

Clarification and the End of Philosophy¹

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1. The Ends and Methods of Philosophy

Tradition has it that philosophy has the creditable and noble end of distinguishing appearance from reality, of getting at the true nature of things. Its purpose is to advance our knowledge concerning what is essential with respect to important matters. Although there have been powerful challenges to the idea that we can get at ‘essences’ *per se*, many of today’s philosophers have retained (or hope to retain) the philosophical ambition of progressing the development of our concepts by broadly rational means. As many see it today, the end of philosophy is not unlike that of the sciences: It is to add to our existing stock of knowledge and to provide, by that route, a deeper understanding the world. In line with this, philosophy is thought to achieve this by advancing and testing theories, refining our categories in the process.

In opposition and reaction to this ‘mainstream’ view, there are those who hold that at best the business of philosophy is purely therapeutic, designed only to help rid us of such ambitions and attendant confusions. Similarly, it is supposed that philosophical method will take a form appropriate to these ends.

I hold that we do not face a simple methodological choice in philosophy either: to advance theory or to attempt therapy. In coming to understand important topics, such as ‘reality’, ‘meaning’, ‘logic’, philosophy end is not progressive, according the standard conception, but this does not imply that it is wholly negative and deflationary. In what follows, I will explore this third way by expounding, explicating and defending Wittgenstein’s claim that philosophy clarifies our understanding of important philosophical matters. However, I will first briefly attempt to discredit its putative rivals.

2. Philosophy as Conceptual Analysis

Moser makes the connection between theorising and conceptual analysis clear in the opening lines of his book, *Philosophy after Objectivity*. There he writes:

Philosophers of all stripes have theories to offer, for better or worse ...
Theories in philosophy, whether good or bad, aim to explain something, to answer certain explanation-seeking questions ... What is being? What is thinking? What is knowledge? What are we? ...
Rare is the philosopher with no theory whatever to offer. Such would be a philosopher without a philosophy ... (Moser 1993, p. 3).

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In fleshing out this idea it is tempting to think that philosophical explanations must be analogous to those in more ordinary and scientific domains. That is to say, a philosophical theory starts life in the form of a speculative proposal about what defines some important topic. However, unlike empirical hypotheses, the testing of a philosophical theory cannot proceed by ordinary experimental methods. Instead philosophical hypotheses must face the tribunal of counterexamples and testing through thought experiment to establish their credentials.² In the light of such testing, the original hypothesis is either refined or abandoned. In this respect, it is thought that the responses we are inclined to make to possible cases provide the appropriate constraint for philosophical, as opposed to other kinds of empirical, theorising.

But what is the basis for this testing? Analytic philosophers focus on the convergence and agreement of our intuitions, those shared intersubjectively', in their attempts, "to justify [their] objectivity" (Gomila 1991, p. 85–6). For example, we are told such things as "Our dispositions to use or refrain from applying the words which express concepts are the objective evidence we have for what those concepts are. Intuitions may be merely subjective manifestations of publicly shared linguistic dispositions" (Miller 2000, p. 235, emphasis mine).

We can see from this alone that the methodological plausibility of conceptual analysis depends on our acceptance of the idea that our agreed intuitions can provide the right sort of constraints for assessing proposals about the nature of important concepts. That intuitions are used to play this sort of role is borne out not only by rare explicit statements of method on the part of analytical philosophers, but even more revealingly by their actual practice.³ But there are several problems with the idea that conceptual analysis might proceed in this way, which I shall now review.

2.1. No Independent Check

The most serious problem concerns the idea that the project of conceptual analysis can be conducted on objective grounds. For we may wonder how our intuitions are meant to provide an independent check on philosophical speculation. For example, consider a parallel worry about using proofs and arguments to objectively settle issues of substantial philosophical concern. Proofs are meant, *par excellence*, to provide, "arguments independent of the prejudices or the goodwill of the audience" (Feyerabend 1999, p. 51). But how can they achieve this given that the acceptance of a conclusion depends on our current conceptual commitments as revealed by our evaluation of the facts?

