shouted at it, say). It might, in the hands of a talented nonsense-poet, be used to write bestselling books that generated money for life-saving charities. It might, in short, be both useful and important, but it would still be nonsense.

Now consider the sentence: 'Nobody ever really dies.' These words occurred to me some time ago, and for a while I found it hard to shake them. As a result I felt somewhat comforted with regard to our mortality and I felt somehow more profound than usual. I no longer think of these words as anything other than pure nonsense, but for a while they were important to me. But what do they mean? What, particularly, does 'really' mean in this context? I could not for the life of me say, and I would happily concede that the words are, logically, nonsense. It does not follow that the words are unimportant, or false (although it follows that they are not true either).

What if someone went for years with such words in their head, perhaps connected with others like 'God' and 'evil'? What if these beliefs, if we can call them that, produced an increase in ethical behaviour and feelings of contentment? This would be a very useful and important kind of nonsense.

My point is not, as might be thought, that this is the nature of religion. My claim is only that some religion might be like this and that, given its importance, the fact that it is nonsense is relatively

insignificant, especially if the believer acknowledges this logical point. For many people, of course, the frank acknowledgement that a sentence is nonsense will be enough to make them disinclined to cleave to it. For many, but not necessarily for all. Something's being nonsense, in the logical sense, is not the same as its being rot or tosh in the evaluative sense. When Wittgenstein says that religious utterances are nonsense, he is not saying what Philip Larkin said, after reading the Bible, that it was 'Beautiful, of course. But balls.'²⁶

So what is nonsense? Wittgenstein, I think, has no view on this in his later work. What he thought in his early work is hard to say, but I will come to this below. He is not out to condemn any particular doctrines, theories, ideas or propositions. Rather, as Diamond argues, he tries to get the reader to acknowledge that certain things she (the reader) was inclined to say do not have the meaning that she wanted them to have. As Martin Stone puts it, 'The difficulty in making sense of what they [in this particular case, the Platonist and the deconstructivist] say belongs to their very intention in speaking; if it made sense, it wouldn't satisfy them and they would reject it.'²⁷ Any combination of words can be given a meaning, but the 'castles in the air' that Wittgenstein sets out to destroy do not correspond to any meaningful sentence. If they do, he is not out to destroy them.²⁸

Lars Hertzberg has written that 'it is a mistake to suppose that we can discuss the meaning of a sentence apart from its use, and . . . to believe that philosophy can place limits on the possible uses of language'.²⁹ This might seem to raise a problem. If Hertzberg is right, then nonsense scarcely seems to exist. Then there would appear to be no distinction to make between sense and nonsense. Whenever a sentence has a use it has a meaning; there is no limit to the possible uses of language, so the land of meaning is infinite and we can never map its borders. In a way this is right. As I have said, though, a sentence's having a use does not preclude its being nonsense. I would say, drawing on Hertzberg, that nonsense is something that is presented as a proposition but that none the less fails to convey any information to an audience.³⁰ If it is not presented in such a misleading way it might be quite useful, as we have seen.

What does it take for a proposition to make sense? Well, it must be understandable. It must, so to speak, work. A working sentence might

not in fact be understood, of course. It might be misheard or misconstrued. It must be comprehensible, not necessarily comprehended. But 'comprehensible' here does not mean capable of making sense in some possible world. Not because possible worlds do not exist, but because *every* string of words makes sense in some possible world. Absolute or ultimate comprehensibility of the in-some-possible-world variety is then not a sufficient condition for meaning. Nor is actually being comprehended a necessary condition for meaning. Other than this, I would say one cannot specify what the necessary or sufficient conditions of meaning are. Perhaps a meaningful sentence is one that ought to be understood in the context, one that a reasonable person would understand. But it is not Wittgensteinian to stipulate how we use the word 'meaningful'. It can be said that meaning depends on context, but what this means needs to be clarified. Hertzberg is worth quoting again here:

[I]t may be important to get clear about the sort of difference considering [an] utterance in its context makes. It does not simply mean that we enlarge the number of factors taken into consideration in establishing the sense of an utterance, as though the sense were a function of a determinate range of contextual variables in addition to the verbal ones. This would be a misunderstanding, as should be clear from the fact that there is no way of determining in advance what contextual considerations will be relevant to what a person is saying. What we respond to in the course of a conversation, it might be said, is the particular utterance in its particular context, our understanding of the utterance and our understanding of the context being mutually dependent.³¹

There is no acontextual nonsense then, or, equally, one could say that there is no acontextual meaning. Philosophy must consider utterances in their context. This is part of the importance of ordinary language to philosophy. It is also relevant to the use of primary sources in studying the history of philosophy critically. Sentences and indeed theories or doctrines cannot be assessed for meaningfulness in isolation. The context of their use, and especially who uses them, is essential. So philosophy must always be in a sense *ad hominem*, as Hertzberg puts it.³²

It is worth noting two points connecting to religion again. The first is that Wittgenstein never attacks religious beliefs. The *Philosophical Investigations* deals with the philosophy of mind and of language, not expressions like ‘Nobody ever really dies.’ Secondly, he does not lay down criteria for making sense or being worthy of belief. It is ‘beliefs’ that the believer can be brought to give up by means of grammatical investigation that are his target. I use scare quotes here because the ‘beliefs’ in question are just houses of cards, empty words, not substantial beliefs at all. Religious faith that can be undermined in this way is probably not worthy of the name.

According to the *Tractatus* and the ‘Lecture on Ethics’, attempts to utter ‘religious truths’ might all result in nonsense, but Wittgenstein never says this in his later work. It would contradict his later methodology to say such a thing. He might, of course, still have thought it. But if he did and (a) this was an evaluative belief, it is irrelevant to his philosophy (because it is not a mere reminder – see *Investigations* §127), or (b) it was a belief that followed from some theory or peculiarly Wittgensteinian definition of meaning, then his later philosophy is internally contradictory (see *Investigations* §128). There is, surely, no picture theory of meaning in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Nor is there any other such theory. So there is no external proof, or thesis, that certain beliefs or propositions are nonsense. Nonsense for Wittgenstein’s purposes is what we all agree is nonsense, or what the reader comes to accept as being nonsense.

We may develop theories of meaning if we want to, but Wittgenstein does not. We may insist that religion is all nonsense, but Wittgenstein does not. And even if we accept Wittgenstein’s earlier view that religious beliefs are nonsense, and even if we also accept Diamond’s austere conception of nonsense, there is still room for faith as important (but not meaningful) nonsense. More precisely what room Wittgenstein leaves for faith we will see in Chapter 5, but for now, having looked at the view of nonsense in his later work, I shall turn, as promised, to what he says about it in the *Tractatus*.

The debate over the *Tractatus*’s view of nonsense is somewhat complex, but focuses on just a few remarks. The most important of these come in the preface and the penultimate remark, 6.54. The preface says that the value of the book lies in the fact that thoughts are

expressed in it and that it shows how little is achieved when the problems of philosophy are solved. These problems are posed only because ‘the logic of our language is misunderstood’. The book’s aim, therefore, is to draw a limit to the expression of thoughts, presumably so that these problems will no longer be posed. We can infer then that, just as in his later philosophy, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* regards philosophical problems as misconceived and hence unreal. Their ‘solutions’ therefore cannot be real either. This reading of the *Tractatus* is confirmed by proposition 6.54:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

Diamond and James Conant are supposed by P.M.S. Hacker to agree that the preface and the penultimate remark constitute the frame of the book, and that ‘all the propositions of the book are nonsense, except for the frame’.³³ According to Diamond’s ‘austere’ view, these nonsensical propositions are plain nonsense, to be thrown away, but they ‘may be useful or even for a time essential’.³⁴ Their value is that they can be used to help us see as nonsense the stuff we are tempted to come out with when we philosophize. This is an important task, and hence the *Tractatus* is an important book, albeit an imperfect one that Wittgenstein improved on in his later work. This is the view of Diamond and Conant, according to Hacker.

It should be noted, though, that this is not exactly how Conant sees things. He denies that ‘The distinction between what is part of the frame and what is part of the body of the work is . . . simply a function of *where* in the work a remark occurs’.³⁵ Instead, he says, the distinction between frame and body depends on how a remark occurs to the reader, and this will vary from reader to reader. This goes a long way towards solving the problem that Hacker raises (and which I discuss below) of how Diamond might explain remarks within the ‘content’

of the *Tractatus* that seem to belong more to the 'frame'. Roughly speaking, Conant's position is that some remarks in the *Tractatus* are clearly quite meaningful, others are fairly obvious nonsense, and others are, as it were, nonsense disguised as sense. Hacker quotes Conant saying that 'the propositions of the *entire* work are to be thrown away as nonsense'.³⁶ However, if he ever thought what this seems to mean, he does not think so now. In his contribution to *The New Wittgenstein* Conant writes:

Question: *which* sentences are (to be recognized as) nonsensical?
 Answer: those that elucidate . . . Not every sentence of the work is (to be recognized as) nonsense. For not every sentence serves as an elucidation. Some sentences subserve the elucidatory aim of the work by providing the framework within which the activity of elucidation takes place.³⁷

The body of the work, I take it, is composed of those remarks that the reader initially takes to make sense. The frame is composed of the remarks that help her to see that these former remarks really make no sense at all. If these framework remarks are not considered to be propositions, then Conant's 'new' position is of course not new at all. At any rate, I will concentrate here on what Conant thinks now and leave aside the question of whether this is a departure for him.

Hacker's much more orthodox view is that the *Tractatus* consists of remarks that, so to speak, technically fail to make sense, but that none the less show us important truths about logic and value. Hacker strongly disagrees with Diamond on numerous points, yet he remains remarkably close to her on the key issue. Here is Hacker on what he calls 'the nub of the dispute':

Nor are there different *kinds* of nonsense – nonsense no more comes in kinds than it comes in degrees. But the nonsense of the pseudo-propositions of philosophy, in particular of the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, differs from the nonsense of 'A is a frabble', for it is held to be 'illuminating nonsense'. It is the motive behind it and the means chosen for the objective . . . that earmarks the nonsense of the *Tractatus*.³⁸

What would Diamond or Conant disagree with here? There is disagreement, but it is not easy to state exactly in what it consists. One way might be to say that Diamond has a higher opinion of the *Tractatus* than does Hacker. Hacker says that 'It is a mistake of Diamond to suppose that the *Tractatus* is a self-consistent work.'³⁹ Diamond might consider such a supposition to be an interpretive virtue rather than a mistake. Hacker, with well-documented justification, is much less charitable. His evidence is of two kinds: internal and external. The internal evidence consists of remarks in the *Tractatus*, such as the preface's assertion that thoughts are expressed in the book, that suggest the book is not all (apart from the preface and concluding remarks) meant to be nonsense. The external evidence consists of things Wittgenstein and those who worked with him said and wrote before, during and after his *Tractatus* period. This evidence again makes it look as though Wittgenstein did not think of the content of his book as entirely meaningless, partly because he gives no hint that he was up to anything as 'postmodern' as Diamond suggests. Hacker's evidence is impressive, although the external evidence should perhaps be of more interest to biographers than philosophers. Let me say more about this.

Hacker divides the external evidence into six kinds. The first is evidence from Wittgenstein's pre-*Tractatus* writings. In the *Notebooks 1914–16*, for instance, Wittgenstein seems to hold views that in the *Tractatus*, according to Diamond, he rejected as nonsense. But of course, he might have changed his mind (or, less plausibly, he might have been playing ironically in his notebooks). Secondly, we have letters written by Wittgenstein at the time of the composition of the *Tractatus*. In letters to Paul Engelmann and Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein seems to advance views that, if Diamond is right, he should have thought made no sense. Hacker remarks that it is implausible that Wittgenstein was pulling Russell's leg. But he might have been trying to lead him to see that what he was apparently asserting was in fact nonsense. According to Diamond this is what is going on in the *Tractatus*, and it has a serious aim. Wittgenstein is not, she would say, merely pulling the reader's leg, despite his indirect method. Thirdly, we have discussions with friends, a rather weak category of evidence consisting of reports on what Russell and Frank Ramsey

said they thought Wittgenstein meant after having talked to him. Fourthly and fifthly, Hacker presents evidence from Wittgenstein's work from 1929–32. Here Wittgenstein seems to be taking up, and in some cases sticking to, ideas he held in the *Tractatus* (i.e. ideas that he must *not* have thought were nonsensical pseudo-ideas). As Hacker concedes, though, 'Some Remarks on Logical Form' might have been 'a temporary aberration',⁴⁰ and the reports on what he said during the period 1930–2 might be unreliable. It is also possible that Wittgenstein's references to what he used to think might refer to a period before the *Tractatus* was complete, or that he might have preferred to respond to the 'contents' of the *Tractatus* without referring to the irony of the book for fear of confusing his readers and students. Finally, Hacker draws on evidence from Wittgenstein's later writings. Again he points to passages that make it 'wildly implausible',⁴¹ but not impossible, that Diamond is right. This evidence cannot be discarded lightly, but it consists entirely of remarks taken from unpublished work, notebooks and hearsay. It is compelling, but if we accept Hacker's highly plausible reading of it, then the *Tractatus* is a worse book than, based on evidence internal to the text, Diamond takes it to be.

Hacker uses the external evidence only to back up his claim that Diamond's reading of the internal evidence is wrong. So it is the internal evidence that is most important, although it would surely be hard to prove much using this kind of evidence if Hacker is right that the *Tractatus* is not a self-consistent work. It is not my concern here, though, to argue whether we should base textual interpretation on biographical data (which seems reasonable), or whether we should always try to read works as internally self-consistent (which seems charitable). Instead I will focus on the question whether Diamond's charitable reading is possible; whether it makes sense on its own, internal grounds. If it does, this is as much of a defence of it as I can offer. First, though, let us look at Hacker's more traditional reading, against which Diamond reacts.

According to Hacker's reading of what Wittgenstein meant, 'one cannot say that Cambridge blue is lighter than Oxford blue ... or even that a light blue object is lighter than a dark blue one'.⁴² This bizarre claim is a result of the doctrine that it is impossible to assert by propositions that any property internal to a fact exists (see

4.1221–4.124). Any such property or relation can be shown, but cannot be said (see 4.122). It seems clear that something is wrong here. Hacker's Wittgenstein thinks that the words 'Light blue is lighter than dark blue' are utterly uninformative, indeed (or because they are) nonsense, but that there is a truth about which they fail to inform, namely the truth that will be manifest to you if you look at a dark-blue object and a light-blue one. Diamond's view is, roughly, that Wittgenstein cannot have been so stupid, that he knew the doctrine that leads to such conclusions was nonsense when he offered it up (in order to be transcended and thrown away).

Hacker differs, and thinks that Wittgenstein was partly right, not stupid. What he thinks is that the *Tractatus* contains 'hard-won insights into the nature of logic', but that Wittgenstein was wrong to think that these can only be shown and not said.⁴³ On the contrary, he agrees with Ramsey and Diamond that 'if you can't say it, you can't say it, and you can't whistle it either'.⁴⁴ Hacker's position is that these supposedly ineffable truths are in fact perfectly 'effable'. From their expressibility follows the fact that we *can* say, for instance, that dark blue is darker than light blue.

To sum up, we have three positions. Hacker's Wittgenstein thinks there are truths that can be shown but not said. Hacker himself thinks these truths can be said. Diamond's Wittgenstein and Diamond herself think the 'truths' in question do not exist.

So let us look at this more closely. Leaving aside what Wittgenstein or anyone else has said about the matter, let us consider what seems to be the truth. We will then be in a better position to interpret Wittgenstein, and others, charitably. What is wrong with saying 'light blue is lighter than dark blue'? Well, what are you saying if you say this? What are you telling someone? If they know what 'light blue' and 'dark blue' mean then they know that the first is lighter than the other, i.e. knowing the former is, among other things, knowing the latter. If they do not know what 'light blue' and 'dark blue' mean then the utterance is no use to them. So these words have no use, so far. They could have a use, though. For instance, if someone knew the meaning of 'light blue' and 'dark blue' only imperfectly, knowing that they were shades of blue, but not having realized that 'light' and 'dark' mean here what they do in 'light red' and 'dark red'. It is

informative and meaningful to say ‘navy is darker than aquamarine’. In the same way, it could be informative to someone who had only ever thought of ‘dark blue’ as being a name like ‘navy’ (perhaps she says it ‘darblue’) to say ‘Dark blue is darker than light blue’, but here one would be making a point about the words ‘dark blue’, perhaps emphasizing the syllable ‘dark’ each time it occurs, not saying anything about the colours themselves.

But what would *that* be? Can words convey the truths that perception reveals? Well, what does perception reveal? How things are, states of affairs. Are these true or false? No. It makes no sense to say of a state of affairs that it is true. A description of a state of affairs can be true or false, though. So does it make sense to speak of the truth we see when we look at dark blue and light blue? Apparently not. We see a reality, a state of affairs, namely, dark blue and light blue. So there is no such thing as the truth of this state of affairs that the sentence ‘Dark blue is darker than light blue’ tries but inevitably fails (according to Hacker’s Wittgenstein) to get across. When this sentence has a use, as in the circumstances described above, it has a meaning. When it does not, it is nonsense. And it does not show some truth that cannot be said. There is no truth here. That is, we can make no sense of talk of there being some truth here. If there is important nonsense it is not, cannot be, important because of the sense it would have if only language, or the laws of language, would let it. Strictly speaking there are no bounds of sense. There is sense and there is nonsense, but there is nothing that prevents the nonsense from joining the elect.

Hacker says that ‘there are, according to the author of the *Tractatus*, ineffable truths that can be apprehended. Indeed, in some cases, they can literally be perceived – for one can *see* that dark blue is darker than light blue, even though, being an internal relation between colours, this cannot be said.’⁴⁵ But of course, Hacker has just said it. Hacker’s Wittgenstein is surely wrong, as Hacker argues. An internal relation is a logical or conceptual relation, a matter of what is thinkable (see *Tractatus* 4.123). Can one literally see such things? No. Truth is not reality (which, of course, can be seen). So Diamond is right, there is no truth here (and therefore Hacker is wrong). Hacker’s Wittgenstein is wrong then and so, it seems, is Hacker in thinking that what Wittgenstein and Diamond call nonsense is really true.

It does not follow that Hacker's interpretation of what Wittgenstein was up to in the *Tractatus* is wrong, however. Wittgenstein might have been horribly confused, *pace* Diamond. As I mentioned above, I do not intend to argue that Diamond is right on this issue. It is enough to note that her view is possibly right and that whether it is or not depends largely on what interpretive methodology we employ.

Mounce offers a different criticism of Diamond on this score. He notes the similarity between Hacker and Diamond on the point that what cannot be said cannot be said; that nonsense is nonsense. Mounce criticizes both Hacker and Diamond for rejecting the distinction between saying and showing, which he sees as central to Wittgenstein's work, early and late.⁴⁶ Indeed, Wittgenstein's later descriptive method would seem hard to comprehend unless some distinction between saying and showing were in play. Mounce is right about this much, but neither Diamond nor Hacker would claim that saying and showing are the same thing, or that the difference between the two is insignificant. The particular distinction that they deny is between *truths* that can only be shown and truths that can be 'said' or asserted. As I argued above, this distinction cannot be maintained, because what can only be shown are features of reality (mountains, tables, and so on), not truths. Any truth realized upon seeing some such feature can be articulated, i.e. said.

In his later work at least, Wittgenstein's position seems to be quite similar to the one taken in Diamond's version of the *Tractatus*. In the *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* Volume II he writes:

Could a 'Psychology' contain the sentence: 'There are human beings who *see*'?

Well, would that be false? – But to whom would this communicate anything? (And I don't just mean: what is being communicated is a long-familiar fact.)⁴⁷

Further down the same page he writes:

And how can it be meaningless to say 'There are humans who see', if it is not meaningless to say there are humans who are blind?

But the meaning of the sentence 'There are humans who see', i.e. its possible use, is not immediately clear at any rate.

When a sentence looks like a piece of information, but we do not have a context in which it would convey any information, that is in which it would have a use, then it is nonsense. That is my view at any rate, and it seems to be an idea that guides what Wittgenstein says. Wittgenstein is not, though, giving us a use theory of meaning because what he actually says is neither dogmatic nor generalized. Wittgenstein is talking about a particular sentence to be used in a particular kind of way, in a 'psychology' or science of the mind, and he does not assert that it must be nonsense. Rather he raises this question, and tentatively asserts only that 'its possible use . . . is not immediately clear'. He is surely right about this. 'There are people who see' looks like a piece of information just as much as 'Dark blue is darker than light blue' does, but until we think of situations in which they might inform, we cannot think of them as genuine bits of information. We might think of such 'propositions' as grammatical propositions, that is as expressions of rules for the use of words. But the meaning of such words depends on the context of their use. In some contexts they might be purely grammatical, in others, they might be informative, empirical statements, in others they would be nonsense. Until we think of a use for them, we exclude them from the language, and this, Wittgenstein says, is what it means to label something as nonsense.

What of the relation between Wittgenstein's early and late work? This of course depends on what he meant in the early work. According to Hacker, Wittgenstein meant that there are ineffable truths, but, also according to Hacker, it is possible that what Wittgenstein meant does not make sense.⁴⁸ Diamond would surely argue that if it makes no sense he cannot have meant it (and not because he was too clever, but because there is no such thing as meaning something that makes no sense). And, indeed, the doctrine of ineffable truths does make no sense, according to her. If Hacker is right, then Wittgenstein was confused when he wrote the *Tractatus*, vainly trying to say what, by his own doctrines, cannot be said. If Diamond is right, then the *Tractatus* does not really try to say anything. Instead it tries to get us to recognize nonsense for what it is, as the *Philosophical Investigations* does. Either way, it is the later work that represents Wittgenstein at his best, and to which we should pay most attention. Let us return

finally to the late conception of nonsense (which may or may not be the same as the early one) and consider briefly a recent attack on Diamond's view.

Lynette Reid rejects the *Tractatus* conception of meaning, nonsense, and so on, as too narrow. No sentence (e.g. 'Dark blue is darker than light blue') is in itself nonsense, as the *Tractatus*, in Reid's view, holds. We cannot, she argues, decide whether any particular belief, a religious belief say, is coherent or incoherent in any absolute sense. This is because according to 'the understanding expressed in the *Investigations*', which Reid endorses:

the variation in what might or might not count as coherence, meaning, contradiction and so on is part of the pattern of our lives with the concepts in question, the religious concepts *and* the concepts of meaning, coherence, understanding and so on, and the philosopher who arrives on the scene to 'sort things out' with his notions of meaning and coherence distorts rather than illuminates what we seek to understand.⁴⁹

This is partly true and partly misleading. The first part is quite right – what might count as meaning, and so on, can vary. The second part, that 'the philosopher' distorts what we seek to understand, is not quite right. Which philosopher, after all? If she tries to impose some theoretical conception of meaning on a debate to which it is ill-suited, then the consequences are unlikely to be good. But this is not inevitable. If she is sensitive to the nature of what it is that we seek to understand, even a philosophical theory might be useful, if well or luckily chosen. Wittgenstein can be regarded as being anti-theory, but it does not follow from anything in the *Philosophical Investigations* that all theories are always bad. Theorizing simply does not count as *philosophy* as he conceives of it. Moreover, the particular philosopher that Reid has in mind here is Conant, who subscribes to no theory of meaning. The aim of a Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation, as Conant sees it, is to show one's audience that what they were inclined to say does not mean what they wanted it to, indeed that there is nothing that they wanted to mean. Such an investigation

is only successful if it satisfies the audience that there has been no distortion and that it has increased the clarity of its thinking. No such investigation is guaranteed to work, but it surely is not guaranteed to distort anything. Reid attacks particular remarks Conant makes about Christianity in Kierkegaard's Copenhagen. Perhaps he expressed himself badly in those remarks, perhaps not. How does Reid know? A good remark, from the Wittgensteinian perspective, is one that is therapeutic for the audience, one that they would accept as representing their views without distortion. There is no reason to believe that Reid's guess at what a nineteenth-century Dane would accept is any better than Conant's. Perhaps more importantly, the *Tractatus* according to Conant does not label any sentence as nonsense in an absolute sense. This is one reason why the distinction between the 'frame' and the 'content' is not sharp or the same for everyone. The nonsense of the *Tractatus* is nonsense in that particular philosophical context, if Conant and Diamond are right.