2 As Miller observes, "When an analysis is proposed, it becomes open to the method of counterexample. The analysis of X, to the extent that it is clear, has implications for what does and does not fall under the concept. The analysis is then tested to see if the things which it implies are X's really are and if things which it implies are not X's really are not. If one can find a genuine X that the analysis claims isn't or a non-X that the analysis claims is, then one has found a counterexample and the analysis is refuted" (Miller 2000, p. 245).

3 For example, in tracing the legacy of what he calls 'counterexample philosophy' as passed down from classical to contemporary thinkers, Bishop provides a representative but hardly comprehensive list of its recent practitioners. He writes, "Consider just a fraction of these: David Lewis on convention (1969) and on causation (1973), Alvin Goldman on knowledge (1967), H. P. Price on meaning (1957), Carl Hempel on explanation (1948), Wesley Salmon on causation (1984) and Hilary Putnam on mental states (1967)" (Bishop 1992, p. 267).

Feyerabend illustrates the general problem by considering Parmenides' argument for a monistic account of Being and its later rejection by Democritus and Aristotle. In both instances, the success of the proof and its putative refutation were built into the reception of the premises that supposedly enable us to draw our final conclusion. In this case, the success of these arguments was dependent on the understanding the proponents had of the 'reality' of change. In both cases, whether these conceptions were taken as established fact or not was decisive. In devising his proof, Parmenides was aware of the common view that things change, even though he denied it (his first premise), whereas Aristotle bases his counter-argument on accepting it. We can see from this that the success or failure of proofs involves making practical decisions – it is never the result of purely objective processes. Consequently, what constitutes a proper counterexample depends on our normative assessment of what we are willing to accept as such. This being so, logical reconstructions of our reasoning at best provide a means of articulating or making explicit our commitments – they do not have the power to settle disputes with any *objective* authority. Contra their advertised properties, logical arguments cannot decide things for us on their own; like any other mode of persuasion, whether we ultimately accept or reject an argument's conclusion depends on *our evaluation* of it. But these evaluations cannot be based on any kind of *independent* check, which is precisely what makes doing serious philosophy so difficult. Miller neatly sums up the overarching hope and underlying problem neatly in the following passage:

One of the attractions of the old method of analysis was that it gave philosophers the impression that they could decisively refute some philosophical hypotheses and that, to this extent at least, philosophy could become progressive instead of endlessly debating the same issues without resolution... Looking for counterexamples is something every philosopher knows how to do and it provides the comforting illusion that one's opponent has really been refuted. But the illusion evaporates when one takes a sufficiently broad perspective on the controversies as they really unfold. Whether something is really an X, as opposed to being an X according to the proposed analysis, is determinable solely by appeal to intuition. And the flimsiness and variability of those intuitions come to light as soon as there is any serious controversy over any weighty philosophical issues (Miller 2000, p. 245).

These observations should make us equally suspicious of the idea that there could be an identifiable independent standard against which to assess the correctness of any given analysis. But without such a standard, there is no real independent test for determining whether or not any given analysis is correct. Hence, in what sense is it right to think of such analyses as a kind of *theorising*? In what sense could they potentially yield *explanations*? At best, it seems the products of traditional forms of conceptual analysis are descriptive, as opposed to genuinely explanatory. This is ironic as Wittgenstein's approach, which is generally misunderstood, is often accused of being unambitious on just this basis.

We can see the seriousness of this problem by asking *which* intuitions are meant to provide the standard against which we can evaluate our analysis of concepts. For

without some pre-established criteria for this we run the risk that if it should turn out that there is no such general agreement, this would ultimately, “suggest that concepts are idiosyncratic and that conceptual analysis is a form of autobiography” (Brown 1999, p. 34).

2.2. No Metaphysical Hard Target

It is frequently observed that although the speculative proposals of conceptual analysts must necessarily be couched in linguistic terms, the very point of distinguishing ‘conceptual’ from merely ‘linguistic’ analysis is meant to remind us that the philosophical target in such cases is always how things *really* stand with respect to the subject under scrutiny, not just how we happen to talk about it. Like the early Russell before them, contemporary conceptual analysts are not interested in words, but what lies behind them. Jackson employs a colourful analogy to make this point. He says, “When bounty hunters go searching, they are searching for a person and not a handbill. But they will not get very far if they fail to attend to the representational properties of the handbill of the wanted person” (Jackson 1998, p. 30, see also p. 33, Miller 2000, p. 234).⁴ But making good on this idea has committed philosophers to a general ‘picture’ of concepts that is far removed from our ordinary understanding of them.