The idea of nonsense as the illusion of sense might not be the only one available in ordinary language. Reid points to examples of it being used in a dismissive, pejorative way. Fair enough. But Wittgenstein never insists that concepts not be used in a precise, or technical, way. He certainly does not license a dogmatic view that we must be conservative or democratic in our use of words, slavishly sticking only to everyday use without qualification. Language allows for precision, definition and technical terms. The understanding expressed in Wittgenstein's investigations is that the meaning of 'meaning' and related concepts can vary. The understanding behind the *Philosophical Investigations*, the idea that gives the book its point, is that there is a certain kind of nonsense, conceived as Diamond and Conant conceive of it, that can be dispelled by attention to actual and imaginary uses of language. A quite specific idea of meaning, nonsense, and so on, motivates the book, which encourages us not to fixate on one specific use of any word. There is nothing paradoxical about this, and no reason why Wittgenstein's method should not succeed, so long as we practise it skilfully and identify correctly which pseudo-beliefs we should apply it to.

Conclusion

If Diamond and Conant are right about Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense then this did not change from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*. If Hacker and Reid are right that the *Tractatus* is confused, then Wittgenstein's view did change, since there is no evidence of confusion in it later on. A certain conception of (one kind of) nonsense lies behind the *Investigations*, but within it there is none, or just as many as there are in ordinary language. The nonsense that is attacked therein is not the balderdash that is sometimes meant when one exclaims 'Nonsense!' It is a kind of nothing, and so cannot be evaluated. It is not bad to speak it, or to 'think' it. And if one cleaves to it no matter what, refusing to stop running it through one's mind and taking it to be important, then perhaps what we have is religious faith, which Wittgenstein is not out to attack at all. Then it is important, and it is important to note this fact. I look further at religion in Chapter 5, and before that at the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for the closely related subject of ethics. In the next chapter, though, I will look at what, if anything, *grounds* our distinction between sense and nonsense.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, §464.
2. Garth Hallett *Wittgenstein's Definition of Meaning as Use* Fordham University Press, New York, 1967, p. 163.
3. See Newton Garver *This Complicated Form of Life: Essays on Wittgenstein* Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, IL, 1994, pp. 200–4.
4. G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, pp. 368–9. Their references are as follows:

BB = Ludwig Wittgenstein *The Blue and Brown Books*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958

BT = Ludwig Wittgenstein 'The Big Typescript' (TS. 213)

PG = Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Grammar* ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1974

PI = *Philosophical Investigations*

PR = Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Remarks* ed. Rush Rhees, trans. R. Hargreaves and R. White, Blackwell, Oxford, 1975

PLP = F. Waismann *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy* ed. R. Harré, Macmillan and St Martin's Press, London and New York, 1965

WWK = F. Waismann *Ludwig Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis* ed. B.F. McGuinness, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1967

ζ = *Zettel*.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein MS 165, p. 78, trans. Norman Malcolm and quoted in his paper 'Wittgenstein on Language and Rules' in *Philosophy* 64 (1989): 8. This manuscript is from c. 1941–4.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6, quoted in Malcolm 'Wittgenstein', p. 9.
7. Cora Diamond 'Rules: Looking in the Right Place', in D.Z. Phillips and Peter Winch (eds) *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars* St Martin's Press, New York, 1989, p. 27.
8. Rush Rhees *Discussions of Wittgenstein* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970, p. 45.
9. Malcolm, 'Wittgenstein on Language and Rules' in *Philosophy* 64 (1989), p. 20.
10. Diamond, 'Rules: Looking in the Right Place', in *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars*, p. 27.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* ed. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G.E.M. Anscombe, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, rev. edn, 1983, pp. 344–5.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
13. Diamond, 'Rules', p. 20.
14. See A.J. Ayer's and Rush Rhees's symposium 'Can there be a Private Language?' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*: Supplementary Volume 28.
15. 'When *I* use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass* Macmillan, London, 1927, p. 125.
16. Something similar might be said about the debate over whether one needs to be religious in order to 'really understand' religion. According to ordinary English usage one can understand a religion quite well without believing in it, or indeed in any other religion. It is also good English, though, to insist that strangers to some experience, faith or practice can never really understand it. To insist that disputes over who can really understand what something is like can be settled by

- a grammatical investigation is to miss the normative aspect of the disagreement or to essentialize understanding (i.e. to insist, against ordinary usage, that it is this and not that). For more on this issue see John Edelman 'Pointing Unknowingly: Fantasy, Nonsense and "Religious Understanding"' in *Philosophical Investigations* 21:1 (January 1998), especially pp. 82–3.
17. See for instance Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good* Ark Paperbacks, London and New York, 1985, pp. 4–15.
 18. §304 has no ifs about it: 'We have . . . rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here.'
 19. David G. Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995, p. 77.
 20. *Tractatus* 5.62.
 21. See H.O. Mounce *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, p. 88.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
 23. H.O. Mounce, critical notice of *The New Wittgenstein* in *Philosophical Investigations* 24:2 (April 2001): 189.
 24. Diamond, 'Rules', pp. 21–2.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 26. Quoted in Andrew Motion *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* Faber & Faber, London, 1993, p. 486. Wittgenstein suggests that religious utterances are nonsense in his 'Lecture on Ethics', which I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4.
 27. Martin Stone 'Wittgenstein on Deconstruction' in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds) *The New Wittgenstein* Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 108.
 28. See *Philosophical Investigations* §118: 'Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? . . . What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards.' The German that Anscombe translates as 'houses of cards' is '*Luftgebäude*' which literally means 'air buildings'. It is important, as §118 also indicates, that, although these are really no more than houses of cards, they appear to be of the highest importance. Hence my, not entirely satisfactory, rendering 'castles in the air'.
 29. Lars Hertzberg 'The Sense is Where You Find It', p. 10 (last para. of paper). On his website Hertzberg writes that 'This essay appeared in T. McCarthy and S. Stidd (eds), *Wittgenstein in America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 90–103. However, by accident a rather crucial passage was omitted from the published version.' As I quote the

passage in question, and agree that it is important, all my references will be not to the published version but to the complete version, available on the internet at http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/lhertzbe/The_Sense_Is_Where_You_Find_It.doc.

30. See *ibid.*, p. 7.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
32. See *ibid.*, p. 9.
33. P.M.S. Hacker 'Was He Trying to Whistle It?' in Crary and Read *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 358. Hacker concentrates his criticism on Diamond, but identifies the view in question as that of Diamond, Conant, Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb and Thomas Ricketts. Hacker presents Conant's view as being essentially the same as Diamond's, and brings Conant in particular into the discussion on pp. 359 and 360.
34. Cora Diamond 'Throwing away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*' in *The Realistic Spirit* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991, p. 81.
35. James Conant, 'Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein' in Crary and Read *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 216.
36. James Conant 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?' in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds) *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, PA, 1989, p. 274, n. 16, quoted in Hacker 'Was He Trying To Whistle It?', p. 359.
37. James Conant 'Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein', p. 216.
38. Hacker 'Was He Trying to Whistle It?', p. 365.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 362.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 369.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
45. *Ibid.*
46. See Mounce in *Philosophical Investigations*.
47. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* Volume II: The Inner and the Outer 1949–1951 ed. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C.G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A.E. Aue, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 77e.
48. See *ibid.*, p. 370.
49. Lynette Reid 'Wittgenstein's Ladder: The *Tractatus* and Nonsense' in *Philosophical Investigations* 21: 2 (April 1998): 140.

Certainty

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).

It is there – like our life.¹

Questions about rule-following, and answers to those questions that emphasize the importance of context or of contingent human practices, can seem not just unsatisfying but deeply unsettling. John McDowell talks about feelings of vertigo in this connection and Stanley Cavell of terror:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘form of life’. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.²

Perhaps partly out of a desire to remove this fear of having nothing solid beneath our feet several commentators have ascribed to Wittgenstein a kind of foundationalism.

The idea that there is such a thing as Wittgensteinian foundationalism is a provocative one, though, for two reasons. For one thing, Wittgenstein is widely regarded as an anti-foundationalist.³ For another, the very word ‘foundationalism’ sounds like the name of a theory, and Wittgenstein of course opposed the advancing of theories and theses in philosophy. None the less, in his book *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty*, Avrum Stroll has argued that Wittgenstein does indeed develop a foundationalist view in his final work, *On Certainty*.⁴ In what follows I will examine what Stroll calls Wittgenstein’s foundationalism and argue that Stroll’s reading of Wittgenstein, though original and interesting, is misguided in important ways. After this I will look at the earlier foundationalist reading of Wittgenstein offered by Gertrude Conway, and then briefly at Rudolf Haller’s theory, which, as we will see, is essentially the same as Conway’s. Finally, drawing on what is right in these foundationalist readings, I will consider the problem of the apparent arbitrariness of language.

Foundationalism

The first thing we need to do is to be clear about what we mean by foundationalism. Definitions vary. The basic idea is that one category of beliefs, propositions, or knowledge, which I will follow Stroll in calling *R*, rests or depends on another, and that this foundational category or set of beliefs, propositions, or knowledge, *F* (which Stroll assumes to be very small), has and needs no further foundation or grounds. Thus abstracted from the theory of any particular foundationalist, this model leaves unclear what exactly *F* and *R* are, as well as the nature of their relationship. To illustrate the model it might help to think of someone like Descartes who looks for or believes in one or more Archimedean points of indubitable truth, *F* (typically mathematico-logical – ‘cogito ergo sum’, ‘ $2 + 3 = 5$ ’ – or phenomenological – ‘I seem to see some pink’ – in character), from which he can attain or justify other bits of knowledge or belief, *R*.

Stroll emphasizes that in traditional foundationalism, whether *F* and *R* consist of beliefs, propositions, knowledge, or whatever, they consist of the same kind of thing. How the things in question are known or can be justified differs – one being grounded, the other

not – but what kind of thing they are – beliefs, let us say – does not. In this regard F and R are alike. Stroll calls this the notion of ‘homogeneous foundations’.⁵ This is crucial to his account of why Wittgenstein is not a traditional foundationalist.

To see how Wittgenstein’s foundationalism, on Stroll’s reading, differs from traditional foundationalism, we first need to see what Wittgenstein’s foundationalism is. In fact it turns out to be not one thing but two. Let me first set out the basic idea. In very crude terms we can say that one of Wittgenstein’s moves against scepticism is to point out that knowledge, one might say, is what successful enquiry achieves. But enquiry involves not questioning all kinds of things – that human beings exist, that the earth exists, that our words have meanings, that our senses are fairly reliable, and so on. This is one way of trying to make the point that knowledge – what we discover to be true, and can doubt – is distinct from certainty – the not questioning of the kinds of things just listed. Certainty, on Stroll’s account, is foundational to knowledge.

One Wittgensteinian response to a sceptic who, after a philosophical enquiry into human knowledge, concludes that nothing is certain, is to show that her enquiry itself presupposes or rather includes certainty. The act of uttering a sceptical doubt implies assurance that the sceptic’s words have meaning and that her audience exists. This is a kind of Moorean point that Wittgenstein makes much use of in *On Certainty*. Scepticism is self-contradictory. Anything from R can be doubted, but not anything from F. At the least we can make the weak claim that not all of F can be doubted. Perhaps in certain circumstances a doubt about the existence of the earth might be understandable, for instance if I am an astronaut on the moon and I see, or seem to see, an ungodly explosion that leaves me blind, so that I cannot see what is left after the smoke clears. But even this doubt involves no doubt about my senses in general, or about the existence of the moon I am standing on, and so on. So there are things we can know and/or doubt, R, and things that are, as it were, beyond doubt, F. The question now is how to flesh out this basic idea.

Throughout *On Certainty*, but especially in the early remarks up to §204, Wittgenstein writes as if F consists of various propositions. See, for instance, §96:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

It seems to belong to the nature of propositions, though, that they can be true or false, that they are revisable. Sections 96 and 97 ('I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself, but there is not a sharp division of the one from the other') seem to imply that what is at one time certain might at another become open to doubt, so that in this sense there is no absolute certainty, even if at any given time one has no option but to be certain of some set of propositions, F. There is, then, a kind of relativism in this propositional form of Wittgenstein's foundationalism, but it is not a sceptical relativism that denies all certainty or fixity. At any given time, on this Wittgensteinian view, there are propositions that are absolutely certain, but which propositions these are might change over time.

Stroll prefers, though, a non-propositional kind of foundationalism that he also finds in *On Certainty*. He notes that Wittgenstein talks less often about propositions being foundational after §204: 'Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.'

This latter kind of foundationalism treats the foundations that make up F as non-intellectual and thus quite distinct from the propositions or whatever that constitute R. The foundations are thus not homogeneous with the structure they support. This distinguishes Wittgenstein's foundationalism from traditional foundationalism. The same goes, Stroll maintains, for the early, propositional kind of foundationalism found in *On Certainty*. The so-called hinge-propositions of F on this view are not like other propositions because they are exempt from doubt, because questions of truth and falsity do not apply to them, because they are not explicitly learned, and so on. In this sense one might say that they are not really propositions at

all, and this is one reason for preferring the second version of foundationalism identified by Stroll.

In this second version of the theory, I have said, the foundations are not intellectual or propositional. But what are they? Stroll identifies several candidates. They could be acting, training in communal practices, instinct, something similar to these three things, or some combination of these things. In this connection see §475 from *On Certainty*:

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

Stroll recognizes that instinct, acting and training are not the same thing, but suggests that

Wittgenstein meant them to be part of a single complex idea that he wishes to contrast with the propositional account. It is thus possible to find an interpretation that welds them into a single (admittedly complex) conception of that which stands fast. On this interpretation, what Wittgenstein takes to be foundational is a picture of the world we all inherit as members of a human community.⁶

Certainty is a way of acting that reflects this picture.⁷ It is ‘an ineliminable, non-modifiable aspect of human life’ that reflects a picture of ‘an independent objective reality that underlies the kind of probative activity we call science’.⁸

Taken together, these descriptions of the foundation sound odd. Could any way of acting really be non-modifiable, one might wonder? And how does the independent reality that underlies science relate to the activity that constitutes certainty?

To answer these questions we need to note the striated nature of Wittgenstein’s foundationalism, according to Stroll. Activities such as enquiring and asserting are embedded in the human community in which they occur. Without a community of enquirers and asserters they could not exist, and without such activities as enquiring, Stroll

insists, there could be no such thing as a human community. 'We would find it incomprehensible if something were defined as a human community that lacked such practices as inquiring, asserting, judging, doubting.'⁹ Of course we could enquire in different ways, but this activity could not be altered so radically as to make it unrecognizable as enquiring. So this practice is at least ineliminable. And what, Stroll nicely asks, could we make of the idea of revising our practice of revising?¹⁰ At least some practices seem to be non-modifiable. Thus one part or level of the foundation consists of certain activities that are necessary for a human community to be a human community. Alternatively, we might say that it is the community itself that is foundational, since it is a necessary precondition for these very activities.

The deepest level of certitude, though, is the world. 'For unless the inorganic world existed there would be no human communities.'¹¹ We therefore have a tripartite epistemological structure. At the bottom is the world. Next up is the community and certain practices, each of which is logically necessary for the other. Finally, at the top, we have the language-game, to which belong knowledge, belief, doubt, and so on. Scepticism is a logical impossibility because it tries to doubt the double-decker foundation that philosophers know as the external world. Wittgenstein therefore is undeniably a foundationalist, according to Stroll.

Wittgenstein on foundations

Let us now consider whether this kind of foundationalism is correct in itself or as a reading of Wittgenstein. A first possible line of criticism is one that Stroll explicitly considers and rejects. A critic might say that a foundationalist reading of Wittgenstein presents him as a would-be explainer of our practices, imposing a theoretical model on life and saying, 'This is how it must be.' This seems clearly to be contrary to Wittgenstein's descriptive approach to philosophy, which Stroll acknowledges. Stroll's response to this line of attack is to say that Wittgenstein is not saying what must be the case but merely what is the case. He cites *On Certainty* §232 in this connection:

232. 'We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them *all*.'

Wouldn't it be more correct to say: 'we do not doubt them *all*'.

Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting.

Wittgenstein is, as Stroll points out, describing what is the case (as he sees it), not laying down the law on what could or could not possibly be the case.

What is true of Wittgenstein, though, is not necessarily true of Stroll. Stroll writes that 'We cannot revise, alter, or question the existence of the earth.'¹² Later he repeats that 'in his foundationalism Wittgenstein has identified an ineliminable, non-modifiable aspect of human life.'¹³ This is no slip but an important part of Stroll's theory of Wittgensteinian foundationalism. To say that we cannot do something (eliminate or change some aspect of human life) surely is a way of saying how things must be, unless one insists that, since one really cannot do these things, saying so is simply a kind of description. To argue in such a way would be to make a mockery of Wittgenstein's explicit statements about his approach to philosophical problems. Stroll does not do this, but it is not easy to see how else he could defend his claim to be giving us Wittgenstein's view and not simply his own. An alternative response to the accusation of theorizing is to modify Stroll's way of talking about what Wittgenstein says in order to see whether its main thrust and insight can be preserved. This is what I will try to do. In what follows I will identify and try to solve some of the major problems that Stroll's view faces.

Let us start with the propositional account of Wittgensteinian foundationalism. The absolutist part of this account, that some propositions such as 'The earth exists' cannot be doubted, gets us into trouble. This is partly because it says what must be the case, and partly because it seems false. One can imagine situations in which it might be reasonable to doubt the earth's existence, such as that of the astronaut described earlier. Admittedly it is less easy to imagine a doubt about something like the earth's being very old, but this difficulty does not prove that such a doubt is impossible. Moreover, the Wittgensteinian move would seem to be to ask what 'I doubt that

the earth is very old' means. These words taken together have no role in our lives. As a matter of simple fact, people do not speak these or similar combinations of words. If someone did utter such a sentence it would be hard to know what to make of it. In the absence of an explanation of what these words mean, we are not in a position to say that they do or do not represent a possible doubt.

Perhaps someone might say that in normal circumstances it is impossible to doubt, say, that the earth exists. But here 'normal circumstances' looks suspiciously like shorthand for 'those circumstances in which the existence of the earth is beyond doubt'. And then the claim simply defines itself as being true. Let us say instead that there are, in everyday life, certain propositions that we do not doubt, or even simply that there is a large nest of propositions that we do not doubt *en masse*. Better yet, let us say that there are combinations of words that we do not use to express doubts and that, although these look like potential doubts, it would be hard to know what to make of them if presented as such.

According to Stroll's other, absolutist, theory, what is foundational is not certain propositions but the community and the world. The true foundation is the world itself. Stroll says:

Wittgenstein wishes to emphasize that it is the existence of the world that is the starting point of belief for every human being. Most of the world is inorganic. There are thus two different components to our inherited background. There is the community, as described above, which includes both organic and inorganic components, and there is the world. Their interrelationship is complex. The world, taken as a totality, represents the deepest level of certitude, having a kind of priority with respect to the community. For unless the inorganic world existed there would be no human communities.¹⁴

In what sense could the world be the foundation of all belief, knowledge or doubt? The obvious answer is that it is physically necessary. Without air, water, and so on, we would all be dead and there would be no sceptics. This is elementary science, though, not philosophy, and not something Wittgenstein would have struggled to express.¹⁵

Nor is it any answer to the sceptic who wonders whether an evil demon is deceiving him about everything. Such a sceptic has no faith in elementary science, and the Cartesian sceptic does not believe in the necessity of the physical world in order to sustain him. He needs only God (or the demon). We are plainly far from what Wittgenstein was concerned with.¹⁶

If we take the idea of the world, or the earth, as foundational out of Stroll's reading (which is desirable for the reasons just given and because the existence of the planet earth is surely not a necessary feature of reality) we can begin to see Wittgenstein's ideas more clearly. First, though, we face more problems. How do we know that there could not be a community that did not enquire? Have we looked? Since we cannot possibly look at every possible human community it seems highly un-Wittgensteinian to assert that there could not be one that did not enquire. I share Stroll's intuition that enquiry is deeply entrenched in our conception of human life, but the temptation to go a priori with this intuition should be resisted.

To bring the focus of the discussion back to scepticism, let us change examples, from enquiring to doubting. Uttering the words 'How do you know that p?' is an act of doubting only in English, only when addressed to someone (rather than, say, parroted), and so on. It is in the context of the life in which English is spoken, in which the practice of doubting exists, and so on, that these sounds, uttered by a human being in appropriate circumstances, constitute a doubt. So the practice of doubting, other practices (speaking? inquiring? learning?) and the community of English speakers might all seem to be necessary preconditions of doubting.

However, as Stroll points out, 'there is an important logical relationship in the opposite direction'.¹⁷ The practice of doubting consists of acts of doubting. Similarly, without the game of chess, a black piece of wood of a certain size and shape is not a king, but without the king there is no such thing as the game of chess. Neither is really a precondition of the other, since neither is logically or temporally prior to the other. Or rather, it seems wise not to call them preconditions of each other, otherwise we might be led into philosophical confusion.

One could try to make a similar move with regard to the human community. It would not be a human community unless it consisted

of people engaged in common practices (doubting, asserting, etc.). And unless they were these very practices it would not be this (i.e. the human) community. This last sentence seems to go too far, though. Communities can change without thereby being destroyed. So there must be a human community for there to be doubting, in the sense that nothing counts as doubting (in English, not according to some philosophical theory) except within such a context. See *On Certainty* §229: ‘Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings.’ But the human community goes on with or without any specific act of doubting (and perhaps without the practice of doubting at all, but I will leave this question aside). In this sense the community in which the practice of doubting exists is foundational to each particular doubt. Any attempt to doubt *it* is self-defeating, implying its own contradiction. But it is important to remember that it is particular acts that constitute practices and that these in turn make the notion of community intelligible. So in one sense any act of doubting is on the same level as, not dependent on, the community in which it occurs. This is one reason to avoid talk about foundationalism in Wittgenstein’s work.

There are others. As Stroll shows, if Wittgenstein is a foundationalist, he does not accept the traditional doctrine of homogeneous foundations. Nor does he talk about bits of knowledge in R being inferred or derived from the foundation F, as they are for a classic foundationalist like Descartes. Furthermore, there is an importantly non-propositional aspect to Wittgenstein’s ‘foundationalism’, the nature of the dependence between F and R for Wittgenstein is complex, and, for him, bits of R can join F and vice versa. We can call Wittgenstein a foundationalist, then, but it is misleading to do so. As D.Z. Phillips has written:

For Wittgenstein, the basic propositions he discusses are not the foundations or the presuppositions of the ways we think, and neither can the ways in which we think be derived or inferred from them. Rather, the basic propositions are held fast by all that surrounds them. They are not the bases *on* which our ways of thinking depend (foundationalism), but are basic *in* our ways of thinking.¹⁸

To describe our use of concepts such as certainty and knowledge necessarily involves the avoidance of summary or neat conclusions. Even so, it might be valuable to repeat what I take to be good in Stroll's account and just how I think it should be amended.

It is Stroll's second, non-propositional form of Wittgensteinian foundationalism that both he and I prefer. Stroll's belief is that what is most foundational is an almost literal foundation: the planet earth on which we live and the rest of the inorganic world. I deny that Wittgenstein ever held such a belief.

Upon this inorganic foundation, Stroll says, is a human community engaged in, and at least partly defined by, certain practices including doubting and enquiring. Importantly, these practices involve not doubting certain propositions or features of the world. And upon this foundation, Stroll goes on, are the language-games of knowledge and belief.

I reject the idea that any practice is essential to (i.e. definitive of) the human community. I agree that doubts are only intelligible as such in certain contexts and that these contexts might then be called necessary or foundational for the existence of genuine doubt or certainty. However, I see multiple reasons not to talk of foundationalism here. Let me quickly repeat the main ones: (1) the context in which doubts exist is not something wholly separable from or prior to particular doubts themselves, as talk of foundationalism might seem to imply; (2) even on Stroll's account, Wittgenstein is not a traditional foundationalist; (3) if Wittgenstein is a foundationalist, then his foundations are such that they can become part of the structure they support and vice versa. It is hard to imagine a building with such foundations.

Very roughly, what Wittgenstein is saying is that meaningfulness depends on context. Certain pseudo-propositions have no meaning because taken naturally they would contradict their very conditions of sense. The contradiction of nonsense, though, is also nonsense. If it is nonsense to say that the earth does not exist, then it is nonsense to assert that it does. So what Phillips calls 'basic propositions' are also really pseudo-propositions, in the sense that it is hard to imagine circumstances in which they make sense (although of course any

combination of words can be imagined to have sense, in a code or in very unusual circumstances, say, so no pseudo-proposition is absolutely nonsensical). We can regard them as being implied by our ways of thinking and living, but since 'they' here refers to bits of nonsense (in normal circumstances) we should not do so without caution. Certainly we should avoid calling them foundational. Before we settle on the conclusion that Wittgenstein is not a foundationalist, however, we should consider what other reasons have been given for applying this label to him.

Conway's matrix

The idea that Wittgenstein is some sort of foundationalist was first put forward by Gertrude Conway.¹⁹ Conway sees this claim as having ethical or social significance: 'A distrust of absolutes characterizes the contemporary period. People sense that they no longer tread on firm ground but on some delicate network of conventions.'²⁰ The absolutes that are distrusted include ethical ones, of course. But if our values seem merely conventional to us then we are unlikely to value them very highly. Conway aims to show that convention certainly has an important role in human life, but that the conventions that matter most are not *merely* conventional. They are grounded in our needs, our physical environment and makeup, our form of life.

On Conway's reading, Wittgenstein was a foundationalist of a fairly traditional sort in the *Tractatus*. The foundations here are taken to be absolutely simple objects which can be named but not analysed, which are the fundamental elements of all states of affairs, and whose names are the fundamental elements of all propositions. Conway does not regard the 'frame' of the *Tractatus* as indicating that Wittgenstein does not really believe any such thing, however much he might seem to in other parts of the book. She rejects, in other words, the idea that any apparent foundationalism in the *Tractatus* is meant to be seen as nonsensical. In his later work, though, she does believe that he rejects the idea of any such foundation. She characterizes Wittgenstein's later view as follows: 'Outside of human

thought, activity, and speech, there are no independent objective grounds of support. There is no timeless, unchanging, independent bedrock.²¹

There is, though, a foundation of a different sort, namely the form of life. Unfortunately, as Conway notes, the phrase 'form of life' appears only five times in the *Philosophical Investigations* and in none of these is it fully explained. Conway suggests that it might help to look at the notion of language-games, which is explained more fully, especially in *Philosophical Investigations* §7, where Wittgenstein says:

We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) [a primitive language used by builders consisting of words such as 'slab' which are called out when a slab, say, is to be fetched] as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games 'language-games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game.

And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like Ring-a-ring-a-roses.

I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'.

Clearly a language-game is not just one thing and there is no reason, as Conway points out, to assume that forms of life and language-games are the same thing. Perhaps they are when the expression 'language-game' refers to what Wittgenstein calls 'the whole', but surely Ring-a-ring-a-roses is not a form of life. More plausibly, Conway considers the possibilities that forms of life are biological (so there would be just one human form of life) or cultural (so that the Azande would have a different form of life than that found in contemporary Western Europe, for instance). She also considers, and seems to prefer, the idea that form of life has more to do with social psychology, with patterns of behaviour and reaction that might be referred to as 'human nature'. This is close to the biological conception of forms of life, but does not focus narrowly on biology. Conway stresses the point that this human nature should not be thought of as necessarily changeless, since Wittgenstein clearly allows for the possibility of

change in a form of life. Since he is so vague about the term ‘form of life’ it is hard to choose between these competing conceptions without being arbitrary. A case can be made for each of them, and as long as we know what we are saying and do not allow our use of terms to lead us astray we may say what we choose.

Conway finds that Wittgenstein uses the concept ‘form of life’ in two ways, one broad and one narrow. The broad sense covers ‘certain basic patterns of behaviour that come naturally to human persons. They speak, hope, question, believe, grieve, fear, build, remember, play, and so on.’²² These are the kinds of thing that mark humans off from gods or animals. Thinking is central to this category of definitively human activities. It is worth noting here that if thinking, that is meaningful thinking, is essential to or definitive of the form of life in this way, then the form of life cannot be the *foundation* of meaning or thinking (except in some very strange and surely misleading sense of foundation).

It is such behaviour that allows us to recognize fellow beings, to ‘find our feet with them’, communicate with them and commune with them. So this behaviour is fundamental in our lives, but in turn it depends on certain objective facts about our biology (how and that we perceive, for instance) and about our environment (many of our practices would have no point if the laws of nature were very different – think of measuring and what would happen if things spontaneously changed size all the time). These objective facts do not dictate a particular form of life, so they are not the true foundation, Conway argues, but they do make our form of life not just convenient but so natural that it is hard to imagine it being otherwise. Thus grammar (the set of rules that define our practices with language) is and is not arbitrary. It is arbitrary in that it rests on our form of life which could have been otherwise, and which in turn depends on certain facts of nature which could also have been otherwise. It is not arbitrary, though, in that, given these facts of nature, life would be almost impossible if we tried to use significantly different practices and rules. We cannot just choose to do mathematics, science, or even art, in a very different way. I will say more about this below.

The narrower sense of ‘form of life’ refers to different cultures. Differences of race, class and gender might also be considered here as

things that can make one person unintelligible to another. Thus Wittgenstein writes that ‘It is important for our view of things that someone may feel concerning certain people that their inner life will always be a mystery to him. That he will never understand them. (Englishwomen in the eyes of Europeans.)’²³ And: ‘We don’t understand Chinese gestures any more than Chinese sentences.’²⁴ Such differences can, like the difference between human beings and lions, be called differences in form of life.

Interpreting *On Certainty* is particularly difficult, Conway notes, because Wittgenstein says outright that he is struggling to express what he means in these notes.²⁵ We should beware of reading too much into remarks whose author is not satisfied with them. It is Conway’s view, though, that what Wittgenstein is trying to say is that human beings live

within a matrix of meanings and activities that fundamentally structure their world. This matrix serves as a horizon, an implicit supportive background that is not usually brought to reflective consciousness. Such a matrix lies embedded in the practices of language, the pattern of human activities.²⁶

I have little quarrel with this way of putting it, except for some unease about calling this matrix a foundation. An important part of what this matrix is is language, so it is rather misleading to say that it makes language possible. Avoiding talk of foundations here helps to make clear just how different Wittgenstein’s view is from traditional foundationalist theories. It also helps to avoid charges of cultural relativism and extreme conventionalism.

Conway points out that Wittgenstein is not a cultural relativist who makes truth and other concepts relative to each culture’s form of life. Different forms of life in this narrow sense do interact successfully sometimes, so they are not hermetically sealed, and the general human form of life is more basic than that of any specific culture. Conway thus calls Wittgenstein a ‘generic relativist’, but this is again somewhat misleading since, as she argues, it is not at all clear what alternative concepts or practices there are that would justify calling our own merely relative. What counting, say, could there be

that would make counting-for-humans a merely relative concept? What sense can we make of a radically different concept of truth that was, none the less, a concept of truth? It is not for me, nor for Wittgenstein, to legislate what makes sense, but the questions are worth raising. I will not say whether there could or could not be a concept of truth other than the one we have. To do so would be to hypothesize (which is all very well, but not relevant here). To call Wittgenstein a relativist of any kind, though, seems to imply that there could be such an alien 'truth' (that was still, somehow, truth), that we can make sense of this idea, and thus to imply one of the hypotheses I am unwilling, on Wittgensteinian grounds, to make. Thus it is best not to call Wittgenstein a relativist at all.

Nor does he regard the conventions that make up the matrix as chosen arbitrarily. We do not really choose how we measure, count, conduct trade, talk, think, and so on. We can just about conceive of different ways of doing some of these things, perhaps all of them. But there are all sorts of reasons, biological, cultural and practical, why we do things as we do. When it comes to such basic practices we scarcely have any real choice. Perhaps it is arbitrary that we have the biology, psychology, and so on, that we do, but given these things, what we do is not chosen arbitrarily, if it is chosen at all.

According to Conway:

Wittgenstein's investigations dispel traditional conceptions of unchanging, necessarily isomorphic structures of thought, language, and reality. The foundation is no longer sought in some objective, invariant, independent reality or structure of consciousness, but in a dialectical interaction of persons, their language and thought, and the world in which they dwell.²⁷

Once again, I disagree with this only in thinking that a foundation with which one interacts dialectically is not a foundation at all. Does this leave us in a frightening position? Cavell describes one reaction to Wittgenstein's non-traditional view: 'We begin to feel . . . terrified that maybe language (and understanding and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations – a thin net over an abyss.'²⁸ Describing our form of life as a foundation might lead to such a sense of

vertigo, especially if we share Conway's view of forms of life as changing and variable from culture to culture. If we give up talk of foundations I think we are more likely to see that we do not need anything to hold us up, that the desired 'foundation' is in fact an inconceivable phantom. Then, in my view, any feeling of vertigo is likely to be dispelled, but the seeing is something that might take some work, and this must be done by each individual for him- or herself. On the other hand, if the desire for foundations is great, giving up the idea that there is a foundation of any kind might just make the vertigo worse. I will consider this possibility below.

Conway suggests that looking at and thinking about forms of life will be morally edifying: 'Wittgenstein's concept of the form of life also provides grounds for intercultural exchange and community while at the same time evoking an increased spirit of tolerance and mutual respect for different cultural perspectives.'²⁹ I see no reason to assume that this is true, however. The kind of vertigo I have mentioned might lead to fear and hatred, and philosophical therapy to remove the vertigo is not guaranteed to work. Even without a fear of foundationlessness, different people are likely to react to different forms of life in a variety of ways. The other is often hated, and seeing that what makes him other is in some sense arbitrary need not remove this hatred, although of course it might. The value to be found in Wittgenstein's foundationalism/anti-foundationalism is primarily clarity, the absence of confusion, not increased tolerance of differences.

D.Z. Phillips makes a similar point when he writes of people

who, under the influence of Stanley Cavell, want to marry Wittgenstein's insights with aspirations to acknowledge other human beings, taken from the Romantic tradition. *This* trying to acknowledge is but *one* relation in which we may stand to others. It must not be sublimed as a central motivation in philosophical enquiry. What *philosophy* has to acknowledge, is that while some will seek the greater accord the Romantics aspire to, others will say that they stand firm, despite opposing differences, because they can no other. A moral or religious desire to change this state of affairs must not become a philosophical thesis which claims that this *must* be our attitude to it.³⁰

Before leaving Conway and the question of foundationalism, it is worth noting that Wittgenstein has also been described as a ‘praxeological foundationalist’ by Rudolf Haller.³¹ According to Haller, Wittgenstein holds that ‘firstly, our claims to knowledge are justified by reasons; secondly, the chain of reasons or justification for what we know has a *finite end*; and, thirdly, that the totality of what we know has foundations’.³² The ‘praxeological foundation’ is the common behaviour of mankind, that is to say, the human form of life.³³ In other words, Haller’s view is the same as Conway’s. I will say no more about it, therefore, except to note that Haller admits that ‘there may be a number of indications that Wittgenstein abandoned the search for foundations’, but insists that ‘*in the crucial passages*’ (his emphasis) Wittgenstein does commit himself to a foundationalist view. There is obviously room for disagreement about which passages are crucial, but I have no serious objection to Haller’s view except his choice of the term ‘foundationalism’ to describe Wittgenstein’s view (which is not to say, of course, that I take back any of the criticism I have made above of what Stroll and Conway say). If we do give up the term ‘foundationalism’, though, there is an apparent danger that vertigo might return in some form or other. In particular, if we see that instead of a foundation there is a web or matrix of practices and reactions that are all interrelated, then the whole thing might come to seem not so much insubstantial as arbitrary. This is a question that interested Wittgenstein, and the rest of this chapter will be devoted to addressing it.

The arbitrariness of grammar

In his review of *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* by George Pitcher, Rush Rhees describes *Philosophical Investigations* part II § xii as ‘the most important short statement for an understanding of the book’.³⁴ This would seem to be a good place to look, then, if we want to understand Wittgenstein’s philosophy in general, and it is particularly relevant to our present enquiry. Wittgenstein tells us that

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis).

But: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.

Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly?

Unfortunately it is not immediately obvious what we are to make of this important short statement. Difficulties become more apparent the more we look at it. It would be understandable if someone were to read the first paragraph quoted above as saying that no concepts are absolutely the correct ones. The second paragraph, however, suggests that we do not have any choice about the concepts we have. I say ‘however’ because if no concepts are absolutely the right ones then there seems to be something arbitrary (in the sense that it does not matter) about which concepts we use; whereas if we have no choice about it then it seems non-arbitrary. Clearly there are two senses of ‘arbitrary’ at work here, but it is disturbing to think of grammar (or logic or mathematics, of which Wittgenstein says much the same kind of thing) as being arbitrary in any sense.

Here is our problem: if grammar is arbitrary (if it makes no difference what rules we employ) then it looks as though what makes sense and what does not is arbitrary, which sounds like saying that we impose sense and order on the world when it is not really there to be found. A further problem, to be considered later, is that if we attempt to justify concepts or rules of grammar by reference to their usefulness then we seem to be committed to a crude form of pragmatism, as if there were nothing wrong with saying ‘I’m right to believe in God because it helps me get through the day.’ Wittgenstein considers pragmatism like this in the *Philosophical Grammar*, where he talks about different kinds of justification. When we have a specific objective, such as carving a piece of wood into a certain shape, any cut we make is right as long as it achieves the right result. The same is not true with language or mathematics though. Calculations are not

justified by the success of their consequences, as we can see from a joke to which Wittgenstein refers in this connection, explained by Rush Rhees as follows:

A tells B that he has hit the jackpot in the lottery; he saw a box lying in the street with the numbers 5 and 7 on it. He worked out that $5 \times 7 = 64$ – and took the number 64.

B: But 5×7 isn't 64!

A: I've hit the jackpot and he wants to give me lessons!³⁵

The rules of mathematics are not justified by this kind of practical usefulness. They have a kind of independence. But how independent can the rules of mathematics or language really be? Must we choose between relativist pragmatism and complete arbitrariness?

It is worth looking more closely at why these most basic of rules and propositions can seem so arbitrary. In one of his more outspoken moments Wittgenstein said: 'Suppose someone says, "That space is three-dimensional is a matter of experience." What experiments would be made? Should we hold up three sticks at right angles and say, "Obviously we can't put another stick in at right angles to these"? What rot!'³⁶

Why is this rot? Our suspicions should be aroused by the words 'Obviously' and 'can't'. Because it is by *definition* that we cannot put in another stick at right angles. Experience does not teach us the definition of a right angle. The 'can't' is logical; it is not like saying 'You can't put any more people in that car', which might be a matter of experience. The two examples are clearly different. It is not as though there is something that we cannot do. Rather there is nothing that we would call 'putting another stick in at right angles to these'.

Much the same point is made by Wittgenstein with another example, that of turning a matchstick through 180 degrees twice to show that it ends up facing the same way.

[I]f I say I showed you that turning the match through 180 [degrees] twice brings it back to the same position – isn't this just a matter of definition?

... [I]f you hold out the match and turn it round, if you say you are 'demonstrating something' – I don't know what you're demonstrating. You're turning a match.³⁷

This raises the question of whether logic is just something we invent, to which I will return.

In the same lecture Wittgenstein provides fuel for a variety of sceptical doubts. He starts off sounding like an anti-realist of some sort. Referring to an article in which G.H. Hardy had suggested that some reality corresponds to mathematical propositions, Wittgenstein says, 'Taken literally, this seems to mean nothing at all – *what* reality? I don't know what this means.'³⁸ And later on he asks, 'What is "reality"? We think of "reality" as something we can *point* to. It is *this, that*.'³⁹ But of course there is no reality we can point to which corresponds to mathematical propositions. So what kind of reality can there be to which they correspond?

In *Philosophical Grammar* Wittgenstein makes it plain that we should not, but tend to, confuse rules with empirical propositions. For instance, he compares the assertion that carbon and oxygen yield carbonic acid with the assertion that a double negation yields an affirmation. Here it looks as though we are describing a property of negation, when in fact we are simply stating a rule. '[T]he rule doesn't give a further description of negation, it constitutes negation.'⁴⁰ So we should beware of any treatment of such rules that makes it sound as if there is something that exists, some property of the universe, which the rule or procedure simply reflects or encapsulates.

It does not follow that everything is arbitrary, that there can be no possible justification of our rules of grammar, but there are some kinds of justification that we cannot find. For instance, language is not justified as a means to some end, say communication. My concentration on mathematics up to now has emphasized the respect in which language can be regarded as a calculus, a set of rules, like the rules of chess. This analogy will be challenged later, but for now I will concentrate on one important disanalogy. If the purpose of chess were to entertain and satisfy people, and if only chess could do this, then the rules of chess could be justified to the extent that they achieved this

end. Language, however, is not such a set of rules. 'Language is not defined for us as an arrangement fulfilling a definite purpose.'⁴¹ 'Language' is more of a family resemblance concept, including all the languages with which we are familiar (English, French, etc.) and whatever is analogous to them. It is not something used for a specific purpose. We cannot say that language is necessary for communication because the concepts 'language' and 'communication' are internally related in the sense that 'the concept of language *is contained in* the concept of communication'.⁴² So we cannot justify language (or grammar) by saying that it achieves its purpose, since in a sense it has no purpose.

In *Zettel* §331 Wittgenstein writes:

One is tempted to justify rules of grammar by sentences like 'But there really are four primary colours.' And the saying that the rules of grammar are arbitrary is directed against the possibility of this justification, which is constructed on the model of justifying a sentence by pointing to what verifies it.

... Doesn't one put the primary colours together because there is a similarity among them, or at least put *colours* together, contrasting them with e.g. shapes or notes, because there is a similarity among them? ... Just as the idea 'primary colour' is nothing else but 'blue or red or green or yellow' – is not the idea of that similarity too given by the four colours? Indeed, aren't they the same? – 'Then might one also take red, green and circular together?' – Why not?!

There is no reason why we cannot, but there are reasons why we do not. There are concepts that are unnatural to us (e.g. 'reddish-green'), and the same goes for rules of grammar (e.g. 'red, green and circular go together'). There are also language-games that we simply cannot learn (like the one described in *Zettel* §338).⁴³

It might help to look at a 'real life' example of how rules, language-games or concepts that are natural to us, and may seem to be 'absolutely correct', are far from natural for other people who, in spite of this, do not fail to realize something that we realize. In his book *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social foundations* A.R. Luria

documents cases of people who do not only share a different sense of what does and does not go together but also display a tendency to maintain that they are right ‘no matter what’, suggesting that they are working with a different set of rules. One example is that of Abdy Gap, ‘age sixty-two, illiterate peasant from remote village’,⁴⁴ who is presented with the series ‘bayonet–rifle–sword–knife’ and asked which one does not belong:

‘There’s nothing you can leave out here! The bayonet is part of the gun. A man’s got to wear the dagger on his left side and the rifle on the other.’

Again employs idea of necessity to group objects.

The principle of classification is explained: three of the objects can be used to cut but the rifle cannot.

‘It’ll shoot from a distance, but up close it can also cut.’

He is then given the series *finger–mouth–ear–eye* and told that three objects are found on the head the fourth on the body.

‘You say the finger isn’t needed here. But if a fellow is missing an ear, he can’t hear. All these are needed, they all fit in. If a man’s missing a finger, he can’t do a thing, not even move a bed.’

Applies same principle as in preceding response.

Principle is explained once again.

‘No, that’s not true, you can’t do it that way. You have to keep all these things together.’⁴⁵

This man is not necessarily stupid. We can imagine a stupid person responding in a similar way, but there is nothing here that the man misses. The classification natural to us is explained to him and he understands it. He simply does not adopt it. He even says, ‘You can’t do it that way.’ This is suggestive, not of a difference of intelligence, but of a different grammar, or sense of relevance, or perhaps even of lifestyle.

The fact that some concepts and rules come naturally to us while others are unnatural partly explains why we are not simply free to

choose our grammar and mathematics. If there are no absolutely right or wrong concepts or rules of grammar this does not of itself make for total arbitrariness.

We have seen some of the ways in which grammar is somewhat arbitrary. But it cannot be completely arbitrary, for as Rhees points out: ‘There could be no mathematical investigations if there were nothing by which our procedure is guided, and nothing by which our results could be checked.’⁴⁶

The mere fact that some procedures, rules and concepts are natural to us, while partially removing a kind of arbitrariness, does nothing to provide us with something by which to guide our procedures and check our results. Nothing to justify our rules of grammar and linguistic practices. Nature, or empirical reality, is related to this kind of justification, however.

Here we are back to the ‘very general facts of nature’ Wittgenstein talks about. Some of these are facts of nature in a straightforward sense, like the fact that more things in the world are red than just the tips of certain leaves in autumn⁴⁷ and the fact that cheese does not regularly expand or shrink to any dramatic degree.⁴⁸ Others are more to do with human nature, though this distinction is not a clear one because we human beings are part of nature in general. It is this second type of fact that is perhaps of most importance. Hence in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* part I §142 Wittgenstein says: ‘What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of man: not curiosities however, but rather observations on facts which no one has doubted and which have only gone unremarked because they are always before our eyes.’

Returning to *Zettel* and the colour example, we find Wittgenstein saying the following:

354. I want to say that there is a geometrical gap, not a physical one, between green and red.

355. But doesn’t anything correspond to it? I do not deny that. (And suppose it were merely our habituation to *these* concepts, to these language-games? But I am not saying that it is so.) If we teach a human being such and such a technique by means of

examples, – that he then proceeds like this and not like *that* in a particular new case, or that in this case he gets stuck, and thus that this and not that is the ‘natural’ continuation for him: this of itself is an extremely important fact of nature.

Of course this is an important fact of nature. But is this the kind of fact that will ease our discomfort at the thought that language might not correspond to reality, or to the facts? Not obviously, but we can see how language has some sort of basis in nature. We ought to examine what sort of basis this is.

One might think that it is a logical basis, that nature or the world provides a logical foundation for language: a foundation which meets the necessary preconditions for the existence of language. At times it can look as though Wittgenstein is suggesting something like this, as we saw above in the discussion of Stroll’s foundationalist reading of *On Certainty*.

Someone might want to say that language must be meaningful, that for language to have meaning is for it to have a use, and that therefore it is a logical requirement that our language be useful, or capable of being used. And the usefulness of a language depends on the nature of the world in which it is to be used. Therefore language is logically dependent on the nature of the physical world, which is its foundation.

Such a person might want to quote Wittgenstein to support this argument. For instance, in *Zettel* §350 we find:

It is as if our concepts involved a scaffolding of facts.

That would presumably mean: If you imagine certain facts otherwise, describe them otherwise than the way they are, then you can no longer imagine the application of certain concepts, because the rules for their application have no analogue in the new circumstances.

Surely language does depend on certain facts. We have seen that our concepts and linguistic practices are dependent on facts about the world and about human beings?⁴⁹ However, there is no *logical* dependence. This is made clear by Wittgenstein in §351 of *Zettel*: ‘If

humans were not in general agreed about the colours of things, if undetermined cases were not exceptional, then our concept of colour could not exist.’ No: – our concept *would* not exist.

Clearly then it would be a mistake to claim Wittgenstein as a supporter of the argument outlined above.

So what kind of dependence or correspondence is there? In his *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein says:

If you say, ‘Some reality corresponds to the mathematical proposition that $21 \times 14 = 294$ ’, then I would say: Yes, reality, in the sense of experiential empirical reality *does* correspond to this. For example, the central reality that it can all be seen at a glance. In such a case as 21×14 nothing is easier than to lay out 21 rows of 14 matches and then count them; and then there is no doubt at all that *all of us* would get the same result. This is an experiential result, and it is immensely important.⁵⁰

If we are going to talk about ‘responsibility to reality’ we should notice two ways in which, say, mathematics can be responsible. In one sense a proposition of mathematics can be responsible to others, if it follows from ‘certain principles and laws of deduction . . . But it is a totally different thing if we ask, “And now what’s *all* this responsible to?”’⁵¹

We go wrong if we treat rules of grammar like empirical propositions, just as we would go wrong if we treated mathematics as a whole like any *particular* expression in mathematics.

Suppose you had to say to what reality this – ‘There is no reddish-green’ – is responsible.