First of all, concepts are classically thought to be tightly defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions; which, despite its having lost favour in other arenas, is a view of concepts that is still, “held by the overwhelming majority of conceptual analysts” (Brown 1999, p. 36). This should not be surprising because seeking a decisive result – such as ‘the’ correct analysis of a given concept – requires there to be some fixed, determinate, hard target. But, as is well known, although some concepts lend themselves to rigorous definition, the majority do not. Most cannot be bound by strict ‘definitions’ in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Most quotidian concepts resist such unique analysis but worse still there is good reason to think that such philosophically important concepts as ‘knowledge’, ‘thought’ and ‘reality’ are even more elusive, precisely because of the visible failures who philosophers have expended so much effort trying to capture them.

The extensive evidence of our continued failure to provide final, agreed analyses of such concepts and the rampant disagreements about their ‘essential’ features suggests that the classical conception of concepts is an error. If we abandon the myth that concepts are a kind of fixed entity and focus instead on the way in which concepts are employed, it is clear - even before we engage in counterexample philosophy - that what is normally labelled under a single name will be a concept that has a great variety of different acceptable uses. It is therefore more probable that disagreements in our intuitions about *the* correct definition of such central concepts emerge because there is a vast range of different circumstances in which our concepts may be legitimately used. This is why debating whether or not a concept is the ‘same’ or not is ultimately a practical matter. Putting the moral slightly differently, Brown holds that in many cases conceptual analysts, “are not attempting to analyze the same concept” (Brown 1999, p. 56).

⁴ Miller notes, one reason Strawson was driven to assume that our most basic concepts are ‘changeless’ is that, “Analysis presumes a stable target” (Miller 2000, p. 235). Or as Gomila remarks, “if meanings were not fixed ... then the whole analytical project would have to be abandoned” (Gomila 1991, p. 85).

To resist this it would be necessary for the conceptual analyst to discredit all but one of these uses as illegitimate, there giving a single use special authority. Otherwise they must address the question: Which concept are we analysing? Is it *the* concept of X or *our* concept of X, as defining by its role in particular set of practices? Hence, if the latter, whom does the pronoun ‘our’ denote? It follows automatically that there will not be clear definitions of most concepts – even our most central ones – as long as, we use ‘our’ with wide enough scope to refer to “all of humanity” (Brown 1999, p. 55).

But it ought to be clear that there is no way to single out one use above all others without special pleading. Surely the task of philosophy is to determine what the *right* understanding of our important concepts is, not what we happen to think it is. Few philosophers would hold that what we think before we philosophise is naturally correct. For example in his discussion of the nature of ‘coming-to-be’ in *On Generation and Corruption*, Aristotle has this to say, “Coming to be simpliciter and perishing come out differently on the common view and on the correct view” (*On Generation and Corruption*, 318b 27-28). But if as suggested above we are really trying to decide between our intuitions when engaged in this task how can we avoid simply falling back on them (or other related intuitions) for guidance? Which intuitions ought we respect? In an attempt to answer just this, Jackson has recently argued that ‘our’ ordinary conception can be defined by the ‘typical’ set of intuitions of *most* people, statistically determined and that this provides the ‘right’ target for our analyses. Yet, this sort of reply only serves to underline the real problem with the entire approach. For it bids us to ask: If philosophy is simply theorising, why should we expect *our* ‘folk theory’ (to borrow Jackson’s idiom) or ‘ordinary conceptions’ about a given topic to be our ‘best theory’? Surely, elsewhere, in different cultures, the conceptual space is parsed differently. Even if, contrary to the evidence, we imagine that there is a unique and well-defined ‘folk theory’ about a given concept, why shouldn’t we favour a more scientific version of the same? And then, of course, we can ask which science should we favour? (see Hutto 2000, ch. 6, 4.2).

But matters are worse still. As already noted, the tradition holds that conceptual analyses they require, “stable and unambiguous concepts” (Feyerabend 1999, p. 57). But thinking about the preceding objection reveals brings yet another problem to the surface: for even our everyday concepts tend to evolve over time. Thus finding concepts that are stable and unambiguous requires that they have the stillness of death. Feyerabend puts the point beautifully by remarking that, “Clarity is ... a property of corpses” (Feyerabend 1999, p. 78). As he notes our concepts are, “well defined only when the culture fossilises” (Feyerabend 1999, p. 79).

Thus, even if for the sake of argument we were to accept that conceptual analysts could agree on a single analysis, it would at best define a universal standard for *a given time*. This is serious, since one of the main attractions of this vision of the philosophical task is that it promised to reveal something of *lasting* importance about the topics it scrutinises. At the very least, even if it fails to *explain* our concepts, it is thought that it might still be a means of discovering their essential nature. But the promise that it might is predicated on the assumption that the concepts to be analysed are not in a continuous state of flux. For if our concepts are open to development and not underwritten by what is ‘eternal, unchanging’, it follows that our philosophical conclusions on any substantial matter will not be final. If this is right, it turns out that

to think conceptual analysis can proceed in anything like the traditional way is an illusion.

3. From Analysis to Revision

Freed from the illusion of conceptual stability, another activity for philosophers suggests itself. That is the development and refinement of our concepts and even development of alternative concepts, as opposed to the mere description of existing ones. The thought is that our concern should be with the, “development and clarification of concepts that are in accord with overall scientific and philosophical aims” (Brown 1999, p. 49). Praising Sellars, Brown widens the scope of the former’s motto to read: “Philosophers have hitherto sought to understand ‘meanings’: the task is to change them” (Brown 1999, p. 55). Miller tells us:

Analytic philosophy is finished. Philosophy, I hope, is not. The discipline as I see it has a glorious and successful past and much to contribute to human progress in the future. The future does not lie in naturalism. Philosophy should respect science, but it should not attempt to be science (Miller 2000, p. 249).

Brandom, who carefully distances ‘explicating concepts’ from analysing meanings, sees only the former as the proper task of philosophy. For him, the most important difference, *inter alia*, is that, “where the analysis of meaning is a fundamentally conservative enterprise (consider the paradox of analysis), I see the point of explicating concepts to be opening them up to rational criticism” (Brandom 2000, p. 77).

The explication of our application of concepts is meant to enable us to be clear about our practical commitments and entitlements. As our commitments are generally unnoticed and unarticulated they have a subterranean influence on us – they need to be brought into the light: examined, challenged and replaced or removed, if necessary. Philosophers need not regard themselves as simply uncovering what is ‘already there’ or as questing after ‘essences’. The job of philosophers is not to behave as final arbiters. They simply prepare the ground for critical reflection. It is only by understanding current commitments properly that one can rationally argue for change. At the very least, the process still provides a platform and often a spur for the development of new habits.

This approach restores something like the Hegelian focus on dynamic conceptual development – *sans* the Absolute Idea. As with Hegel’s dialectic, logic – although now conceived differently – is seen as playing a central role: one that gives philosophy a privileged place in the development of concepts. It paves the way for the rational assessment of our conceptual entitlements and commitments, enabling them to be clearly expressed and rendered explicit, eventually enabling us to rid ourselves of inadequate or defective concepts that infect our thinking. Thus, Brandom claims “Logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness.” (Brandom 1994, p. xix–xx).

Like other forms of Hegelianism, a defining feature of this approach that philosophical progress is an ambition. By these lights, philosophy’s task remains rationalistic and progressive. Hence Brandom’s claim that:

Making the tradition rational is not independent of the labour of concretely *taking* it to be so. To be adequate, each such Whiggish rewriting of our disciplinary history must create and display *continuity* and *progress* by its systematic inclusions and exclusions (Brandom 2000, p. 76, third and fourth emphases mine).

The idea that philosophy is primarily about the rational revision and development of our concepts has been growing in popularity. Thus, it has become common to think its aim is the, “construction of better concepts” (Brown 1999, p. 57, emphasis mine). Or to hold that, “Philosophers should propose new concepts and evaluate them solely in terms of their utility ... Utility trumps intuition” (Miller 2000, p. 240). Yet, what assurance is there that such developments are ‘better’ or ‘more useful’? On what basis is this judged? How can we make intelligible talk of progress and betterment? In the absence of some independent standard what do such assessments actually come to? How is it to be decided that our concepts are rationally improving?