Where is the reality corresponding to the proposition ‘There is no reddish-green’? (This is entirely parallel to Hardy’s ‘reality’.) – It makes it look the same as ‘In this room there is nothing yellowish-green.’ This is of practically the same appearance – but its use is as different as hell.⁵²

The difference is that ‘There is no reddish-green’ is a *rule*, not a statement of empirical fact. The correspondence between rules and reality is entirely different from that between sentences and reality.

The correspondence is between this rule and such facts as that we do not normally make a black by mixing a red and a green; that if you mix a red and a green you get a colour which is ‘dirty’, and dirty colours are difficult to remember. All sorts of facts, psychological and otherwise.⁵³

The ‘justification’ of rules of grammar, like the justification of concepts, is entirely different from that of sentences. A given proposition in mathematics may be justified by reference to other principles and axioms within mathematics, but the whole of mathematics cannot be justified in this way. Likewise, a grammatical rule may be justified by its practical usefulness and its naturalness to us. A particular rule might be changed if it ceased to be useful or natural to us. Wittgenstein gives the example of changing the rule that says the words ‘I’m cutting red into bits’ is nonsense, so that these words become a meaningful expression:

If we do give a sense to the set of words ‘I’m cutting red into bits’ how do we do it? – We can indeed turn it into quite different things; an empirical proposition, a proposition of arithmetic (like $2 + 2 = 4$), an unproved theorem of mathematics (like Goldbach’s conjecture), an exclamation, and other things. So I’ve a free choice: how is it bounded? That’s hard to say – by various types of utility, and by the expression’s formal similarity to certain primitive forms of proposition; and all these boundaries are blurred.⁵⁴

But the whole of grammar cannot be changed in this way. We can change particular rules and principles: we cannot just change the whole language or grammar. Nor can we justify grammar as a whole. Justification occurs only within a system or language-game. The system or language itself cannot be justified from the inside, and there is no such thing as getting outside to judge it. So it makes no sense to condemn grammar as arbitrary, nor to defend it as non-arbitrary.

It is worth noting now that the idea of language as a system, which I have just used, can be misleading. Even when speaking of language as a calculus, Wittgenstein emphasizes that the use of language

should be seen as part of our life, not as something static and independent of us. '[W]hat is called "language" is something made up of heterogeneous elements and the way it meshes with life is infinitely various', he writes.⁵⁵ Rhees suggests a way of getting out of the idea that language is a system. He recommends 'emphasizing that speaking and writing belong to intercourse with other people. The signs get their life there, and that is why language is not just a mechanism.'⁵⁶ To ask whether grammar is arbitrary is to treat it as something independent of us that can be isolated and examined or judged. But grammar is no such animal, and so the question is misguided.

The problems we started with, then, seem to have been resolved. Wittgenstein cannot be committed to a pragmatism that attempts to justify grammar by reference to its usefulness, because he does not seek to justify grammar at all. Grammar is no more invented or arbitrary than is walking on two legs.⁵⁷ Or perhaps we should think of it like this:

So is the calculus something we adopt arbitrarily? No more so than the fear of fire, or the fear of a raging man coming at us.

'Surely the rules of grammar by which we act and operate are not arbitrary!' Very well; why then does a man think in the way he does, why does he go through these activities of thought?⁵⁸

No reason can be given, but 'arbitrary' is not the word to describe these phenomena. This perhaps sounds all a little too neat and certain. To that extent I have possibly overstated the case. The point of saying 'Grammar is arbitrary' (and there is a point) is to combat the tendency to believe that there is some determinate or absolute logic of the world against which to measure the logic of our language. The point of saying 'Grammar is non-arbitrary' is to combat the various species of scepticism that raise their heads when we say that grammar is arbitrary. As long as we do not get too dogmatic about it we should be all right. But that is not to say that there is no truth to express. Just that it is difficult to express it without blundering into error.

We have seen, then, that there is a sense in which grammar is not arbitrary, in which there is some foundation to our use of language, including our use of such important concepts as truth. However, we

have also seen good reason not to speak of foundations here, and that in some sense grammar is arbitrary. Conway emphasizes the first of these observations and attempts to draw some significant moral conclusions from it. I have argued against this that no particular ethical view follows from Wittgenstein's philosophical work on language. This issue is worth looking at in more detail, though, given the apparently ethical aim of his work, which we looked at in Chapter 1. In the next chapter I will consider Wittgenstein's ethical views and the question whether his philosophy has any implications for ethics.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, §559.
2. Stanley Cavell *Must We Mean What We Say?* Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1969, p. 52, quoted in John McDowell 'Non-cognitivism and Rule-following' in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds) *The New Wittgenstein* Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 43.
3. See for instance Richard Rorty *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1979, p. 317.
4. Avrum Stroll *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty* Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1994.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
7. See *ibid.*: 'Certainty is thus not a matter of reflection about the door but a way of acting with respect to it.'
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 167 and 169.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
10. See *ibid.*, p. 176.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 180–1. Apparently Stroll has in mind *On Certainty* §209: 'The existence of the earth is rather part of the whole *picture* which forms the starting-point of belief for me.' Here, though, Wittgenstein says that the existence of the earth (not the world) is only part of a picture of the world, and it is this picture that is the starting-point of belief. Compare

this with §141: 'When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions.' It seems incorrect to take Wittgenstein as saying that one proposition, or part of the world-picture we acquire as children, is more fundamental than another.

15. Wittgenstein makes clear the difficulty that he is having expressing his thoughts accurately in several places in *On Certainty*. See, for instance, §358.
16. Stroll has questioned, in conversation, my wanting to call this elementary science, but otherwise he accepts this characterization of his view.
17. Stroll *Moore and Wittgenstein*, p. 171.
18. D.Z. Phillips *Faith after Foundationalism*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1995, p. 123.
19. Gertrude D. Conway *Wittgenstein on Foundations* Humanities Press International, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1989.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 60. Here Conway cites *Philosophical Investigations* §25, pp. 231 and 174, and *Zettel*, pp. 532ff. and 540ff.
23. *Culture and Value*, p. 74e, from 1948.
24. *Zettel* §219.
25. See *On Certainty* §358 and §532, for instance.
26. Conway *Wittgenstein on Foundations*, p. 84.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
28. Stanley Cavell *The Claim of Reason*, p. 178, quoted *ibid.*, p. 152.
29. Conway *Wittgenstein on Foundations*, p. 168.
30. D.Z. Phillips's entry in *Philosophical Investigations* 24: 2 (April 2001): 152. This is a special issue of the journal in which entries are untitled, since all answer the same questions about Wittgenstein.
31. See Rudolf Haller *Questions on Wittgenstein* Routledge, London, 1988, p. 123.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
33. See *ibid.*, p. 129.
34. Rush Rhees *Discussions of Wittgenstein* Schocken Books, New York, 1970, p. 54.
35. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Grammar* ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Peter Winch, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1974, p. 185, footnote.
36. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics Cambridge, 1939* from the notes of R. G. Bosanquet, Norman

Malcolm, Rush Rhees, and Yorick Smythies, ed. Cora Diamond, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, and London, 1989, lecture 25, p. 245.

37. Ibid., pp. 245–6.

38. Ibid., p. 239.

39. Ibid., p. 240.

40. *Philosophical Grammar*, p. 52.

41. Ibid., p. 190.

42. Ibid., p. 193.

43.

338. If someone were to say: ‘Red is complex’ – we could not guess what he was alluding to, what he was trying to do with this sentence. But if he says ‘This chair is complex’, we may indeed not know straight off what kind of complexity he is talking about, but we can straight away think of more than one sense for his assertion.

Now what kind of fact am I drawing attention to here?

At any rate it is an *important* fact. – We are not familiar with any technique, to which that sentence might be alluding.

339. We are here describing a language-game that *we cannot learn*.

44. A.R. Luria *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 59.

45. Ibid., p. 60.

46. Rush Rhees ‘On Continuity: Wittgenstein’s Ideas, 1938’ in Rush Rhees *Discussions of Wittgenstein* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970, p. 115.

47. See Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* Volume I §47.

48. See *Philosophical Investigations* §142.

49. We might think in this connection of *Philosophical Investigations* § 142, in which Wittgenstein writes:

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

50. *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* lecture 25, p. 246.

51. Ibid., p. 240.

52. Ibid., p. 243.
53. Ibid., pp. 244–5.
54. *Philosophical Grammar*, p. 126.
55. Ibid., p. 66.
56. Ludwig Wittgenstein *The Blue and Brown Books* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1969, with preface by Rush Rhees, p. xiii.
57. See *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* Volume II §435.
58. *Philosophical Grammar*, p. 110.

Ethics

At the conclusion of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person. That, I believe, is something very important. Here nothing further can be substantiated. I can only step forth as an individual and speak in the first person.¹

Imagine a left-wing Freudian, F, at a cocktail party who gets into conversation with a right-wing conspiracy theorist, G. F starts to ask G questions about his childhood and his dreams, and perhaps encourages him to do some free association. As long as this 'psychoanalysis' is going on, F will never say 'You're mad' to G, nor anything like it. Still, the way the conversation has gone indicates that F suspects G of being psychologically disturbed. So we can distinguish between what F will say (to G) and what F suspects (about G in particular and about mental disorders generally). We might also wonder whether F would have had the same suspicions about G had she shared G's right-wing views. Whether a conspiracy theorist is regarded as paranoid or insightful is likely to vary according to one's political persuasion.

The point of this story is to underline some distinctions that might be useful in thinking about Wittgenstein. It might do us good to keep separate (1) what he can be expected to say in his philosophical works, given his conception of what philosophy is and how it should be done; (2) the suspicions about particular philosophical problems and those who suffer from them which guide what he says; and (3) his purely personal views, which may or may not influence these suspicions. Category 2 will include both particular ideas or suspicions, about rules, language or the mind, say (at least concerning what it is wrong to say about these things), and general ideas about the nature of philosophical problems and how to solve them.

I believe that there has been a tendency for commentators to mix these categories up, and to read stuff from category 1 as evidence (and nothing more) of the suspicions of category 2, which are then misrepresented as theories. Therapeutic remarks are not just symptoms of something else, though; they have their own purpose and importance. And suspicions are not theories. What I am calling a suspicion here would only ever be used as a rule of thumb, even by someone who felt certain that it was always likely to be useful, because it is a methodological guideline, not the goal of philosophical reflection (which is clarity, not the advancing of theses).

So, what does this have to do with ethics? If we are interested in Wittgenstein's ethics, or in whatever moral philosophy we might derive from his thinking, we need to make sure we know which Wittgenstein we are talking about. The Wittgenstein of category 1, rather like a Freudian therapist, is quite deliberately uncontroversial and nonjudgemental. He spouts 'nothing but boring truisms', and if anyone disagrees with a remark he takes it back.² Wittgenstein 2 is more interesting, and Wittgenstein 3 (the personal Wittgenstein) is, at least sometimes to some people, seemingly crazy. It is the 'mad' Wittgenstein that I will look at first in this chapter, and try to see whether his madness (if that is what it is) infects or invalidates what is said by either the suspicious/'theoretical' Wittgenstein (2) or the trite Wittgenstein (1).

I will suggest later with regard to Wittgensteins 1 and 2 that truly Wittgensteinian moral philosophy is an impossibility or contradiction in terms. I will argue also that at least in terms of his attitude towards ethics, Wittgenstein's thinking changed little during his career. Just what his thinking on moral philosophy was I intend to make clear, but roughly speaking it was that we should not do it at all. Certainly we should philosophize morally, and for Wittgenstein this does not just mean, say, not violating others' rights, which it is hard to imagine any philosophy doing. Rather, philosophizing ethically involves seriousness, honesty, perhaps even courage: characteristics that are not always present in professional philosophical work. In this sense we should do moral philosophy, but we should not, he would say, try to philosophize *about* morality. To understand why

he thought this way it will help if we look at both his personal moral outlook and his ideas about what philosophy is and is for.

The structure of this chapter therefore is as follows. First, I will set out some of the difficulties involved in working out Wittgenstein's views on ethics. Secondly, I will look at Wittgenstein's character and personal ethical views (the 'mad' Wittgenstein). After this I will return to the question of what Wittgenstein considered philosophy – rightly understood – to be, and then look in detail at what he wrote, and did not write, about ethics throughout his career. I argue that Wittgenstein changed his mind little, if at all, on the question of moral philosophy during his career. I will explain how this view is compatible with a noticeable trend in Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics, namely the disappearance from his later work of explicit discussion of ethics. Finally I will show how all this relates to the few remarks Wittgenstein made about standard moral philosophy, explaining what he meant and how this is consistent with my attempt to take Wittgenstein's methodological remarks at face value.

Problems

Writing about Wittgenstein and ethics is problematic for several reasons. He wrote too little and too much on the subject, ethics are both too central and too marginal to his work, and what he had to say about ethics is in some ways unconventional and yet in others quite orthodox. There are other problems too, but these are enough to be going on with. Let me try to explain these paradoxical claims.

He wrote too little about ethics in the sense that none of the books that have been published in his name are about moral philosophy. We have a treatise on logic and philosophy, the language- and psychology-oriented *Philosophical Investigations*, works on the foundations of mathematics, the philosophy of psychology, colour, and the nature of certainty, but only one short lecture on ethics, written at a time of transition in his thought. He wrote too much on ethics in the sense that the *Tractatus* was avowedly (although not apparently) an ethical work; most, if not all, of his earlier and later work relates to

the concerns of the *Tractatus*. He also claimed to see every problem from a religious point of view and did not distinguish sharply between the ethical and the religious. So everything he wrote is relevant to those interested in Wittgenstein's ethics or the relation between Wittgenstein's philosophy and ethics. In this sense ethics are too central to his work to make life easy for the Wittgenstein scholar or the ethicist trying to cull new ideas from his work. However, ethics are also too marginal in the sense that he wrote so little explicitly about them. The *Investigations*, for instance, makes only a few passing references. In the index (which admittedly cannot always be relied upon) the words 'good' and 'ethics' appear only once and the reference in each case is to §77, which quotes 'good' merely as an example of a word with a family of uses. The point is more about meaning in general than ethics. 'God' appears four times, all in connection with the philosophy of mind or language. The word 'value' does not appear at all.

That what Wittgenstein said about ethics is unconventional is perhaps already evident, given that he wrote a book on logic and said it was ethical, a work whose sentences are self-confessed nonsense (which of course adds a further twist to the problems I am describing). Arguments for or against utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, the form of the good, moral-sense theory, and so on, are scarcely to be found in Wittgenstein's writings, and not at all in anything he intended for publication. A certain unconventionality in Wittgenstein's ethics is further suggested by the fact that interpretations of what he wrote on the subject have varied so widely. Sabina Lovibond claims him as a champion for her left Hegelianism, while Bernard Williams sees a need to encourage Wittgensteinians not to be so conservative.³ Biographies of Wittgenstein are full of reports of his unorthodox views and behaviour, several of which I will consider below.

Wittgenstein's orthodoxy is perhaps harder to illustrate, but he was old-fashioned, if that is the right expression, to the point of feeling out of sympathy with the whole spirit of modern Western civilization, and there are remarkable similarities between things Wittgenstein says and things G.K. Chesterton says in his book *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith*, which defends traditional Christian beliefs.⁴ This last point might appear to be a rather weak piece of evidence, but we will see

that even Wittgenstein's most eccentric claims bear a family resemblance to ideas from several Christian thinkers and popular poets.

Further problems for making sense of Wittgenstein's views on ethics relate to the nature of his published works. The only book he had published in his lifetime – the *Tractatus* – consists of sentences that, according to the book's author, do not make sense. It would be difficult and dangerous to draw conclusions about ethics, or anything else, from such self-confessedly meaningless sentences. So should we base what we say on the book as a whole rather than on its parts? Perhaps, but it is not clear exactly what this would mean. On the other hand, there are further dangers in relying on other sources found under Wittgenstein's name. Most of these works are collections of notes, and who would want to be judged on the basis of their notes, or of anything but finished works?

All this is by way of warning. The subject of Wittgenstein and ethics is a difficult one. It is one, however, about which it is possible to say something. What I will do in what follows is point to similarities in remarks Wittgenstein made about ethics at various times in his life, consider briefly some of the changes that occurred in his philosophy and then reconsider what he might have said and meant in the light of these. First of all, if we bear in mind the story of F and G, it will help to look at Wittgenstein's personal ethics.

Against peace and freedom

A well-known anecdote, told by Joachim Schulte and Ray Monk, has Wittgenstein sneering at Bertrand Russell for going to a meeting of the World Organization for Peace and Freedom (or some such thing) and exclaiming, in response to some self-defence by Russell, that he would prefer 'by far' a society for war and slavery.⁵ Even if he was joking, his objection to Russell's society still remains to be explained. And there is some reason to think that he might not have been joking. His personal ethics were quite unorthodox. He did, after all, hope it was true that Ivan the Terrible had the architect of the Cathedral of St Basil blinded. He also referred to the leaders of the anti-nuclear movement (sometimes called the peace movement) as 'scum'. He also seems to

have admired the practice of human sacrifice. I will say more about these strange views below. In this case, though, it seems much more likely that his remark was a rejection of what he perceived as Russell's liberal self-righteousness and perhaps naivety in thinking that the means to peace and freedom is a society for the promotion of peace and freedom. Russell's thoughtless self-importance is a more likely object of Wittgenstein's contempt than his noble goals. It would be mad genuinely to support a society for war and slavery, after all.

Wittgenstein, it ought to go without saying, was not mad. The very limited extent to which he was pro-destruction is made clear in the following passage from 1946:

The hysterical fear over the atom bomb now being experienced, or at any rate expressed, by the public almost suggests that at last something really salutary has been invented. The fright at least gives the impression of a really effective bitter medicine. I can't help thinking: if this didn't have something good about it the *philistines* wouldn't be making an outcry. But perhaps this too is a childish idea. Because really all I can mean is that the bomb offers a prospect of the end, the destruction, of an evil, – our disgusting soapy water science. And certainly that's not an unpleasant thought; but who can say what would come *after* this destruction? The people now making speeches against producing the bomb are undoubtedly the *scum* of the intellectuals, but even that does not prove beyond question that what they abominate is to be welcomed.⁶

This is not so much pro-death or anti-peace as it is anti-science, and not just any science is attacked but a particular 'soapy-water' kind. This violent objection to certain aspects of modern life is not so different from that of the popular, Christian poet John Betjeman, who wrote in one of his best-known poems: 'Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough / It isn't fit for humans now', and wished (or pretended to wish for) the destruction of all that was artificial there, including the 'tinned minds' of its inhabitants.⁷ Perhaps the 'soapy-water science' to which Wittgenstein objects is the science that produces these minds. If so, Wittgenstein is neither alone nor insane in opposing it.

What, though, of his seeming admiration for blinding an architect and for human sacrifice? In 1949, when Wittgenstein was in Ireland, he said to M.O'C. Drury:

The Cathedral of St Basil in the Kremlin is one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen. There is a story – I don't know whether it's true but I hope it is – that when Ivan the Terrible saw the completed cathedral he had the architect blinded so that he would never design anything more beautiful.⁸

Rush Rhees remembers a similar conversation in which Wittgenstein referred to the blinding as a '*wonderful* way of showing' the Tsar's admiration, and said that he hoped the story was true.⁹ If it is true, then Ivan the Terrible put his admiration of a building above any concern he might have had for a man's eyes. There is *something* wonderful about such a strong reaction to architectural beauty, but the Tsar's priorities seem terribly wrong. Wittgenstein does not say they were right, of course, but he does show a disturbing lack of sympathy for the architect. He seems to hear the story from an almost inhuman point of view. This might be called seeing the world from a God's-eye point of view, or under the aspect of eternity, but we can only speculate as to whether Wittgenstein would have agreed with such a description. Certainly his attitude is more aesthetic than humanist.

The same could be said of his attitude toward ritual killing. We can see something of this attitude in the story of the King of the Wood of Nemi, which Wittgenstein called 'dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic'.¹⁰ The King of the Wood gets his position by slaying the current priestly guardian of the sacred oak, whereupon he takes up the job of protecting both the tree and himself with his sword. If Wittgenstein had called Ivan the Terrible's act dreadful, horrible and tragic, as well as wonderful, he might have sounded more human. Perhaps he took the human angle for granted.

Rush Rhees tells us that

During one of his visits to Swansea in the early years of the war (1942, I think) he had seen in some cinema a 'documentary' film of German planes bombing Polish towns or villages (and perhaps troop positions, I do not remember). What struck him was that

there was a musical accompaniment of Wagner's music. And this, he said, brought out what was tragic in these actions of the German air force. By this he did not mean, of course, that they were producing 'tragic results' or 'tragic destruction' in the villages that were being bombarded. Still less did 'tragic' mean 'pitiful' or that we should feel sorry for them. His point was rather that the music enabled one to see the evil missions on which these pilots were engaged as something like the moves of the hero in a tragedy – moves which he makes 'in spite of himself', call it tragic inevitability or destruction (cf. *Antigone*, *Orestes* . . .) or how you will. Not that this in any sense justified what they were doing, but that when you view them in this way there is no question of what would be justified or what would not . . . When you view it as 'tragic' – then you have moved away from the question whether the policy was the right conclusion to draw from such and such deliberations, or whether it was the prudent course to take in view of the circumstances, or even . . . to ask whether it showed the consideration for other men that it might have shown.¹¹

It is tempting to see Wittgenstein's remarks in the above anecdotes as reflecting just such a move away from questions of right, prudence and even consideration for other people. And if one moves in that way, then of course there is no question of whether the tragic view is right, prudent or justly considerate. It is tempting also to link this with Wittgenstein's comment on music, to the effect that no one would be likely to understand Wittgenstein if they did not appreciate the importance that music had had in his life.¹² Some music does change one's perspective, making it more sublime or heavenly (or sublime-seeming). We know something about what music Wittgenstein listened to, but not much about how it made him feel, or think about things.¹³ So I will resist speculating more along these lines. It is enough that Wittgenstein's idiosyncratic comments can be read as compatible with sanity, and even a fairly traditional romanticism. The nature of Wittgenstein's romanticism will become clearer in the rest of this chapter, and in Chapter 5.

Two more lines of enquiry concerning Wittgenstein's (possible) personal beliefs are worth considering at this point, though. The first

has to do with G.E.M. Anscombe, Wittgenstein's friend and student, who argued famously that moral philosophy should not rely on concepts of rightness, prudence or Kantian notions of duty or proper respect for humanity.¹⁴ Anscombe suggests that most modern moral philosophy incoherently tries to rely on theism (for the concepts it uses) and to reject it (for methodological reasons of assuming as little as possible, or else from simple atheism). Concerns about what is permissible or forbidden in various circumstances make no sense without anyone who might do the permitting or forbidding. God used to fill this position, but if he does not exist, or is not methodologically acceptable, then nothing can be either permitted or forbidden. Nor, Anscombe argues, is it clear how it could be 'obligatory' or even 'right' or 'wrong'. It is at least possible that Wittgenstein would have agreed with this (there is certainly something Wittgensteinian about Anscombe's analysis of moral concepts), and perhaps for this reason he might have adopted something like the tragic view (which the Catholic Anscombe does not).

The second has to do with Wittgenstein's similarity with Christian writers such as Betjeman and G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton's similarities with Wittgenstein, which I touched on in Chapter 1, have been well documented by William Brenner, and have to do with their mutual appreciation of the wonderful. Doesn't everyone appreciate the wonderful? Not according to Chesterton. Atheists and materialists, he thinks, live in a little world (a tinned world, perhaps). Betjeman, a sort of ordinary-language poet, is surprisingly capable of tragedy (and all the more capable because of the element of surprise). We get a sort of God's-eye view, and an appreciation of it, in the poem 'Beside the Seaside'. After 194 lines describing middle-class English holidays, we get this:

When England is not England, when mankind
Has blown himself to pieces. Still the sea,
Consolingly disastrous, will return . . .¹⁵

The natural and the rooted (England) is valued here, not the stupid, destructive people or their new country (the England that is not England).

This reminds me of Wittgenstein's attitude towards the darkness of his times, of which totalitarianism and genocide were more symptoms than essential features, products of an infatuation with technology. The totalitarian state can be thought of as government as machine; the concentration camp a production-line of death. The rejection of the kind of life one might find in rural Ireland, Norway or Russia, in favour of newfangled (and murderous) designs for living disgusted Wittgenstein. In such darkness he saw little hope for philosophy, which could itself amount to no more than a technique since the death of metaphysics. As he wrote:

The nimbus of philosophy has been lost. For we now have a method of doing philosophy, and can speak of skilful philosophers . . . But once a method has been found the opportunities for the expression of personality are correspondingly restricted. The tendency of our age is to restrict such opportunities; this is characteristic of an age of declining culture or without culture.¹⁶

To use his new technique, though, one need not share Wittgenstein's tragic vision, and its product is not the same as the product of a Wagnerian score. Before we look at what its product is, let us finish our consideration of Wittgenstein's personal ethics.

If one really wanted a life lived in answer to the question 'What would Ludwig do?' then one's life would be rather difficult, and not just because Wittgenstein liked to 'go the bloody hard way'.¹⁷ There would, of course, be the financial hardship caused by giving away one's money, having to cadge off friends, and live in a remote Norwegian hut (albeit in very splendid isolation on a beautiful fjord). The difficulty I have in mind is more the theoretical one of knowing just what he would do in another time and place, not to mention whether he would have been the same person in different circumstances.

Wittgenstein's 'accept and endure' stoicism might seem to imply a life of pure moral passivity, but that is clearly not how he lived.¹⁸ One might flesh out, as I have tried to do, the ethics-related anecdotes from his life with references to likeminded people such as Chesterton and Betjeman, but then there would be a danger of turning Wittgenstein into a Christian, which he was not.¹⁹ The very idea of accepting

life or the world is hard to interpret, since in one sense we cannot but accept what comes our way. This is one reason perhaps why Wittgenstein resorted to such metaphors as changing the shape of one's life to fit into life's mould.²⁰ We cannot determine what will come our way, but we can determine our attitude toward it. Describing or justifying what one takes to be the right attitude, though, is no easy matter, and it seems almost impossible to know how it will show itself in our behaviour.

Consider Chesterton's views on sexual fidelity. His view is that one person is quite enough for anyone and that those who think otherwise are blind to the wonders of each human being.²¹ This idea strikes me as being Wittgensteinian (although I can also imagine Wittgenstein revelling puritanically in monotonous, not wonderful, monogamy, or preferring celibacy). But where does full appreciation of local wonders end and narrow-minded refusal of the world begin? Romanticism, even romantic puritanism, is one thing, but xenophobia and physical coldness are something else. Chesterton would surely have hated the homosexual promiscuity that Wittgenstein is alleged (not very plausibly) to have indulged in for a while. But is it impossible that this would be one way to express one's appreciation of the wonders of the flesh? After all, Wittgenstein does say that both destroying a manuscript and reverently preserving it are natural ways to express one's respect for it and its author.

Think also of food. Wittgenstein was known to insist that he be served only porridge when visiting friends, or to say that he would eat anything as long as it was the same thing every day. Is this the behaviour of a happy man, or a good guest? It could be. It is not hard to make porridge. But it smacks of puritanism and a refusal of certain pleasures that a host might want to give to or share with a guest. This kind of refusal is worryingly close to the attitude of people who will not try foreign food. I personally find this attitude disgusting, but I suppose it is not inherently so. I could not prove that there is any cowardice, xenophobia or culpable pessimism behind it.

What we have here is a kind of existentialism, I think. Not the Sartrean idea that we can make of ourselves what we will. It is rather the idea of the Kierkegaardian conscience doing that than which it can do no other. There might even be some Nietzschean determinism at

work, and no Sartrean free will at all. The Wittgensteinian approach is to look and think and wonder, and do what one's conscience dictates. Whether this wonder will lead us to spend a lifetime exploring the delights of porridge or, instead, to try as many different foods as possible, or, of course, some course of action between these extremes, one cannot say. On this, Wittgenstein might say, there is no more to be said.

Wittgenstein's method

Let us now turn to Wittgenstein's innovative approach to philosophy, and the relevance it might have for ethics. In the beginning, roughly speaking, all academia was philosophy. Since then, as specific areas of enquiry have been defined, and methods for solving their problems devised, various sciences have broken away from philosophy. What is left is the residue of problems that cannot be solved (at least not yet), in other words pseudo-problems (and science waiting to happen). Anyone with the right kind of attitude toward life, Wittgenstein seems to have believed, will not worship at the altar of science and, if they are like Wittgenstein, will not worship at the altar of a church (or synagogue, etc.) either, but will feel drawn to something like worship all the same. These people turn to philosophy. But philosophy is the study of problems that are not real. It is trash that seems of value only to the best, or most thoughtful, people. So it is important, but it is nonsense. What is not nonsense is just more science, and that is of no interest to the true philosopher. The true philosopher's job, then, is to deal with the nonsense and his or her attraction to it. Anyone who can just ignore it is not a true philosopher.

What is it then to deal with nonsense? It is to be honest with it, to see it, and show it, as what it is. This, Wittgenstein seems to think, is the only honest and psychologically healthy approach to the problem. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein tries to deal with all nonsense at a stroke, as it were by blowing up the rubbish heap. Later he realized that this did not work, and he spent his life wandering and mapping the border territory between sense and nonsense. His real contribution, he claimed, was his techniques for dealing with nonsense.²²

These techniques aim at intellectual clarity and presuppose, of course, that philosophical problems are not real problems. Furthermore, any attempt at a solution to such a non-problem must also be wrong, so all philosophical theories must be wrong. The only exceptions would be if the theory in question were in fact scientific and not philosophical (this might happen in the philosophy of mind, or language, say), or if the 'theory' were some undeniable platitude or truism.

Wittgenstein's basic technique might be called looking around. Traditional philosophy looks at concepts more or less in isolation. Paradigmatic cases would be Augustine's meditation on time and Descartes's meditations on his mind and on God. It is assumed in such work that time, mind, and so on, are peculiar and mysterious kinds of thing or stuff. Philosophy mistakes itself for a weird science. (When questions about time, say, become genuinely scientific the (bad) aura of mystery and excitement goes away.) Wittgenstein does not assume that 'time' is not the name of an object. Nor does he argue or prove that it is not. Instead he gets us (or tries to) to look around and see or think for ourselves. If it is an object, it can be studied scientifically.

One way to get a sense of the details of Wittgenstein's method (apart from reading his work) is to look at the chapters in Beth Savickey's book on *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*.²³ These cover attention to ordinary language (what we actually say and think, so that we can see what taking on a philosophical commitment might cost us), the asking of questions (to see whether we really think what philosophizing makes us think we think), the use of language-games (Wittgenstein likes to make up uses of language to show how different things would be if we meant literally what some theory says we mean, or to bring out features of our language that are hard to deny but which tend to be overlooked by philosophical theories), attention to particular cases (so that generalizations do not blind us to reality) and the use of analogies (to get us to look at things differently).

None of this proves that the philosophy of, say, Plato, Descartes or Locke is wrong. We are left free to accept their ideas if we still feel so inclined after the Wittgensteinian investigation is over. But someone who did cling to such ideas after all the facts Wittgenstein brings

together have been fully considered would perhaps have not a philosophical theory but more a kind of religious belief, and Wittgenstein is not out to attack that. In *Culture and Value* he writes that

It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition; but it is equally true that we *always* eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of all our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition.²⁴

Whether a way of thinking is respectable or superstitious depends partly on how deep it is, and it is one goal of grammatical investigation to test the depth of our beliefs. Of course it is a kind of methodological presupposition of Wittgenstein's that all philosophical theories are misguided, but it is not part of the application of the method to insist that this is so. The method is designed to expose nonsense, so it is no more inherently biased than, say, dialectic, which is in fact a similar, but less varied, method. Being able to apply it successfully, though, requires having a 'nose for nonsense', which the Platonist, *et alii*, will not have (as Wittgenstein sees things).

Where then does Wittgenstein's method take us? It might seem that the answer is 'not very far'. After all, Wittgenstein's method can be characterized as saying only what everyone will admit. This is not very different from the standard philosophical approach of starting with a common intuition and then proceeding by careful logical steps, each of which will surely be accepted by any rational person. Of course people make mistakes in applying this method, but so too might they in trying to apply Wittgenstein's method. The difference is that Wittgenstein might be more rigorous than most about choosing intuitions that are universally, not just widely, shared, and that he would not attempt to proceed from there by logical steps. He eschews inference. (Or at least he never insists that one thing follows from another, however much he might invite the reader, often by interrogation, to make a certain inference.) Instead he would look around carefully at how any given theory might play out in practice. This again is not very different from the kind of things normal moral philosophers do with each others' theories. We should expect

Wittgenstein to be sceptical, to look for awkward counterexamples to any theory, and to feel no need to offer an alternative ethical theory of his own. In this sense he might be considered an anti-theorist, perhaps even a particularist. But what is left after philosophical investigation is personal, not philosophical, so we are back here to the existentialist or 'mad' Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's stomach-aches

As well as the personal Wittgenstein, with his idiosyncratic ideas about civilization and the bomb, and the philosophical methodological Wittgenstein, with his ideas about linguistic analysis and grammatical investigation, we have the tempted, metaphysical Wittgenstein and the liberating words he needs (or suspects that he needs) to show him the way out of the fly-bottle. The metaphysician must heal himself. Wittgenstein likens the thoughts that tempt him to stomach-aches, which he presents to his readers only in order to demonstrate his method for dealing with them.²⁵ An ethical 'stomach-ache' might be Wittgensteinian, but it would not be something he would endorse.

In this section I should look at the implications for ethics of the suspicions that must guide Wittgenstein's method in practice. All that can really be said about them, though, is that Wittgenstein would be suspicious of any and all ethical theories (but not religious beliefs or ethical views closer to religion than philosophy or metaphysics). He *might* be more sympathetic to communitarian ideas than Platonist ones, since Platonism seems to be a target in the *Philosophical Investigations* and since communitarianism has been inspired in part by Wittgenstein himself. However, given his stated opposition to all philosophical theories, we should not at all think that communitarianism, or any other doctrine, follows from his work.

Nor should we simply assume that Wittgenstein would oppose, for instance, Platonist or realist views. He opposes confusion, after all, not any particular doctrines. And no doctrine, considered as a proposition or set of propositions, is inherently confused, just as no sentence is inherently meaningless. It all depends on what use it is given. Even if a given doctrine seems to be self-contradictory, some investigation

of the doctrine's adherents would be necessary in order to find out whether this contradiction was real or merely apparent. Given Wittgenstein's insistence that believing what he says in no way dictates what one's religious beliefs might be, then any belief that is religious in character should escape Wittgensteinian investigation unscathed. Wittgenstein said that the advantage of his philosophy 'is that if you believe, say, Spinoza or Kant, this interferes with what you can believe in religion; but if you believe me, nothing of the sort'.²⁶ Thus natural law theory might well be acceptable to Wittgenstein, at least if the believer is Catholic. Kantian deontology might be all right for Pietists. And so on. What matters is not the letter of the belief, but the character. We can discover nothing substantive about ethics, then, by merely following anti-theoretical suspicions.

The implications that Wittgenstein has for ethics therefore depend on which Wittgenstein, or which aspect of his life and work, we have in mind. Within a grammatical investigation we have both the voice, or voices, of temptation (Wittgenstein when he is wrong) and the non-confrontational words of the therapist (Wittgenstein when he sees clearly). Ethical views derived from the wrong Wittgenstein are not themselves necessarily wrong, but it would be a mistake to consider them Wittgensteinian in anything but a joke sense, just as theories derived exclusively from papers found in Marx's trash could not with a straight face be called Marxist. Ethical views derived from the sympathetic therapist will either distort what the therapist says or else be true to their nature as boring truisms (and questions) and thus be of no interest. Properly Wittgensteinian ethics, then, should be either ethics based on, or in line with, Wittgenstein's personal views, which are not as crazy as might be thought, or else should be derived somehow from the philosopher Wittgenstein's methodology and guiding suspicions. I will return to the question of what this could mean at the end of the chapter.

Continuity in Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics

If we are to consider what Wittgenstein as a philosopher thought about ethics we should look carefully at what he wrote on the subject,

and consider seriously the possibility that he might have changed his mind at some point between the early *Tractatus* and the later period of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In this section I will look at what he wrote about ethics and show that there is considerable continuity. In the next section I will consider the main difference with regard to ethics between the early and the late work.

In June 1916, very early in his philosophical career, Wittgenstein wrote a kind of summary of his ethics.

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?

I know that this world exists.

That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.

That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.

That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it.

That life is the world.

That my will penetrates the world.

That my will is good or evil.

Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.

The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.

And connect with this the comparison of God to a father.

To pray is to think about the meaning of life.

I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.

I can only make myself independent of the world – and so in a certain sense master it – by renouncing any influence on happenings.²⁷

No carefully formulated or explained ethical doctrine is to be found in the *Notebooks*, from which these remarks are taken. Wittgenstein wrestles with problems, changing his mind and repeating himself, reformulating earlier ideas. It is important, though, to get the flavour

of his early thinking, especially if we want to achieve a sense of continuity with his later writings. We must start at the beginning. To the quotation above, then, I will add these:

In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what 'being happy' *means*.

I am then, so to speak, in agreement with that alien will on which I appear dependent. That is to say: 'I am doing the will of God.'²⁸

(... in [a] sense ... a man *without* a will would not be alive.)

But can we conceive a being that isn't capable of Will at all, but only of Idea (of seeing for example)? In some sense this seems impossible. But if it were possible then there could also be a world without ethics.²⁹

Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic.³⁰

I keep on coming back to this: simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad. And if I *now* ask myself: But why should I live *happily*, then this of itself seems to me to be a tautological question; the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it *is* the only right life.

But this is really in some sense deeply mysterious! *It is clear* that ethics *cannot* be expressed!³¹

If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed.

If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed.

This throws light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin.³²

Similar remarks are made later in the *Tractatus*, such as 6.41 'The sense of the world must lie outside the world', and in *Culture and Value*, for instance, 'The good is outside the space of facts', from 1929 and, 'Troubles are like illnesses; you have to accept them: the worst thing you can do is rebel against them', from 1949.³³ Consider also: 'The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the

problem';³⁴ 'The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear';³⁵ and '... the experience of wondering at the existence of the world . . . is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle'.³⁶ The main themes in Wittgenstein's writings on ethics, then, seem to be as follows: goodness, value or meaning are not to be found in the world; living the right way involves acceptance of or agreement with the world, life, God's will or fate; one who lives this way will see the world as a miracle; there is no answer to the problem of life, the solution is the disappearance of the problem.

The disappearance of ethics

If there was consistency in Wittgenstein's ethical outlook it is not *obviously* reflected in his philosophical writing. As I have said, the *Tractatus* is supposed to be an ethical work, while there is no obvious reason to think of the *Investigations* in this way. I will try to say something about this change in this section.

Here are some striking passages from the *Tractatus*:

My fundamental idea is that the 'logical constants' are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts.³⁷

To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world.³⁸

The general form of the proposition is: This is how things stand.³⁹

I would like to say that something awful or awesome is being got at here, that there is an implication that there is no 'if . . . then' or 'therefore' in the world. There are no conclusions in the world, only facts. Everything in the world seems somehow two-dimensional. The totality of facts confronts us like a wall that we can either become part of (whatever that might mean) or bang our heads against. It is interesting to compare what Wittgenstein says about the general form of the proposition, which is supposed to mirror the form of the world, with his remarks in the *Notebooks*:

How things stand, is God.
 God is, how things stand.⁴⁰

Both God (or the world, how everything stands) and logic (and the propositions of which it is the form) seem implacable, fearsome.⁴¹ There is little one can say about such profundities, though. 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.'⁴²

This brings us to the importance of nonsense and the 'Lecture on Ethics'. In this lecture as, I have suggested, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says that 'no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value'.⁴³ An example of 'an absolute judgment of value' is the saying to someone who is happy to behave badly, 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better.'⁴⁴ Any such declaration tells you nothing about the world because no facts stand behind it, so it is nonsensical. Viewed disinterestedly, the facts themselves dictate no such value-judgement. So value is not in the world. And to try to go beyond the world is to try to go 'beyond significant language'.⁴⁵ Wittgenstein concludes that 'My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language.'⁴⁶

This seemingly hopeless effort is symptomatic of something for which Wittgenstein has the greatest respect, but it is not clear whether he regarded it as truly hopeless or not. He does say in the lecture that nonsensicality is of the essence of ethical and religious expressions,⁴⁷ but elsewhere he suggests that value *can* be expressed. We see this in the *Tractatus*, which itself is intended to serve an ethical purpose – it may contain nonsense but it is not itself intended as a meaningless work. We also see it around the same time as the lecture. In 1930 Wittgenstein wrote:

A work of art forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other; *we* may exalt it through our enthusiasm but that does not give anyone else the right to confront us with it . . .⁴⁸

The expressive power of art, in contrast to philosophy, is again implied a few years later in a remark from 1933–4:

I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.⁴⁹

This might help to explain why Wittgenstein appears to have written less and less about ethics as time went by. If only a work of art can show the value that cannot be put explicitly in words then perhaps philosophers should speak of value only in so far as they are artists.

This is not the whole story, however. The passage I quoted above from 1930 continues:

But it seems to me too that there is a way of capturing the world *sub specie aeternitatis* other than through the work of the artist. Thought has such a way – so I believe – it is as though it flies above the world and leaves it as it is – observing it from above, in flight.

A perspicuous overview is something Wittgenstein strove to achieve in his later work. Whether his intention in doing so was ethical is a question I considered in Chapter 1, but it is worth returning to it here.

There are reasons to believe that what Wittgenstein was doing in his later work was far enough removed from ethics (more so than the *Tractatus*, for instance) for it to deserve to be called something else. The *Philosophical Investigations* contains even less of an apparently ethical nature than the *Tractatus*, and does not seem to have the unity of purpose evident in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein might have thought of his *Investigations* from a religious or ethical point of view, but if so it seems no more ethical than anything else he did or said.

Another reason why Wittgenstein might have stopped philosophizing about ethics is that he believed no justification could be given for ethical pronouncements about what one should or should not do.

Wittgenstein associated value or ethics or living rightly with seeing the world as a miracle. But the world does not dictate that we see it this way rather than with the eye of the practical scientist.

Rules of life are dressed up in pictures. And these pictures can only serve to *describe* what we are to do, not *justify* it. Because they could provide a justification only if they held good in other respects as well. I can say: ‘Thank these bees for their honey as though they were kind people who have prepared it for you’; that is *intelligible* and describes how I should like you to conduct yourself. But I cannot say: ‘Thank them because, look, how kind they are!’ – since the next moment they may sting you.⁵⁰

The bees may sting not just because they are bees but, I take it, because they are things in the world and hence subject to contingency. Anything might happen. That does not mean that it is a mistake to think of the world as a miracle, to treat life as a miracle or as a gift from God, but it does mean that you cannot prove that this is the correct attitude to take. Changing someone’s attitude means changing the way they live. If you can do this, then they will see things differently, but you cannot prove that they should do so.

This does not mean that philosophy has no contribution to make to ethics. Philosophy of a certain kind can change the way one lives, in so far as it changes the way one thinks or changes one’s perspective on things. Wittgenstein’s later work was dedicated to clearing up confusions in his own and others’ thinking, and this was not just a game to him. The aim of his philosophy is to clear up problems:

The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear.

The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life’s mould. So you must change the way you live and, once your life does fit into the mould, what is problematic will disappear.⁵¹

By the time the *Investigations* reached its final form he believed in solving problems one at a time, not solving one big problem all at once.

But in some ways, as we have seen, his position had not changed from the earlier period of the *Tractatus* and the lecture on ethics.

Having emphasized the continuity in Wittgenstein's thinking on ethics, though, it would be worthwhile to make good on my earlier promise to look at some of the differences between the later and earlier philosophy, and at how these relate to moral philosophy.

Methodology and value

James Conant has suggested that Wittgenstein's later philosophy could be viewed as an attempt to overcome some apparent limitations on what, in the *Tractatus*, he had called the only possible 'strictly correct method' in philosophy. This method is that of saying nothing except what can be said, and the limitations are that it seems to require the physical presence of an interlocutor and that it would not satisfy the interlocutor.⁵²

The method practised by the author of the *Tractatus*, however, is not the method that he advocates in it. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein freely talks nonsense and does not limit himself to stating empirical facts. The *Investigations*, and the other later work, is less contradictory and does attempt to satisfy its puzzled interlocutors by working out problems, even if it does not attempt to provide answers to problems. In doing this Wittgenstein looks directly at what people say, are tempted to say, are likely to be tempted to say, and why. He looks at phenomena and engages with practices rather than dealing more abstractly with language as it apparently must be, as he had in the *Tractatus*. The later philosophy is much more a matter of looking and seeing.

How does this relate to his remarks on ethics? One way is that in the later work there is no a priori rejection of the idea that value could be found in the world. Indeed it could be said that no ideas are rejected. Wittgenstein invites his audience to say what they choose. His method is one of agreement combined with clarification of concepts and a thoroughgoing determination to look at the facts. He does not advance or refute theses, he looks at what one might mean by saying certain things. So he does not talk about how to live or how to solve

the problem of life. Problems are investigated one at a time. There is no hierarchy of problems nor reference to *the* problem of life.

Wittgenstein offers not answers to questions but a method, a way of approaching and dealing with problems. This approach is painstaking, open-eyed, thorough, sensitive and receptive. It is not revolutionary or combative. In this way Wittgenstein's later method is very much in keeping with his earlier remarks about ethics and is itself ethical without being about ethics. He never thought of ethics as a subject alongside others. I do not think it would be right to conclude that there was a *hidden* ethical agenda behind the later work. Wittgenstein's interest in the questions he talked about was genuine, but it was also ethical in a way that it is not with many philosophers.

What I have referred to as the disappearance of ethics in Wittgenstein's later work reflects not a change in his beliefs but an attempt to put these beliefs more consistently into practice. What he stopped doing was talking about ethics because, as he had said all along, it is not possible to say anything about them. Ethics, for Wittgenstein, is not a subject nor a particular sphere or aspect of life. Everything is to do with ethics because life itself, the whole world, is, so to speak, a gift from God. This is only a manner of speaking because it is really impossible to speak about God or ethics. This is why talk about ethics disappears from Wittgenstein's later work, but his work is no less ethical, or ethically motivated, in the later years. What one does and the way one does it are not two totally separate things, but I think the best way to understand Wittgenstein's philosophical change, with regard to ethics at least, is as a methodological rather than a substantive one. And his ethics are in his method, part of which is the avoidance of blatant talk about God or morals.

So no one doing ethics should expect that Wittgenstein would agree with what they say on the subject. That is why I suggest that 'Wittgensteinian moral philosophy' is a contradiction in terms.

It might be objected that Wittgenstein's philosophy changed. In the *Tractatus*, it is often said, he puts forward a picture theory of language, according to which language pictures the facts, the totality of which constitutes the world. Since ethics concerns value and not fact, at least roughly speaking, we cannot speak about ethics. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, however, this theory does not appear. In its

place is a more messy or complex view of language, according to which a word like 'good' has a family of uses and meanings. So we *can* speak meaningfully about ethics after all.

This view of Wittgenstein's two main works is flawed. For one thing, any picture theory of language in the *Tractatus* is put forward only in a peculiar sense. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are put forward in order to be transcended, to be climbed over and *thrown away*. These propositions are, as it were, interviewed only so that we may eliminate them from our enquiries. And what is the result of those enquiries? Nothing. Not a mysterious, mystical nothing, but the familiar, banal nothing of the blank page. The propositions that make up the *Tractatus* can be read as footnotes to this blank page.

What is the point of that? I will not say more here about what the value and purpose of the *Tractatus* is or was meant to be, but part of it is elimination. It is an attack on fundamentally meaningless theories and vanities. These are important vanities, no doubt, that Wittgenstein himself was drawn to, but their significance lies in the strength of the temptation to believe them, not in their intrinsic meaning. Perhaps he was wrong, but Wittgenstein certainly seems to have taken himself to be dispatching errors of thought. Furthermore, perhaps part of what he took to be wrong with the ideas he tried to explode was that they missed or misinterpreted precisely the complexities and messiness that he went on to explore in the *Investigations*. The contrast between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, then, is not so stark.