But those ‘conceptual revisionists’ who deny that scientific empirical theories could provide the appropriate measure, to appeal to non-empirical philosophical theories to do so instead. Thus we are told, “theory-choice should be governed by the same sorts of normative principles as are empirical theories” (Bishop 1992, p. 273). But if, as I just argued, appeal to thought experiments, argument and intuitions do not adequately constrain such ‘philosophical’ theorising, then there is no anchor for it that parallels the role experiment plays in the empirical sciences. Hence, if we want to continue to speak, in good faith, of philosophical progress, we must identify some other, more credible constraints on the development of our concepts.

4. Enter Scientific Naturalism

Given these concerns, it is hardly surprising that naturalism has emerged as the dominant form of philosophy employed by the inheritors of the analytic tradition. In awarding, “the results of empirical science the centrality formerly enjoyed by intuitions”, it promises to supply real constraints on conceptual development, which permit us to talk of progress (Miller 2000, p. 231, cf. also 233). Unlike those who see philosophy providing a privileged vantage and means to get at ‘real essences’, naturalists agree that there is no perspective ‘other’ than that provided by language from which to view matters. Any distinctions must be drawn and justified within our existing and developing practices. Philosophers, who crave an independent measure by which to judge, from on high, the worth of their explanations, crave the impossible.

Like revisionist philosophers, naturalists believe that concepts and practices are always on the move, having the potential for improvement. But unlike other revisionists they hope to provide a firm assurance that such developments are in fact progressive. They hold, above all else, that the methods of the science are the best and most rigorous that we have. In a perverse way, it is but a short step from dismissing the idea of higher philosophical perspective to accepting that there is no perspective higher than that provided by science. This is what opens the way for a very ambitious naturalism, according to which science is seen as having a privileged place in ensuring all genuine conceptual development. It is our highest court of

appeal on such matters. Amidst all our activities, it is first among equals. Russell captured this spirit long ago:

This brings me, however, to a question of method which I believe to be very important. What are we to take as data in philosophy? What shall we regard as having the greatest likelihood of being true, and what as proper to be rejected if it conflicts with other evidence? It seems to me that science has a much greater likelihood of being true in the main than any philosophy hitherto advanced (I do not, of course, except my own) ... We shall be wise to build our philosophy upon science (LA, p. 339).

Such too is the mantra of today's scientific naturalists. Quine made this approach attractive when he revealed the analytic/synthetic distinction to be bankrupt, for with that move everything ultimately becomes an empirical matter to be decided by appeal to our best theories. Everything is open to revision: if needs must, even 'logic' and 'necessity'. Quinean holism ensures that there is always a way out if one's presuppositions or assumptions lead to nonsense: to surrender these or certain others. This can often be achieved by changing the associated concepts.

On this view, it is always possible to make such adjustments. Scientific and philosophical progress will go hand in hand. It is often thought that Wittgenstein's obstinate and unwarranted anti-theoretical attitude caused him to overlook this possibility for the refinement and improvement of our categories. Thus accusing Wittgenstein of just this lack of vision, Klagge writes:

Wittgenstein speaks of the resolution (or dissolution) of a philosophical puzzle as one in which: the puzzle 'completely' disappears; and leads to the 'vanishing of the problem'. This is just what conceptual change produces (Klagge 1989, p. 324).

In saying this Klagge distinguishes what he calls 'scientific' and 'conceptual' resolutions to philosophical problems. A scientific resolution would meet a particular demand by supplying the appropriate facts. Klagge is prepared to agree with Wittgenstein that in many cases a scientific solution to a philosophical problem will not be forthcoming. But this still leaves open the possibility that we might dissolve philosophical problems by revising our conceptual criteria or by replacing troublesome concepts in the process of developing our scientific theories. As he puts it, "Science not only discovers new facts, but in doing so ... it can affect old concepts. Science can be relevant to the resolution of philosophical perplexities by provoking a conceptual resolution of them" (Klagge 1989, p. 325).