I have hardly proved a general continuity between the two works, but I have shown evidence that there was no great break in Wittgenstein's thinking on ethics at least. He had nothing to say on the subject – if it can even be called a subject at all. But he did have an ethical attitude or point of view. This attitude is expressed in his work. If we take him at his word, he had no *other* views, hidden or otherwise, about ethics. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. Not because it is very important to keep silent, but because there is nothing to be said. We may do philosophy morally, but we may not, cannot, according to Wittgenstein, do moral philosophy as traditionally conceived. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing one can say about moral philosophy. In the next section I will look at what Wittgenstein had to say about it.

Wittgenstein on ethics

Let us look at what Wittgenstein actually said about some ethical theories, to see whether this fits with my thus far somewhat a priori hypothesizing about what he should be expected to say about them. According to O.K. Bouwsma, Wittgenstein's criticism of philosophical ethics was not so much that it, or its content, was wrong, but that it was trivial.⁵³ Understanding what past philosophers have said, or helping students achieve such understanding, is dismissed by Wittgenstein as trifling and futile, while preaching, which is not philosophy, runs the risk of doing harm.⁵⁴ When philosophers are not exhorting but philosophizing, they are interested in a system: something 'up in the air', not something of real use or value.⁵⁵ What is distinctive about moral philosophy (as distinct from moral exhortation) is its lack of seriousness. Hence: 'When a man is in deep earnest about what he ought to do then one can see how fantastic what philosophers do is.'⁵⁶

Wittgenstein also says that 'The use of the word "good" is too complicated. Definition is out of the question.'⁵⁷ This is evidence for a kind of linguistic particularism or, less misleadingly, contextualism or anti-essentialism. There is no essence of goodness, so Platonism and hedonism (as philosophical theories) are out of the question. Instead, what can meaningfully be called 'good' depends on the particular context one is in. Not just anything can be called good or ethical.⁵⁸ Hans-Johann Glock says that 'Unfortunately, this runs counter to [Wittgenstein's] claim that even Goering's remark "Right is whatever we like" expresses "a kind of ethics".'⁵⁹ It is quite clear that there is no contradiction here, though. Not everything is an ethical principle, but a lot of things can be, even Goering's remark. Goering's principle, after all, is not so far removed from hedonism or ethical egoism. It is not, as Glock claims, 'a paradigm of immorality'.⁶⁰ It is, though, at the edges of what can be recognized as an ethical principle, hence the word 'even' before 'Goering's remark'. When Norman Malcolm imagined Cesare Borgia saying, 'This is my ethical principle: I trample on other men's toes all I can', Wittgenstein reportedly frowned and scoffed, denying that this could be an ethical principle.⁶¹ So there are limits to what a person's ethics could be, but this tells us

nothing about what to believe. It does not, after all, entail that we should have any ethics at all.

There is also evidence in Wittgenstein's thought of a more substantive sort of particularism, or what might be called existentialism. There is no one thing that all people should do in a given context; it depends on the person. Thus:

[E]thics [is] telling someone what he should do. But how can anyone counsel another? Imagine someone advising another who was in love and about to marry, and pointing out to him all the things he cannot do if he marries. The idiot! How can one know how these things are in another man's life?⁶²

This idea that we can tell each other nothing is echoed in Wittgenstein's suggestion that it would be wholesome were one to read a dialogue such as Plato's *Euthyphro* and come away saying, 'See, see, we know nothing!'⁶³ So ethical theorists who think they can answer general questions about what we should do (or how we should be, perhaps) are quite mistaken, according to Wittgenstein. (I think this goes for the personal Wittgenstein and the suspicious Wittgenstein, but it does not follow from his method, nor would it be part of the method to assert such a claim.)

It does not follow, however, that Wittgenstein rejects everything that looks just like a philosophical theory. On religious belief Wittgenstein says, 'Believe whatever you can. I never object to a man's religious beliefs, Mohammedan, Jew, or Christian.'⁶⁴ Now, what if one earnestly believes that one's faith requires that one always act so as to produce the greatest possible happiness? Wittgenstein himself clearly was no utilitarian. He talks of the distinction between higher and lower pleasures as a symptom of the mistake involved in the generalization that all and only pleasure is good, or else as a development of the 'absurdities' of the hedonic calculus.⁶⁵ But religious utilitarianism, if there could be such a thing, would not be absurd in any general sense. The rejection of it as absurd, that is to say, would only ever be a personal matter, Wittgenstein would say. The same would go for a sincere virtue theorist who lives by the question 'What would Jesus do?' or a Kantian who believes that the categorical imperative

embodies God's will. And there is no reason why the immunity afforded to religious belief should not extend to earnest, serious ethical beliefs of a non-religious nature. One may believe whatever one can, but of course there will be limits to what one can believe.

Conclusion

What Wittgenstein would say about ethics clearly depends on which Wittgenstein we are talking about. Wittgenstein himself said some rather strange-sounding things, and might have meant some strange things by these remarks, but can be thought of as speaking from a recognizable, conservative (anti-novelty), quasi-Christian point of view. As a man, then, he was certainly against utilitarianism, and seems not to have subscribed to any particular philosophical theory on ethics. As a philosopher, he believed not in developing theories but in using a certain kind of method, intended to destroy illusions and confusions. This again suggests that he would not have supported any ethical theory, but it says nothing about what he would have supported instead. The other Wittgenstein, the one we see in the application of Wittgensteinian method, deliberately says nothing except what we will all agree with, often just asking questions and so avoiding asserting anything controversial. This Wittgenstein would not support any but universally accepted ideas, and would not even reject any theory (although his aim might be to get theorists to give up their pet beliefs). So he would assert absolutely nothing of interest, nothing but 'boring truisms'.

So does Wittgenstein have no relevance for moral philosophy? To say so would be to go too far. The real question is which ethical beliefs will withstand the application of Wittgenstein's method? Once we see all the facts, what will we still want to say? Well, that will vary from person to person. Is the satisfaction that serial-killers gain from their crimes intrinsically good, bad or neither? It seems bad to me, but I suppose some utilitarians will consider it good. Will they still say it is good after they have really thought about it seriously? I cannot say. The philosopher as individual or as philosopher cannot speak for others on ethical matters. But it should be obvious

that this is not a complete abdication of ethics. It is a rejection of trivial systematizations and inaccurate generalizations. But in this sense, Wittgensteinian ethics should be no different from any other. Philosophy, for Wittgenstein, is a critical activity. In itself it has nothing to say.

We have seen, then, that a thoroughly Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy leads to the conclusion that ethics, in the sense of moral philosophy, is impossible. However, ethics in the sense of morality, having certain values and facing moral problems, seems to be unavoidable. There is no reason to suppose that Wittgenstein would have encouraged an unthinking response to such problems. Instead, there is good reason to believe that he would have advocated the same kind of response to them that he did to every other problem. The Wittgensteinian thing to do is to face such problems honestly and carefully, without one's perception or judgement being distorted by ideology, theory, laziness, cowardice or wishful thinking. Thinking in this kind of way about, say, abortion, might not count as philosophy in Wittgenstein's sense, and, more seriously, might not yield any particular conclusion about what to do, but we cannot know whether this is true without further investigation. Productive or not, such thinking can reasonably be called Wittgensteinian, and it is undeniably about ethics. There are more ways to be Wittgensteinian than simply employing what Wittgenstein took to be the proper methods in philosophy. Here is not the place, though, to see where such thinking might get us in any particular ethical investigation.⁶⁶ My concern now is not to apply Wittgenstein's method but to explain it and explore some possible objections to it. One of these objections is that Wittgenstein's philosophy is bound to be biased because of its ethical goals. I believe I have shown that this is not the case. In the next chapter I will consider the related question of what implications Wittgenstein's philosophy has for religion.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, conversations recorded by Friedrich Waismann, trans. Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1979, p. 117.

2. On truisms see Ludwig Wittgenstein TS 219, p. 6, quoted in David G. Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 28. On taking back controversial remarks, see *Philosophical Investigations* §79, §109 and §128. Philosophers, says Wittgenstein, are to assert nothing contentious, and others are left to say what they like. Nothing is forbidden or denied. In 'The Big Typescript' (MS 213) as translated by Anthony Kenny in *The Wittgenstein Reader* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p. 265, Wittgenstein says:

One of the most important tasks is to describe all the blind alleys of thought so vividly that the reader says 'Yes, that is just what I meant'. To hit off exactly the features of every error.

You see, it *is* the right expression only if he recognizes it as such.

And in his lectures on religious belief Wittgenstein says of someone who uses the expression 'Eye of God' that 'If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say.' Ludwig Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* ed. Cyril Barrett, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1966, p. 71.

3. See Sabina Lovibond *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1983 and Bernard Williams 'Left-Wing Wittgenstein, Right-Wing Marx' in *Common Knowledge*, 1: 1 (spring 1991).
4. See William H. Brenner 'Chesterton, Wittgenstein and the Foundations of Ethics', in *Philosophical Investigations* 14: 4 (October 1991).
5. See Joachim Schulte *Wittgenstein: An Introduction* trans. William H. Brenner and John F. Holley, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1992, p. 23 and Ray Monk *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* Jonathan Cape, London, 1990, p. 211.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* trans. Peter Winch, ed. G.H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, pp. 48–49e.
7. John Betjeman 'Slough' in *Collected Poems* compiled by the Earl of Birkenhead, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1971.
8. M.O'C. Drury 'Conversations with Wittgenstein' in Rush Rhees (ed.) *Recollections of Wittgenstein* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 165.
9. Rush Rhees, *ibid.*, p. 224.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1993, p. 121.
11. *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* ed. D.Z. Phillips, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 309–10.

12. See Drury in Rhees (ed.) *Recollections*, p. 160.
13. Among his favourite composers were J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Haydn, Labor, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert and Wagner. If this sounds too much like a list simply of famous composers, it might be helpful to add that he did not like the 'worthless' and 'bad' music of Mahler. See *Culture and Value* p. 67e (from 1948).
14. G.E.M. Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, Volume III University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1981.
15. Betjeman 'Beside the Seaside' in *Collected Poems*, compiled by the Earl of Birkenhead, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1971, p. 165.
16. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1932* ed. Desmond Lee, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p. 21.
17. Wittgenstein often advised his students to 'go the bloody hard way'. See Rush Rhees *Without Answers* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969, pp. 169–72.
18. I owe the phrase 'accept and endure' to Cora Diamond, in conversation.
19. For proof of Wittgenstein's non-Christianity see Brian R. Clack *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999, pp. 126–9.
20. See *Culture and Value*, p. 27e (from 1937).
21. See G.K. Chesterton *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* Image Books, New York, 1990, pp. 57–8.
22. See, for instance, *Philosophical Investigations* §133.
23. Beth Savickey *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation* Routledge, London and New York, 1999.
24. *Culture and Value*, p. 83e. This remark was written in 1949.
25. See Rush Rhees 'Correspondence and Comment' in *The Human World* 15–16 (1974): 153, quoted in Stern *Wittgenstein*, p. 6.
26. Quoted in G.E.M. Anscombe 'What Wittgenstein Really Said' in *The Tablet* (17 April 1954): 373.
27. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Notebooks 1914–1916* ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1979, p. 72e
28. *Ibid.*, p. 75e.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 77e.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, p. 78e.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 91e.

33. *Culture and Value*, pp. 3e and 79e.
34. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961, 6.521.
35. *Culture and Value*, p. 27e (from 1937).
36. Ludwig Wittgenstein 'A Lecture on Ethics', in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge, 1993, p. 43. Hereafter this lecture will be referred to simply as 'Lecture'.
37. *Tractatus* 4.0312.
38. *Ibid.*, 5.4711.
39. *Ibid.*, 4.5.
40. *Notebooks*, p. 79e (dated 1 August 1916).
41. For an extended comparison of God and logic in Wittgenstein's work see Philip R. Shields *Logic and Sin in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1993.
42. *Tractatus* 6.522.
43. 'Lecture', p. 39.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
46. *Ibid.*
47. See *ibid.*
48. *Culture and Value*, p. 4e.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 24e.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 29e (from 1937).
51. *Ibid.*, p. 27e (from 1937).
52. See James Conant 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?' in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* ed. R. Fleming and M. Payne, Bucknell Review, Lewisburg, PA, 1989, p. 273 fn 10.
53. O.K. Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949–1951* ed. J.L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1986.
54. See *ibid.*, p. 7.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
58. See *ibid.*, p. 6.
59. Hans-Johann Glock *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 110. Glock's reference is to Rush Rhees 'Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics' in *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 25.
60. *Ibid.*
61. See Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations*, p. 5.

62. Ibid., p. 45.
63. Ibid., p. 50.
64. Ibid., p. 56.
65. Ibid., p. 60.
66. I explore such an approach to moral philosophy, along with other broadly Wittgensteinian approaches, in Duncan Richter *Ethics after Anscombe: Post-Modern Moral Philosophy* Kluwer, Boston, MA, and Dordrecht, 1999.

Religion

I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.¹

Wittgenstein's conception of, and approach to, philosophy, at least in his later work, seems clearly to be at odds with standard views of his philosophy of religion. This reflects badly on these standard views. In this chapter I will look at these views and their likely origins, contrast them with statements Wittgenstein made about his purposes and method in doing philosophy and show how, given the nature of some widely held religious beliefs, Wittgenstein would be violating his own methodology if he really held the views attributed to him. I will conclude that he did not hold these views, and that his philosophical method could not lead to any general doctrines about religion, or indeed about anything else. Finally I will look at some of Wittgenstein's remarks that seem to make my argument implausible and explain how I would respond to such a charge, and just what I take the point of Wittgenstein's writing on religion to be. It should not be surprising that, as with ethics, Wittgenstein was not out to attack or defend any particular belief. Indeed, as we have already seen, philosophy practised according to his conception, at least in his later work, could not support or destroy religious faith. In this sense, as Kai Nielsen has argued, Wittgenstein is a fideist, but Wittgensteinian fideism properly understood is not the embarrassment Nielsen thinks it is.²

Sources of the alleged doctrines

The standard views of Wittgenstein on religion that I have in mind are summarized nicely by John Hyman in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*:

Wittgenstein defends two principal doctrines . . . The first is that the expression of a religious belief in words is not a prediction or a hypothesis, but ‘something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference’; the second is that religious beliefs are therefore equally immune from falsification and from verification.³

The doctrines attributed to Wittgenstein by Hyman bear closer examination. The first doctrine (‘the expression of a religious belief in words is not a prediction or a hypothesis, but “something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference”’) might be traced to such passages as these (from *Culture and Value*):

Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: not, however, because it concerns ‘universal truths of reason’! Rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly).⁴

[F]aith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence.⁵

I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*.⁶

There is also, of course, the passage that Hyman actually quotes, which is worth giving at greater length:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s *belief*, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference.⁷

It is worth noting immediately that in the last quotation given Wittgenstein is describing how things strike him, not necessarily how they objectively are, and that instruction in a religion (and out of one, I would argue) involves not only description but also an appeal to conscience. In other words, this is presented as a personal opinion about what it takes to change someone's religious beliefs, not a neutral grammatical remark of the kind that make up properly Wittgensteinian philosophical works. This opinion might be quite correct, or even logically necessary, if it captures the grammatical essence of religious instruction. Even so, according to this very view, mere description (which is what properly Wittgensteinian philosophy offers) cannot change someone's belief. This implies that philosophy cannot be prescriptive in matters of religion, as I will argue below.

What now of the second doctrine, which asserts that religious beliefs can be neither verified nor falsified? Where does Wittgenstein say this? He comes close in a couple of places. One is in his lectures on religious belief, where he says that

Reasons [for religious beliefs] look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive.

The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business.⁸

Father O'Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science . . . I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable.⁹

There is also Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics', which concludes that '[T]he tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language.'¹⁰ Religious language, he suggests, is 'mere nonsense', in which no belief could be either verified or falsified.¹¹

Clearly, then, Hyman's interpretation of Wittgenstein is not groundless. However, it would be much too hasty to conclude that Hyman is right about Wittgenstein's view of religion. For one thing, none of the sources I have quoted, indeed none of the sources that I *could* have quoted in which Wittgenstein talks directly about religion,

is a reliable guide to his settled and mature thought on what philosophy can say about religion. The 'Lecture on Ethics' is a fairly early work (1929), and later sources at least suggest that Wittgenstein came to think of religious language as being perfectly capable of meaning. The 'Lectures on Religious Belief' as we have them are just notes taken by students. Other relevant sources include *Culture and Value*, which is simply a collection of Wittgenstein's thoughts on various topics, philosophical and otherwise, his notes on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and his conversations with O.K. Bouwsma.¹² We clearly need to be careful in distinguishing Wittgenstein's personal opinions, and his guiding suspicions, from his ideas about what, if anything, philosophy itself tells us all to believe, just as we saw in the previous chapter with regard to Wittgenstein's views on ethics.

Wittgenstein's personal opinions might be extremely interesting, but they are not philosophy as he understands it. For instance, Emyr Vaughan Thomas has distinguished between some religious beliefs and what Wittgenstein might call 'the *genuine* religious spirit'.¹³ This 'genuine' or 'authentic' form of belief (which is inseparable from the personal ethics – a sort of Tolstoyan romantic puritanism – outlined in the previous chapter) is strongly appealing, but it is no part of Wittgenstein's philosophical approach to prescribe such a faith, as we will see below, and as we have seen already in connection with Wittgenstein's views on ethics.

We should also distinguish from his personal opinions any half-formed or later-rejected beliefs. The best way to do this, it seems to me, is to look at Wittgenstein's most finished philosophical work, especially as found in the *Philosophical Investigations*. This is what I will do in the following section.

As a brief aside, though, it is worth pointing out that David Stern, who emphasizes the importance of Wittgenstein's unfinished and unpublished work, comes to a relevantly similar conclusion to the one I will reach here. This conclusion is that Wittgenstein's work is not directed towards or against other people's views. Rather, Wittgenstein, at least in his later work, is engaged in a struggle with his own intuitions and convictions. The point of publishing these 'private conversations', as Wittgenstein calls them, is to demonstrate his method for dealing with problems of this kind.¹⁴ The only possible

criticism of religious beliefs that we should expect to find in Wittgenstein's philosophy, therefore, is of one's own beliefs, and then only if these beliefs have the characteristics of philosophical confusion. Philosophy does not tell us which religious beliefs, if any, we should or should not have. Of course if we look carefully we might find something other than what we might expect, but we should not quickly leap to the conclusion that Wittgenstein contradicts himself should any apparent inconsistency arise. Such uncharitable readings should be accepted only as a last resort.

Wittgenstein's avowed method and purpose in philosophy

According to Wittgenstein's pronouncements in the *Philosophical Investigations* about what philosophers should do, Hyman's account of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion is surprising. For one thing, Wittgenstein maintains that philosophy should not advance doctrines or theories at all, but should instead describe uses of language. Furthermore, properly Wittgensteinian philosophy does not tell people what they can or cannot say, although it might of course influence what is said. The descriptions that philosophy provides are supposed to consist of statements that we would all accept. It is doubtful that the Pope, or any Christian fundamentalist, would accept the doctrines attributed to Wittgenstein. Hyman himself does not.

Believers who reject these doctrines are classified as not religious but superstitious by some Wittgensteinians, and perhaps would be by Wittgenstein himself. Such pejorative labelling clearly goes beyond the bounds of properly Wittgensteinian philosophy, though. This criticism has been levelled against D.Z. Phillips by Brian Clack.¹⁵ In his defence, Phillips maintains that he uses the word 'superstition' in a non-pejorative sense to describe practices that are confused. To say that a practice is confused when it genuinely is so, is not prescriptive, according to Phillips; though he notes that 'Clack finds this disingenuous'.¹⁶ Clack's view is understandable. 'Confusion' is almost as clearly pejorative as 'superstition'. However, Phillips's position is not as wrongheaded as it might seem. His claim is that some practices really are confused, and that if philosophers bring this out

in their Wittgenstein-inspired descriptions of such practices, then so be it. They have not thereby violated Wittgenstein's methodology or, indeed, gone beyond the kind of thing that Wittgenstein himself wrote, as we will see.

All the same, it is clear that anyone describing a religious practice as confused is not saying something that we would all agree with, unless the 'we' here excludes the practitioners of the religion in question. Perhaps Wittgensteinian philosophy could be done in a self-consciously parochial way, but this is not what Phillips takes himself to be doing. Someone might, of course, be led to see and acknowledge that he or she had been confused without realizing it by way of a series of steps, none of which involved saying anything the subject did not accept. However, calling the person confused would not be part of any of these steps, and so not part of the method Wittgenstein offers us, even if the belief that the person is confused is either the motive for or the conclusion of the application of Wittgensteinian therapy. Moreover, a claim that a person is confused is only acceptable to Wittgenstein if the subject accepts it, or would accept it. It is hard to say with confidence when this would be, unless the subject is oneself. I will return to the important concepts of confusion and superstition below. Before that I should address the problem we have just seen in applying Wittgenstein's method (which aims, roughly, to remove confusion without contentiousness) to religion.

I see three possible responses to the problem. One is that Wittgenstein contradicts himself: a possibility we should not exclude, but not the most charitable interpretation, so not the first to take up. The second is that philosophers might show a practice to be confused without ever saying that it is. This is not what Phillips does, though, nor what Wittgenstein himself seems at times to be doing. The third possibility is that expressions of Wittgenstein's personal opinion have been mistaken for philosophical remarks by his exegetes. Our examination of the contexts from which Wittgenstein's 'doctrines' are derived suggests that this might be the real answer to the problem.

In the much more reliable *Philosophical Investigations*, as we have seen, Wittgenstein clearly implies that the only theses philosophers may advance are those with which everyone would agree. Philosophy's job is description, not theorizing or hypothesizing. The description

should, if done properly, be inarguable, and should lead to a sense of de-puzzlement in oneself or one's interlocutor, just as psychotherapy is only successful when accepted as such by the patient. (The point here is that philosophy is *like* psychotherapy in this regard, not that philosophy is itself a kind of psychotherapy.) On this Wittgenstein's ideas seem to have changed little since the 'Big Typescript', in which he says:

One of the most important tasks is to describe all the blind alleys of thought so vividly that the reader says 'Yes, that is just what I meant.' To hit off exactly the features of every error.

You see, it *is* the right expression only if he recognizes it as such.¹⁷

Not only this, but philosophical therapy can only work when the subject feels that he or she has a problem. It may be that 'Human beings are profoundly enmeshed in philosophical – i.e. grammatical – confusions',¹⁸ but philosophical work is pointless without a receptive audience. The passage just quoted ends with this sentence: 'So you can only succeed in extricating people who live in an instinctive rebellion against language; you cannot help those whose entire instinct is to live in the herd which has created this language as its own proper mode of expression.'

It is somewhat surprising that Wittgenstein regards contented speakers of ordinary language as in any philosophical sense confused, but part of his point is surely that philosophy is wasted on such people. (I would be inclined to argue that the very concept of a practice excludes the possibility of a confused practice, but I will consider what might be meant by confusion in relation to practices below.) The important points for now are that Wittgenstein regards philosophy as useful only for certain people, to relieve them of mental cramps, and can only work if the people in question accept as correct the descriptions that philosophy offers them. Even a brief and crude description of some widespread types of religious belief (or beliefs about such beliefs) will show that Hyman's doctrines are not the banal reminders of undeniable truths that Wittgenstein wants us to use in doing philosophy.

Four varieties of religious belief

Let me say a little here about some kinds of religious belief, and especially kinds of Christian belief. I am interested here not in a general categorizing of religious beliefs. Rather, my aim is to point out some of the different kinds of beliefs that are held about the relations between religion, science and philosophy. We can easily think of four stereotypes: (1) the fundamentalist, which insists on a literal interpretation of religious beliefs and texts; (2) the existentialist, which treats religion as something to which science and logic are irrelevant; (3) the rationalist, which regards proper religious belief as being entirely compatible with logic and science; and (4) the postmodern, which is similar to the existentialist, but more ironic than passionate, perhaps because of a kind of philosophical self-consciousness. Let me define these stereotypes further in terms of their relations to what have traditionally been considered the natural means to truth (science and philosophy) and to literalism. For the fundamentalist, religious truths are truths of the same kind (but not importance) as any other: all truths are literal truths, and science and philosophy are potential rivals or enemies (e.g. creationist attitudes towards evolution). For the existentialist, religious truths are literally, i.e. really, true, but they are not true literally, i.e. when taken as scientific or philosophical truths. Science and philosophy are completely distinct areas of thought and/or life. For the rationalist, religious truths are, at least sometimes, not to be taken literally. When they should be is determined at least in part by science and philosophy. Philosophy, science and religion are partners, albeit perhaps unequally, in the search for truth. Finally, for the postmodernist, religious truths are not literally true and therefore are immune from criticism from scientific or philosophical sources.

This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of the variety of religious belief, but it is instructive none the less. It is instructive because, simplified as they may be, these positions are recognizable, and yet the Wittgensteinian position Hyman outlines is incompatible with two of them: the fundamentalist and the rationalist. Contrary to the first Wittgensteinian doctrine, a fundamentalist might insist that the Bible contains both predictions (about the Day of Judgement,

say) and hypotheses (the creation story, perhaps). These predictions and hypotheses differ from others not in kind, the fundamentalist will say, but in being certainly true. Both the fundamentalist and the rationalist would seem likely to disagree with the second Wittgensteinian doctrine, which says that religious beliefs cannot be verified. Fundamentalists believe in the possibility, at least, of empirical confirmation of the truth of the Bible, and rationalists believe that God's existence can be proven logically. Apparently, then, these allegedly Wittgensteinian doctrines say more than what everyone would necessarily agree with, even if no actual person held these views. However, fundamentalism is common, and the rationalist position is at least close to the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (and very close to the doctrine of Father O'Hara). Of the stereotypes we are considering here, Hyman's Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion seems to force the religious believer into either an existentialist or a postmodern mode of belief.

It might be objected that the stereotypes I have outlined are not only simplified but also superficial. What the fundamentalist, for instance, *says* is different from what the postmodernist says, but the meaning might be the same, or the postmodernist might simply see and state more clearly what the fundamentalist tries to say in his or her confused way. This (or the equivalent for rationalists or existentialists) might be true of any particular fundamentalist. But we cannot say, 'Here is what your words mean, here is what you do, and – look! – they do not fit. You are confused.' The meaning of fundamentalist claims, according to Wittgenstein, *is* (at least to a large extent) their use in practice. So the meaning and use of religious language cannot be compared or contrasted straightforwardly.

Still, one might try to push the fundamentalist who regards belief in science to be merely part of the 'religion' of secular humanism, say. We might point out that scientific and religious beliefs come about in different ways. But this does not guarantee that the fundamentalist will accept that religion and science are importantly different. Judgments of importance are evaluative and not grammatical. Christians can argue among themselves about the rights and wrongs of fundamentalism, but grammatical investigators cannot. Nothing is ruled out absolutely by Wittgensteinian philosophy.

Another important objection to the description above of various kinds of belief would be that they are not themselves religious beliefs but instead beliefs about the nature of religious beliefs. Indeed, they are *philosophical* beliefs and therefore just the kind of thing that Wittgenstein would want to investigate for possible confusion. This is quite true, but the line between religion and philosophy is not easy to draw here. The very same words ('I *know* that God exists', say) might express faith when used by one person and mere confusion when spoken by another. I will explore this issue further in the next section.

Implications for understanding and applying Wittgenstein's work

It looks as though the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* ought to reject the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion that Hyman outlines. But is this the end of the matter? It is hard to see how it could be. Wittgenstein surely would, after all, describe scientific language and religious language differently. The rules for their uses are different, as are the contexts in which they are used (at least sometimes). This might not always have been true, and it might not be true in the future, but there are differences between science and religion. A fundamentalist would surely disagree. Similarly, it is hard to imagine Wittgenstein the philosopher (and certainly not Wittgenstein the man) accepting any logical proof of God's existence. Yet the rationalist does. So what is the Wittgensteinian philosopher to say to such people? I will consider three plausible alternatives, of which only the last, I will argue, is truly Wittgensteinian.

The first idea is that philosophy (as advocated by Wittgenstein) could be a tool for cleaning up religion. One might try to criticize such fundamentalist doctrines as 'creation science' by criticizing their claim to be good science, or attack rationalist theology by criticizing the logic of any attempted proof of God's existence, say. If we accept that only what is called science is science, then we can reject creation science as pseudoscience. In this way creationism as a form of religious belief is undermined (I do not say destroyed). We might

criticize a creationist for confusedly believing that he or she has a certain kind of justification for his or her faith. And with logic we might undermine the faith of the defender of any unsound argument for the existence of God (unless he or she embraces unreason or mysticism in response). It seems, then, that some religious beliefs do, or could, have foundations that science or philosophy could prove false. If it is part of someone's religious belief that such belief can be verified, then such belief can, in principle, be falsified, contrary to the second Wittgensteinian doctrine.

This first attempt at a Wittgensteinian approach would reject such confused parts of religious belief, leaving behind a kind of post-philosophical residue. When creationists or Calvinists or Thomists try to justify their beliefs and attitudes philosophically we would combat this error, but otherwise leave them free to believe whatever they like, or whatever they can.

This, I think, is close to what Wittgenstein had in mind (although it would not be part of his philosophical therapy to say such a thing). It is hard to see, though, how a rationalist Catholic, for example, could comfortably remove all the philosophical, or foundationalist, ideas from her religion and leave only the religious ones behind. (Unless we essentialize religion as, say, existentialist or postmodern.) Moreover, it seems impossible from a distance to say in any generalized way just what is a philosophical belief and what is a religious belief, as we have seen. This first attempt at a Wittgensteinian conception of the philosophy of religion is flawed, then, but something of it is preserved in the third version, discussed below.

Before coming to that, let us consider a second kind of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. If Wittgenstein's conception of what philosophy should be is not a useful instrument of reform, perhaps he would say that the philosopher should be more objective, more phenomenological in a sense, and simply describe what people believe and do. The people called scientists say this; the people called creationists say that. Aquinas says this; Wittgenstein says that. If this is so, then we must distinguish between the philosopher *qua* logician and the philosopher *qua* philosopher. We can only describe what people say, what we observe, and then see what beliefs emerge or survive this process. This sounds disturbingly relativistic, if not

pointless, and it raises the question just who is the philosopher who is neither theist nor atheist nor logician nor scientist, etc.? How, one might wonder, can we describe uses of the language that informs our lives if we abstract this much from our living selves?

Furthermore, people who argue that creationism is in fact science, or that the existence of God can somehow, either logically or scientifically, be proved are precisely the kind of people who are likely to insist that belief in God or creation would be groundless without the proof they offer. What must we, as philosophers, say in response to such an assertion? Must we just accept it, patronizingly, as in fact part of a particular religious view, despite the protestations of the believer to the contrary? I do not think we can, since to do so is in fact not to accept it but to refuse to listen to it. This is precisely what is patronizing about the stance I am considering.

Paul Johnston has written that

[W]hile believing in God involves a reaction on the individual's part, one cannot infer from this that it is merely a question of his reacting in a certain way. Rather, part of the content of his reaction is the claim that it is the response to an independently existing reality: hence if one treats it as merely reflecting a human reaction, one thereby expresses one's own rejection of the claim that God exists.¹⁹

We cannot, as Wittgensteinian philosophers, say that believing in God is merely a certain kind of reaction, because part of what it means to believe in God is to deny that it is merely such a reaction. Some religious belief might, upon investigation, be seen to be nothing more than a certain reaction to the world. But we would have to do the investigation first before asserting that this is an accurate description of any particular religious belief, and it is no part of Wittgenstein's method of philosophical investigation to make such contentious claims.

This brings us to the third and final possibility that I want to consider. The only way out, the only way for genuinely Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion to have value, seems to be if the audience is oneself, or a few likeminded people, and just looking attentively,

describing anthropologically, has value either in itself or in making certain claims to belief undesirable. I suspect that this is the truly Wittgensteinian view. Wittgenstein suggests that accurate description might have intrinsic value when he writes: 'For me . . . clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves.'²⁰ The idea that such description might make some beliefs undesirable or psychologically untenable is suggested by *Philosophical Investigations* §79, which says that 'when you see [the facts] there is a good deal that you will not say', but also that you may 'Say what you choose.' What one chooses to say after all the facts are in will surely vary from one individual to another. Philosophy is paradigmatically a kind of dialogue (witness the various voices in the *Philosophical Investigations*) but also primarily a working on oneself. It could be done with another, but only if he or she were willing. And then the application of Wittgenstein's methods would be, like psychotherapy or religious conversion, an individual matter.

This reading of Wittgenstein is supported by Caleb Thompson's reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* as a confessional work. According to Thompson, Wittgenstein's work is confessional in terms of both style and content. The style is confessional, says Thompson, following Stanley Cavell, because 'in talking about ordinary language, in talking about what we say, I am inevitably saying something about myself, about what *I* say.'²¹ The content of Wittgenstein's philosophy is also like confessional work because in it he is explicitly wrestling with temptation, fighting against the urge to misunderstand language.²² Support for this reading of Wittgenstein can also be found in his comment from 1931 that 'Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)'²³

If I am right, then in a truly Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, creationism, foundationalism, the ontological argument, and so on, would not be attacked *per se*, although they might well be considered good material for philosophical analysis. Rather, the individual concerned would be questioned, offered statements with which to agree, and so forth, until, perhaps, some light dawned and the fly saw the way out of the bottle. This can only be a personal process, though,

and there can be no part in it for generalized hypotheses or conclusions about religion in general, of the kind Hyman describes. Hyman might well be describing the views of certain Wittgensteinians, but not, I think, those of Wittgenstein himself.

Getting Wittgenstein's goat

I am suggesting that with religion, as with other subjects, we distinguish between (at least) two Wittgensteins: Wittgenstein the philosopher, concerned with removing philosophical puzzlement by means of grammatical description, and Wittgenstein the man, concerned with the decline of passion and seriousness in the Western world. We have to make this distinction if we are to take seriously Wittgenstein's remarks about the nature and purpose of philosophy done on his terms.

What, then, are we to make of Wittgenstein's work on religion? Do not the following remarks of his prove me wrong?

Operations which depend on a false, overly simple idea of things and processes are to be distinguished from magical operations. For example, if one says that the illness is moving from one part of the body to another, or takes precautions to divert the illness as if it were a liquid or a condition of warmth. One is then creating a false picture for oneself, which, in this case, means a groundless one.²⁴

To drive out or slay death; but on the other hand it is represented as a skeleton, as itself dead in a certain sense. 'As dead as death.' 'Nothing is as dead as death; nothing is as beautiful as beauty itself.' The picture in terms of which one conceives of reality here is such that beauty, death, etc. are the pure (concentrated) substances, while they are present in a beautiful object as an admixture. – And do I not recognize here my own observations about 'object' and 'complex'?'²⁵

The scapegoat, on which one lays one's sins, and who runs away into the desert with them – a false picture, similar to those that cause errors in philosophy.²⁶

Let me explain what is seemingly problematical about these passages. The first passage (hereafter 'passage 1') describes what sounds like some sort of magical or religious view or practice and calls it false, which is hardly the kind of universally acceptable description I have said we should expect from Wittgensteinian philosophy. The second passage quoted (passage 2) compares the European Lenten rite of 'Carrying out Death', which involves removing an effigy from the village, with philosophical errors identified by Wittgenstein in his earlier thinking. So must not there be an error in the rite? In the third passage the idea of a scapegoat, which, as Clack and Frazer point out, has been important in many cultures, is labelled false.²⁷

I cannot comment individually on every such passage, but I have chosen three as representative of those that seem most awkward for the view that I am trying to advance. They are not, I think, as awkward as might at first be thought, especially if we consider their original contexts. Passage 1 is from the 'Remarks on Frazer', which need not be read as a philosophical work (or indeed a finished work at all) and, more importantly, does not call any religious or magical practice or belief false.²⁸ Wittgenstein is distinguishing magic from bad science, not calling magic a form of bad science. As Wittgenstein says earlier in the same set of remarks:

It can indeed happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized an error on which it was based. But this happens only when calling someone's attention to his error is enough to turn him away from his way of behaving. But this is not the case with the religious practices of a people and *therefore* there is *no* question of an error.²⁹

The acceptance of a false picture, as described in passage 1, clearly involves an error. In a religious practice, though, there is (can be) no question of error. The kind of talk of an illness moving from one part of a body to another that Wittgenstein has in mind in passage 1 is not, then, religious or magical talk. It is also worth noting, I think, that passage 1 refers to one doing something for oneself, not a practice shared by a people or culture. At any rate, there

is no need to read a criticism of any magical or religious practice or belief into this passage.

Passage 2 comes from the same remarks, so some of what I said about passage 1 also applies here. Furthermore, the point of the passage seems clearly to be a criticism of a particular metaphysical theory, not any religious view. It might be maintained that if metaphysics is criticized by being compared to magic then magic is being implicitly criticized. This is not so, however. Magic is fine, Wittgenstein seems to think, as long as it is recognized as such. The problem with metaphysics is that it has delusions of being something else. It is also not a practice in the relevant sense. There is nothing like a religious practice based on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. If there were, the status of its propositions would change.

About passage 3 I will say rather more, since it is so important. Berel Dov Lerner has pointed out that this 'comment is of singular importance for the exposition and defence of his ideas on religion' because it is the clearest available example of Wittgenstein criticizing religion.³⁰ Without such a comment to draw on, Wittgensteinians might seem to have to defend the idea that religion is somehow untouchable, beyond the range of philosophical critique. My position is that Wittgenstein was not really criticizing the scapegoat ritual when he called it a false picture, and that in one sense *everything* (including religion) is beyond the range of properly Wittgensteinian criticism, while in another sense *nothing* (including religion) is beyond it. In what follows I will trace the reception of Wittgenstein's remark into the secondary literature, and explain the position just described in relation to all this.

Although similar rituals have been held in a variety of cultures, the best-known scapegoat ritual is the one described in Leviticus:

And he [Aaron] shall take . . . two goats, and present them before the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented

alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.³¹

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.³²

It is not obvious what Wittgenstein means when he talks about a false picture in connection with this rite. Rush Rhees says this:

When Wittgenstein calls this rite a misleading picture, he may mean something like this: consider

- 1 'Children carry the sins of their fathers.'
- 2 'A goat, when consecrated, carries the sins of the people.'

In the first sentence 'carry' is used in the sense of the whole sentence. In the second sentence 'carry' seems to mean what it does in 'The goat carries on his back the basket in which we put our fire-wood'; and yet it *cannot mean that*.

Of course a living animal may be taken as a symbol together with the other symbols, the symbolic performance, in the ritual. But in this case Wittgenstein thought the symbol, in the role that was given it, was badly misleading.³³

Following Rhees, Phillips has used Wittgenstein's remark to argue that 'one cannot ascribe to Wittgenstein the view that anything that is called religious or ritualistic is free from confusion'.³⁴

The problem is what it means to call such rituals false, misleading or confused. As Lerner points out, 'it is meaningless to talk about a "picture" being false outside of any cultural context. It is equally meaningless to talk about a ritual presenting a particular "picture" in an extra-cultural sense.'³⁵ Rhees concedes that we do not know how the practitioners of the scapegoat ritual thought of their acts,

and Lerner suggests a very plausible interpretation according to which the ritual is symbolic of God's forgiveness of sin. Nothing we do, Lerner points out, ritual or otherwise, can force God to forgive our sins. There need be no more confusion in this ritual than in any other. That is to say, there is no reason to suppose that the ancient Israelites believed that they could cause themselves to be forgiven by means of the scapegoat ritual. Thus there is no reason to think of the ritual as superstitious in Phillips's sense of a mistake regarding causal connections.³⁶ Charity, if nothing else, suggests we accept Lerner's view of the ritual as symbolic.

Charity also suggests we reject the idea that Wittgenstein was just wrong. If by 'false' Wittgenstein meant misleading, then we need to consider who might be misled. There is no evidence that the original practitioners of the ritual were misled, although of course they might have been. Indeed, Lerner suggests that the scapegoat is much more likely to be misunderstood by Christians than by the ancient Israelites because Christians have 'the notion of a man taking on the sins of others and offering himself (or should I write Himself) in atonement for them'.³⁷ The scapegoat is confusing to Christians who might think that a goat is somehow, impossibly, taking Christ's role. To the Israelites, it was just a goat, albeit one with an important symbolic role in this ritual.

Charitable interpretation, then, leads us to read Wittgenstein as his friend and student Rhees suggests he be read, and to read Rhees as suggesting that the scapegoat ritual is (potentially) misleading to particular people, i.e. modern Christians. The ritual is not misleading or false in any absolute, culture- or context-independent, sense. It is not confused in any such sense, either. Whether it is rightly called superstitious I will consider in the next section.

Superstition

The meaning of 'superstition' is somewhat obscure. It will be worthwhile to look at the way Wittgenstein uses the word 'superstition', which he does, albeit rarely. According to the index of *Culture and Value*, one of the main works in which the word is

used, there are three references to superstition in the book. The first refers to the idea that primitive people must have wondered at everything as superstitious:

[I]t's just false to say: Of course, these primitive peoples couldn't help wondering at everything. Though perhaps it is true that these peoples *did* wonder at all the things around them. – To suppose they couldn't help wondering at them is a primitive superstition.³⁸

Wittgenstein is criticizing a kind of philosophical or theoretical idea, not a religious practice here. The second reference contrasts religion and superstition: 'Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from *fear* and is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting.'³⁹ No specific practice is criticized here. The third reference talks about pictures in our thinking as superstitions, but suggests that if the picture is deep enough, it should not be treated as a superstition.

It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition; but it is equally true that we *always* eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of all our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition.⁴⁰

So, Wittgenstein does use the concept of superstition, but this is not the *Philosophical Investigations*, that is to say, not a remark from a very finished work, and he does not call any practice superstitious except the practice of a certain kind of false science. In the *Philosophical Investigations* itself Wittgenstein refers a few times to superstition, but always only to philosophical superstitions. For instance, see §110: "Language (or thought) is something unique" – this proves to be a superstition (*not* a mistake!), itself produced by grammatical illusions.⁴¹ In his 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*' he refers to belief in ghosts as a superstition, but this is (mostly) a way of criticizing Frazer, not those who believe in ghosts. '[W]hy . . . does Frazer use the word "ghost"? He thus understands this superstition very well, since he explains it to us with a superstitious word he is familiar

with.⁴² Given the evident irony here, the first use of the word ‘superstition’ could easily have been put in scare quotes, to make clear who is being criticized. Wittgenstein is not at all in the habit of criticizing religious beliefs or practices as superstitious, however much some Wittgensteinians might want him to be.

We have seen that Wittgenstein says we must describe ‘blind alleys of thought’ in such a way that the reader recognizes exactly his or her own error, and recognizes it as an error. The philosopher has done his or her job only if this happens.⁴³ What will be recognized as the right expression of a particular blind alley will vary depending on one’s audience. It will not be the same for ancient Israelites as for modern Christians. It is this audience that we must keep in mind if we want to understand Wittgenstein’s remark about the scapegoat.

Phillips’s view that the scapegoat ritual is confused or superstitious has been taken by Clack to mean that it is ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthy of scorn’.⁴⁴ Such a view, Clack argues, is incompatible with the ‘sense of depth and profundity’ that one finds in Wittgenstein’s account of magic, ritual and religion.⁴⁵ However, there is no evidence (except his use of the word ‘superstition’) that Phillips is scornful or contemptuous of any ritual behaviour. Clack himself summarizes an important aspect of Wittgenstein’s view thus:

When a perennial feature of human life (say, death) becomes the focus of the ritual imagination, [the] magico-metaphysical imagination spawns such rites as ‘Carrying out Death’ [which is similar to the scapegoat ritual], born out of a ‘misunderstanding of the logic of language’.⁴⁶

What Clack objects to is what he imagines to be Phillips’s attitude towards the scapegoat ritual. In fact, what Clack, following Wittgenstein, calls a misunderstanding of the logic of language in the quotation just given seems to be very much the same as what Phillips, also following Wittgenstein, calls confusion or superstition. Perhaps the difference between Clack and Phillips concerns nothing but terminology and what each takes Phillips’s attitude to be. Clack’s doubts about Phillips’s attitude are understandable, though, given his insistence on using words that at least *sound* pejorative. All we can

say with certainty, since Phillips's attitude is hard to determine precisely, is that it would be more Wittgensteinian of Phillips if he chose his words more carefully or more neutrally.

Let me ask now, as I promised earlier that I would, what it could mean for a practice to be confused. We cannot explain confusion in terms of superstition, since Phillips does the opposite and since, as Rhees put it:

What is the mark of any religious practice (or teaching) which would lead one to call it superstitious?

I cannot think of any general answer.⁴⁷

Superstition is a vague and insulting term. It only seems acceptably Wittgensteinian if we can explain it in terms of confusion, so let us look at that.

In Chapter 1 I discussed confusion in one sense: i.e. as a certain mental state from which an individual might suffer. In what sense, if any, could a practice be confused? A practice might be said to be confused if those involved all feel confused. The wedding, say, was not rehearsed, and those involved are not quite sure where they should be or what they should be doing. This is a confused event, though, not a practice. A practice is something repeated. Feelings of confusion might remain even so, of course, but this is surely not what Phillips has in mind. The practice itself, not the practitioners, is meant to be confused. Nor will a practice that confuses observers, or participants, count as confused.

What I think Phillips has in mind is a practice that illegitimately combines elements of different practices without the participants realizing it. The combination must be illegitimate or else there is no confusion, just innovation. Rugby is not a confused version of soccer, from which it originated. But what are the criteria of legitimacy here? Each game has its own rules, and it is not at all clear that there are meta-rules for the creation of new games. The burden of proof that there are such rules lies with those who wish to condemn practices as philosophically confused. Practices might be confused in some other sense (theologically, say) but that is not philosophy's business. *Every* practice or belief is immune from criticism when one sticks to a

method that allows only those assertions that are accepted by the practitioner or believer herself. And this is Wittgenstein's method in philosophy.

On the other hand, there is such a thing as a roundabout way to go. Socrates' method is somewhat similar to Wittgenstein's in this sense, but he leads people from complacent certainty to doubt. Any belief whatsoever might be subjected to the method of grammatical investigation and found, by the believer, to be confused. Any practice based on such a belief might thus be criticized. There is no reason why a Wittgensteinian cannot suspect, or even firmly believe, that someone else has a confused belief. But it is not Wittgensteinian to try to prove such suspicions correct (using syllogistic reasoning, for instance). Rather the method is to lead the other to see things the same way. And this is to be done, if it can be done, by saying nothing that is controversial or objectionable.

With regard to his remark on the scapegoat, I think the context of this remark, and therefore its purpose, need to be borne in mind. The remark is one of many about philosophy, not religion or magic. Wittgenstein is saying that philosophical errors often arise from false pictures. Admittedly, he also implies that there is something wrong with the idea of a scapegoat, but his remark is not primarily about the scapegoat ritual and is addressed, presumably, to those who neither practise nor believe in such a ritual. Given the point Wittgenstein is making here, if someone objected to his pejorative remark about scapegoats he would withdraw it and use a less objectionable example. It is also worth noting that this remark did not make it into the *Philosophical Investigations*, unlike many of those from the same set of notes, and so we should not assume that Wittgenstein himself was entirely happy with it. As with all of Wittgenstein's remarks on religion, it is important to remember that he says what he says 'for a particular purpose'.⁴⁸ If Wittgenstein had been focusing on the scapegoat ritual in this remark, no doubt he would have expressed himself more carefully. In the 'Remarks on Frazer' the criticism is all of Frazer's interpretation of religious and magical practices and beliefs, not of those practices and beliefs themselves, although of course Wittgenstein probably shared in none of them. Similarly, in the 'Lectures on Religious Belief' Wittgenstein is out to correct

philosophers' misunderstandings of religious belief, not to attack or defend such belief itself. When he talks about references to the Eye of God as uses of a picture, he is concerned to make clear that he is not thereby belittling or criticizing such references. Of the user of the expression 'Eye of God' Wittgenstein says, 'If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say.'⁴⁹ He goes on a little later as follows: 'All I wished to characterize was the [consequences] he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant.'⁵⁰ If it is only acceptable to say that someone uses a picture when the person himself would admit as much, then surely it is only acceptable *when discussing scapegoats* to say that the scapegoat ritual involves a false picture if the practitioners of this ritual would admit as much, which they surely would not.

Perhaps this conclusion comes too fast. Wittgenstein, after all, says that when he talks about someone using a picture what he means is to offer a characterization of the consequences that person wished to draw. If that person were to overhear part of Wittgenstein's lecture and object that although he did indeed draw those consequences he was by no means using a picture, then he would have missed Wittgenstein's point. Such 'disagreement' would be only superficial. To avoid this kind of misunderstanding a skilful Wittgensteinian might look for another way to characterize the man's position, but we should not think that a true practitioner of Wittgenstein's method would never use words to which someone might take exception. The point of avoiding disagreement is to avoid disagreement on matters of real substance. Only philosophical illusions are to be dispelled. Genuine religious beliefs will be untouched by the application of this method. That is to say, not only will they remain unscathed, they will not even be confronted by it.

Wittgensteinian fideism

Finally, let me turn to Kai Nielsen's paper 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', which seems to have contained the first argument that embarrassed some Wittgensteinians into wanting to read Wittgenstein as critical of some religious beliefs or practices. Wittgensteinian fideism is the

idea, which it is part of my purpose in this chapter to defend, that '[p]hilosophy cannot relevantly criticise religion; it can only display for us the workings, the style of functioning, of religious discourse'.⁵¹ Nielsen objects that this idea makes a nonsense of his belief that religion itself is irrational.

Nielsen's insistence is not so much that religion is irrational, but that it makes sense to consider the possibility that religion might be irrational, that talk about God might be just as incoherent and irrational as talk about witches. Belief in witches is irrational, according to Nielsen, not because witches do not exist but because it is incoherent to assert that witches exist while living a life in which one relies on such concepts as 'fact' and 'evidence'. It is just not clear what possible fact is meant when one asserts that witches exist, or what would count as evidence for such a factual claim, Nielsen says.

It surely could, though, become clear what was meant if one talked to a believer in witches. Someone might believe that there are long-nosed women with green skin who are able to fly on broomsticks. This is a false belief, but not an incoherent one. The belief is only really incoherent if nothing is meant by it. It is not remotely Wittgensteinian to insist a priori that no one who talks about witches means anything by such talk. Perhaps some such people merely believe that there are old women who live alone and know a lot about herbs. This is coherent and true.

Let us turn to what Nielsen says about God and facts. Nielsen says:

But when it is claimed – as presumably people who seriously utter certain religious propositions claim – that the *facts* asserted by these religious propositions are such and such, their claims must be open to some possible confirmation or disconfirmation: their claims must be publicly testable.⁵²

This, he says, is what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark. But it is not. Presumptions and judgements of people's seriousness have no part in the method that Wittgenstein advocates for doing philosophy. No doubt some religious believers are confused about the relation between religion and science. Others might use the word 'fact' in religious contexts in a poetic or secondary sense, as expressions of a

certain attitude or feeling that should not be taken literally.⁵³ Still others might deny that there is any such thing as a 'religious proposition'. And so on, and so on. We do not know without asking people what they would or would not say, so we do not know what they would admit, and so we do not know what we can say about their beliefs while still being properly Wittgensteinian.

We can, of course, choose to reject Wittgenstein's method, but that is another matter. Nielsen himself does so, although apparently without realizing it. Whether religion is rational depends on which standard of rationality one applies, and it is not a matter of undeniable fact that there is only one such, or that the one standard finds religious belief wanting. Choosing a standard is making a value-judgement. Wittgenstein never denies our ability or right to do this. He does, though, deny that philosophy or grammar will do it for us. There is no general kind of belief (religious or historical beliefs, for instance) that cannot be changed or exposed as incoherent as a result of close attention to grammar, but there is no kind that inevitably will be. In this sense Wittgenstein is a fideist.

Such fideism does not commit us to relativism or to any bizarre or stupid beliefs, as might be thought, however. We can agree with Cora Diamond when she writes in *The Realistic Spirit* as follows:

According to the widow Keelan, in Tara, in 1893

St Columcille never had a father. The way it was was this: St Bridget was walkin' wid St Paathrick an' a ball fell from heavin', an' it was that swate she et it all up, an' it made her prignant with Columcille, an' that's what a praste towld me, an' it's thrue.

But it is *not* true – and even if it were part of the conventional representation of Columcille that he was so conceived, or of Irish saints in general that they were, that would not make it true.⁵⁴

I personally agree entirely with this. But of course the widow Keelan would not. Diamond flatly contradicts her. And so, if Diamond were practising Wittgensteinian philosophy on her (the widow Keelan), she would not say such a thing. Diamond's point is aimed at contemporary philosophers and, in making it, she assumes that they do not

believe the story told by the widow Keelan. In this sense her remarks are what I have been calling parochial, but this does not invalidate them. In this parochialism there is a kind of methodological relativism. What one says, what one should say, will depend upon one's audience, but not because the truth is relative. Rather, what philosophy, like medicine, can achieve is relative to or dependent on the audience or patient. Even if this is relativism, then, it is best not to call it relativism as this is more likely to lead to misunderstanding of what Wittgenstein is up to. He is neither a fideist nor a relativist in any genuinely objectionable sense.

Phillips has said that it is 'simply a scandal in scholarship' that the label 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' has made a recent comeback despite his best efforts to combat it.⁵⁵ Lest I be accused of aiding and abetting this scandalous situation, let me try one last time to clarify my position in relation to what Phillips has written about 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' in *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*.⁵⁶ The fideism Phillips takes on there is something of which Wittgensteinians, and in particular Phillips himself, are often accused. It is rarely attributed directly to Wittgenstein, and it is not the view that I have been attributing to him here. In fact it is not one view but one or more of the following five theses:

1. Religious beliefs are logically cut off from all other aspects of human life.
2. Religious beliefs can only be understood by religious believers.
3. Whatever is called religious language determines what is and what is not meaningful in religion.
4. Religious beliefs cannot be criticized.
5. Religious beliefs cannot be affected by personal, social or cultural events.⁵⁷

Phillips is quite capable of defending himself from the charge that he believes any of the above. Let me address the question whether Wittgenstein believes them. Wittgenstein would not support thesis 1, since he has no theory according to which one area of language is logically cut off from another. Language-games of questioning or philosophizing, for instance, cut across many if not all 'aspects of human

life'. Thesis 2 would not be challenged if presented as a normative claim, but if it is meant in a purely positive way it is obviously false, otherwise non-Buddhists, for instance, would all fail courses they might take on Buddhism, which is not the case. Thesis 3 might be true, but is very vague and appears to be meant as a form of conceptual relativism, on which see Chapter 3 (Phillips offers little by way of explanation or refutation of this woolly idea). Theses 4 and 5 are just plainly false, and there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that Wittgenstein would have been foolish enough to endorse either of them. When I call him a kind of fideist, then, it is not this scandalous folly that I have in mind.

Conclusion

My argument has been that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy is of a method for dealing with certain sorts of problems. In this sense it is like a kind of therapy. Part of this method is to say nothing to the 'patient' that he or she does not accept. The goal is to bring a certain clarity, which can be recognized at least in part by a feeling of intellectual clarity or peace. Wittgenstein does not lay down the law on who needs such therapy, nor does he guarantee success. His method may be tried on anyone one suspects of philosophical confusion. So no one, and no belief, is beyond the scope of Wittgensteinian philosophical investigation. But no particular kind of belief is condemned prior to such investigation. Philosophical therapy is no more guilty of relativism or objectionable fideism than, say, chemotherapy, which takes no stand on religious issues either. There is just no place here for dogmatic assertions that religion is irrational, or anything of the sort. There is no place either for dogmatic condemnation of any particular ritual or belief, at least not prior to an investigation with an interlocutor who practises the ritual or holds the belief. With the scapegoat ritual we are in no position to carry out such an investigation, so we are in no position to condemn it as false, confused or superstitious.

Indeed, it is no part of Wittgenstein's philosophy to maintain that *any* religious belief or practice is false (or superstitious or confused). Hence his remark that the advantage of his philosophy 'is that if you

believe, say, Spinoza or Kant, this interferes with what you can believe in religion; but if you believe me, nothing of the sort'.⁵⁸ Philosophical therapy cures, if anything, philosophical problems, not religious ones. A person's religious beliefs might be infected with philosophical confusion, but if so, all the true Wittgensteinian can do is to offer helpful remarks and see whether these are accepted. Most likely they will not be, unless the individual in question feels confused. What works, if anything, will vary from individual to individual, although of course certain remarks might be found to be more generally useful than others.

However, there can be no place here for sweeping generalizations about what is, or is not, nonsense. Whether an assertion makes sense, and what sense it has, is shown by the work it does, or does not do, in someone's life. There is no combination of words ('proof of God's existence', for instance) that could never have a use in a person's life. Nor is there any that is always used meaningfully. This is why, given Wittgenstein's ideas about what philosophy should be, there can never be Wittgensteinian doctrines about religion.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein as quoted by M.O'C. Drury in Rush Rhees (ed.) *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 94.
2. Kai Nielsen 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' *Philosophy* 42: 161 (July 1967).
3. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1999, p. 154.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* ed. G.H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p. 32e (from 1937).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33e (from 1937).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 53e (from 1946).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 64e (from 1947).
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor, ed. Cyril Barrett, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1966, p. 56.

9. Ibid., pp. 57–9.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1993, p. 44.
11. See *ibid.*, pp. 42–3.
12. O.K. Bouwsma *Wittgenstein: Conversations 1949–1951* ed. J.L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1986.
13. Emyr Vaughan Thomas ‘Wittgenstein and Tolstoy: The Authentic Orientation’ *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 363.
14. *Culture and Value*, p. 77e (from 1948), quoted in David G. Stern *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995, p. 7.
15. See Brian R. Clack ‘D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion’ (especially pp. 113–19) *Religious Studies* 31 (1995) and Clack’s *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion* Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1999, pp. 122–3.
16. D.Z. Phillips ‘On Giving Practice its Due – A Reply’, *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 123.
17. Ludwig Wittgenstein, from ‘The Big Typescript’ (MS 213) as trans. Anthony Kenny in *The Wittgenstein Reader* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p. 265.
18. Ibid., p. 272.
19. Paul Johnston *Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York, 1989, p. 113.
20. *Culture and Value*, p. 7e (from 1930), quoted in Beth Savickey *Wittgenstein’s Art of Investigation* Routledge, London and New York, 1999, p. 41.
21. Caleb Thompson, ‘Wittgenstein’s Confessions’ *Philosophical Investigations* 23: 1 (January 2000): 3.
22. See Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, §109.
23. *Culture and Value*, p. 16e (from 1931).
24. Ludwig Wittgenstein ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*’ *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, p. 125.
25. Ibid., p. 135.
26. Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Philosophy’ (from ‘The Big Typescript’ MS 213) in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, p. 197. This is section 93 of the ‘Big Typescript’, headed ‘THE MYTHOLOGY IN THE FORMS OF OUR LANGUAGE. (PAUL ERNST)’. The ‘Big Typescript’ was written in 1933.
27. See Clack *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, pp. 123–5.
28. In fact there are two sets of remarks by Wittgenstein on Frazer. The first were originally scattered throughout a manuscript written in 1931 and

later grouped together by Wittgenstein as part of a larger typescript. The second set was written on scraps of paper, probably after 1948 according to Rhees. For more on the origin of the remarks see *Philosophical Occasions*, pp. 115–17.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
30. Berel Dov Lerner 'Wittgenstein's Scapegoat' *Philosophical Investigations* 17: 4 (October 1994): 605.
31. Leviticus 16: 7–10, King James Version.
32. *Ibid.*, 16: 21–2.
33. Rush Rhees *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* ed. D.Z. Phillips, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 75–6. Emphasis in the original.
34. D.Z. Phillips *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1986, p. 27.
35. Lerner 'Wittgenstein's Scapegoat', p. 606.
36. See D.Z. Phillips 'Primitive Reactions and the Reactions of Primitives' in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1993, p. 72.
37. Lerner 'Wittgenstein's Scapegoat', p. 609.
38. *Culture and Value*, p. 5e (from 1930).
39. *Ibid.*, p. 72e (from 1948).
40. *Ibid.*, p. 83e (from 1949).
41. Emphasis in the original.
42. *Philosophical Occasions*, p. 131.
43. Ludwig Wittgenstein, from 'The Big Typescript' (MS 213), as translated by Anthony Kenny in *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 265.
44. Clack *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, 1999, p. 125.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–2.
47. Rhees *Rush Rhees on Religion*, p. 116.
48. *Philosophical Investigations* §127.
49. *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 71.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 72. The original passage has 'conventions' instead of 'consequences', but from the context this seems clearly to be a mistake.
51. Nielsen 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', p. 193.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3.
53. For more on secondary sense see Chapter 8 of Cora Diamond *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

55. D.Z. Phillips's entry in *Philosophical Investigations* 24: 2 (April 2001): 150.
56. D.Z. Phillips *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*.
57. See *ibid.*, pp. 5–16 for these theses and Phillips's response to them.
58. Quoted in G.E.M. Anscombe 'Misinformation: What Wittgenstein Really Said' in *The Tablet* (17 April 1954): 373.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that as well as the usual distinction between the early and the late Wittgenstein, we distinguish between Wittgenstein the man and Wittgenstein the philosopher. It is Wittgenstein the man who fears the darkness of his time, who dislikes utilitarianism, who dismisses certain religious beliefs as superstitious, and so on. Wittgenstein the philosopher advocates a certain kind of approach to philosophical problems in which one does not express any such views as those just listed, but instead sticks to questions, imaginary examples and inarguable banalities. The use of this method must be guided, though, by certain ideas about what is confused and what is not, and what the likely cause of the confusion is. So, as we saw in Chapter 4, we can in fact distinguish three Wittgensteins: the personal, the methodological and the suspicious. It is not always easy, or perhaps even possible, to know exactly which of these Wittgensteins is speaking at any given time, but we must try to keep them separate if we are to take Wittgenstein at his word, and to understand both what he says and why he says it.

The difficulty of knowing which Wittgenstein is speaking is especially acute when reading notes of his lectures and conversations. When he responds to some remark with the exclamation ‘Rubbish!’ is he lapsing momentarily into personal mode, commenting on his students’ failure to grasp his method, or simply violating his own methodological procedure?¹ I think it is the second of these alternatives, but of course I cannot prove that Wittgenstein meant one thing rather than another in such a context. This is one reason for putting more weight on the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is actually written by Wittgenstein and is fairly polished (it was almost ready for publication when he died). It is his methodological remarks there that have guided my interpretation of his other works.

The most important of these other works, of course, is the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which is strikingly different from the later work

and thus allows for an additional, and much more traditional, distinction between Wittgensteins. I am sympathetic to the Diamond/Conant view that the *Tractatus* is an internally consistent work with much the same aim as Wittgenstein's later work. However, P.M.S. Hacker has amassed an impressive quantity of external evidence that suggests otherwise. So there is at least a possibility that Wittgenstein was more confused when he wrote the *Tractatus* than Diamond and Conant think. Partly because of this I prefer to focus on the later work which, if Hacker is right, is much less of a mess and, if Diamond is right, says much the same as the early work anyway.

What, then, does Wittgenstein say in all this work? In a word, nothing. What he says he is trying to do is to demonstrate a method for showing up nonsense for what it is. He makes no positive claims that one claim is true and another false. He does seem to try to show that certain ideas are really nonsensical (such as the idea of a private language), but this can only ever be a temporary, tentative and *ad hominem* point. Wittgenstein does not say that there never could be a private language, or that the idea of such a language is absolutely nonsensical, for instance. Instead he shows that, taken a certain way, the words 'private language' do not refer to anything that satisfies the person who wants to use them.

In Chapter 1 I explained the importance for understanding what Wittgenstein says of knowing why he says it, what his goal is in doing and reconceiving philosophy. His goal is not, I have argued, the same political one as Karl Kraus's. Nor is it any consequentialist one. I thus disagree with Hilary Putnam when he writes:

If Wittgenstein wants to make a bonfire of our philosophical vanities, this is not a matter of sheer intellectual sadism; if I am reading Wittgenstein correctly, those vanities, in his view, are what keep us from trust and, perhaps even more important, keep us from compassion.²

The vanities that Wittgenstein does indeed wish to help us destroy are to be destroyed not because they keep us from trust (and lead us into scepticism) and compassion, but because they are vanities. For Wittgenstein, clarity has its own value. He wishes to help us remove

the motes and beams from our own eyes, as it were, not because of what we will then see (he does not claim to know what this will be), but just so that we can see clearly. Wittgenstein is not out to exalt the sacred mystery of all things, *pace* James C. Edwards, even if he himself believed in such a mystery (which I rather doubt, mostly because I cannot imagine Wittgenstein using such words to express his conception of the wonder of the world). Talk of hidden significances, it seems to me, is precisely the kind of thing that Wittgenstein would expect to be dropped by the clear-sighted. It is certainly significant that he never talked this way, at least in his more mature work. Thus Rush Rhees, who knew him very well, doubts that Wittgenstein would have spoken of 'seeing the world aright' (as he did in the *Tractatus*) after 1929.³ There is no claim in the later work to know how the world is, or how it should be seen. Even in the *Tractatus* there is very little like this, but what there is seems important, since the world is presented as a sort of monolith: 'the totality of facts', which sounds very heavy. The metaphysical minimalism of the *Tractatus* (even if it is a minimalism that seeks to undo itself) is not just self-destroying in the later work, but completely absent.

This has made the later Wittgenstein seem to some people to be a relativist, denying that there are any facts or way the world is. One form relativism could take would be the idea that each of us lives in a world of his or her own. Solipsism does seem to have been one of the vanities that tempted Wittgenstein, but even in the *Tractatus*, I have argued, he saw it as a vanity, as utter nonsense. The same goes for his idea of a private language. The same does not go, however, for the hypothetical idea of a solitary rule-follower or, more specifically, language user. It is hard to imagine such a person, at least if we want to do so fully, filling in all the background to her strange story, but there is nothing Wittgensteinian (I am speaking of the methodological or therapeutic Wittgenstein who presents himself as the author of the *Investigations*) about asserting that no such case ever could arise. Wittgenstein makes no claims about what is or is not necessary in order for people to follow rules or to have a language. He simply describes.

This very description, though, and the refusal to go beyond or below it, can seem to lead into a different kind of relativism. What ultimately justifies these descriptions, after all, making one right and

another wrong? Is truth merely conventional or relative to our language-games? Or is there some ultimate justification for our words (not these or those words, but our whole language or conceptual scheme)? If so, what is it? If not, aren't we in trouble? Wittgenstein's remarks that grammar expresses the essence of things (see *Philosophical Investigations* §371 and §373) and that grammar is arbitrary (*Philosophical Investigations* §497, for instance) add strength to this fear.

As we saw in Chapter 3, though, what Wittgenstein says is not quite that grammar is arbitrary. There is an arbitrary aspect to grammar, but also an important non-arbitrary aspect. Because of his emphasis on this non-arbitrary aspect, the fact that we do not *choose* our language and that there are parts of it, or features of it, that would be virtually impossible for us to do without, Wittgenstein is not a relativist who thinks that one conceptual scheme is as good as any other. Because of the arbitrary aspect, though, because the world does not make one language, or grammar, or set of concepts, absolutely the right ones, it is better not to speak of Wittgenstein as a foundationalist.

Just as the world does not justify our grammar in that kind of way, so too our grammar does not impose any particular ethical or religious views on us. So Wittgenstein's method of grammatical investigation (grammatical description) does not lead to any particular beliefs about ethics or religion, as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5. When Wittgenstein himself refers to a belief as superstitious we should not conclude that this is meant as a grammatical remark, even if the remark occurs in the midst of philosophizing. 'Superstition' is not, after all, a neutrally descriptive word. That there is evidence of some kind for the existence of God is not something that all speakers of English, just as speakers of English, will agree is a superstitious belief. So if Wittgenstein thought that philosophy could label as superstitious someone who claimed to have such justification for religious belief (someone that I have called a rationalist or a fundamentalist) then he would be violating his own conception of philosophy. Perhaps he was muddled about this, but we do not have to read him that way. It is noteworthy that when Wittgenstein talks about Father O'Hara, who thinks along the rationalist lines I have been describing, he speaks in the first-person singular. Wittgenstein says:

I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition.

... I would ridicule it ...⁴

It is clear that this is inconsistent with Wittgenstein's remarks about how to do philosophy, even remarks made in the same set of lectures, so it is not simply that he had not yet settled on the method of the *Investigations*. We can quite easily save Wittgenstein from accusations of muddle or hypocrisy here though if we take such remarks as statements or expressions of his personal opinions. It is this that I propose we do, in order to be able to take Wittgenstein at his word. Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, as with all his philosophy, consists of a way of dealing with philosophical problems. Wittgenstein's method is not a means for judging or deciding between alternative religious beliefs.

Is this method any good? If not, Wittgenstein's pessimism in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which he suggests that the book is unlikely to achieve its aim of bringing light into one brain or another, is warranted. He says that the book is not a good one, so if it is not, then he is right. If it *is* a good one he is right too, of course, to have written it. So the question of whether Wittgenstein was right or wrong is trivial. He cannot be wrong not only in this trivial sense but because, as I have repeatedly emphasized, he makes no positive claims that could possibly be wrong. But he could be *insignificant*. It could be that his work really does not stimulate thought or help to remove confusion. It could even be, I suppose, that such confusion is not the terrible thing that Wittgenstein took it to be. I do not believe that all value-judgements are subjective, but in this case I think the reader must judge for herself whether Wittgenstein's method is of any use. Personally I find it helpful, but I cannot prove that I am not deluded about this.

It does not follow, though, that any other use of Wittgenstein's work is misguided. Of course it might be, but there is no reason why we must take from Wittgenstein only what he explicitly gave us. If we choose to take inspiration from Wittgenstein the man as a moral example, that is up to us. If we choose to share his suspicions, or even to call them theories, and defend them as best we can with rational

argument, that too is up to us. We need not share Wittgenstein's pessimism about the possibility or value of doing this (although of course we can, and we might be right to do so). If people have false, confused or harmful beliefs and will not accept grammatical therapy, then rational argument might be the best way to respond to them. Wittgenstein clearly did not take this course himself, and history suggests that most philosophers will not be persuaded by Wittgenstein-inspired arguments and theses, but it does not follow that orthodox Wittgensteinians should just give up what they are doing right now.

If we distinguish between Wittgensteins as I have proposed, then it follows that one can be Wittgensteinian, or continue his legacy, in at least three ways. One would be to follow the personal Wittgenstein, attacking, even ridiculing, what he took to be superstition, scientism and unreasonableness. A second would be to extract arguments and theses that seem to lie behind much of what Wittgenstein says and to use these, and others like them, to attack contemporary theories of language, mind, and so on. Doing so is not doing what Wittgenstein called philosophy, but it is still likely to oppose beliefs that he opposed and to support positions that he suspected were right, so it is reasonable to call such activity Wittgensteinian. Hilary Putnam's work comes to mind as a good example of this kind of philosophy. It is not likely to achieve what Wittgenstein wanted to achieve, because its aim is something other than clarity (it might be truth, or more productive research programmes in artificial intelligence, say), but there is no special (or grammatical) reason why we must share Wittgenstein's aims. Thirdly, of course, we can try our hands at what Wittgenstein did. This is not easy, and will seem pointless to those who do not share his values, at least somewhat, but it is the 'purest' way to be a Wittgensteinian philosopher.

Whether one chooses any of these paths is up to the reader, of course. It is not my aim here to prove one or more of them better than the others, nor even to recommend any of them. My aim has simply been to clear up some of the confusion surrounding Wittgenstein's aims, the methods he used to achieve these aims, and the things he said and wrote in applying these methods. It is not unreasonable to think that Wittgenstein himself was confused, at least some of the time, about these things. But it is possible, too, to interpret his work

as being self-consistent, if we read him as I have proposed, and if we take Cora Diamond's line on what he was doing in the *Tractatus*. It is possible, in short, to take him at his word.

Notes

1. See, for instance, p. 71 in Ludwig Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* ed. Cyril Barrett, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1966.
2. Hilary Putnam *Renewing Philosophy* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992, pp. 178–9.
3. See Rush Rhees's untitled contribution to *Philosophical Investigations* 24: 2 (April 2001): 157.
4. *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 59.

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