This being so, why shouldn't philosophy simply proceed after the fashion of science. Put simply, if we are open to the possibility of radical change in our scientific conceptions, then why should we think that philosophy can deal with its troubles in this way? That is: when faced with paradox, why shouldn't philosophical problems be 'resolved' by revisionary methods? Why shouldn't philosophy be concerned with this sort of positive, systematic and progressive development of our concepts? The removing conceptual confusions would be like the clearing of rubble before exploring new ground. Thus revising our concepts can be seen in the service of this higher end.

Why shouldn't philosophers regard themselves in Lockean terms as those for whom it is, "ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of human knowledge" (Locke, *Epistle to the Reader*).

This is possible in limited cases. But naturalists make a much stronger claim, which Papineau sets out clearly below:

Traditionalists will allow, of course, that some philosophical problems, problems in applied philosophy, as it were, [can be solved by the uncovering of further empirical evidence]. But they will insist that when we turn to 'first philosophy', to the investigation of such fundamental categories of thought and knowledge, then philosophy must proceed independently of science. Naturalists will respond that there is no reason to place even first philosophy outside science. They will point out that even the investigation of basic topics like thought and knowledge needs to start somewhere, with some assumptions about the nature of the human mind and its relation to the rest of reality. Without any assumptions to work from, investigation would be paralysed. And the obvious strategy, naturalists will argue, is to begin with our empirically best-attested theories of mind and its relation to reality, and use these as a framework within which to raise and resolve philosophical difficulties... (Papineau 1993, p. 3).

5. Exit Scientific Naturalism

Unless we appeal to the rational methods of science what ensures our conceptual developments progress steadily? How can we protect against the prospect that 'anything goes'. As Klagge says, "From what Wittgenstein says, it sounds as though changes of criteria are more or less immediately possible, so that *we may choose* which phenomena are to count as criteria" (Klagge 1989, p. 322, emphasis mine). We can see from the emphasis on 'choice', in Klagge's remarks, that the question that really troubles naturalists is: What, if anything, ensures that concepts simply do not shift randomly and without direction or as a matter of whimsy? Yet despite such accusations, Wittgenstein is very much alive to this concern, only he gives a different answer.

'So does it depend wholly on our grammar what will be called (logically) possible and what not – i.e. what that grammar permits?' – But surely this is *arbitrary!* –It is not every sentence-like formation that we know how to do something with, not every technique has an application in our life (PI §520, emphasis mine).

By focusing on the *purpose* for which we use our concepts, as opposed to the rules that might define them, we can be confident that they will not develop arbitrarily, even if they are not constrained by the purely 'rational' or 'scientific'. There is a teleological aspect to 'what we do' that, *not being part of our concepts*, remains constant and that shows itself through our activities. We will only be able to make sense of conceptual change if we focus on the underlying point of our various activities and not merely 'rules' alone. For example, consider again an important use

of analogies and the role they play in the explanation and extension of our concepts. This requires us to recognise the flexibility of our concepts.

We must doubt the claim that the sciences, individually or collectively, operate with a special method or methods that would afford them pride of place with respect to *all* forms of conceptual change and practical development. Why should we accept that because certain methods are successful for a limited range of purposes that they can apply equally well in all domains? Without a satisfactory answer to this question it is arbitrary to elevate the sciences above all other domains. There can be no grand philosophical justification for according science such status or deferring to it on all such matters, as naturalists admit. Rather some think to justify this type of approach by predicting that there will actually be a future, coherent absorption of all legitimate disciplines into a single, unified science, through the painstaking process of conceptual revision and theoretical reduction. *At best* this is a hope, and a dim one: It is not an argument for naturalism. For although in some domains, such streamlining reductions have occurred, there are many cases in which the divergent methods in sciences cast doubt on the idea of a future uniform and unified science. But I think the situation is worse still, and I have condemned it as deeply intellectually confused in my other writings (see Hutto 1999, 2000).

It should also be clear that such deference cannot be justified on practical grounds. It is not use pointing to the fact that the sciences reliably produce what are deemed to be ‘successful’ results in their specific domains. As the issue is normative, the absence of any other higher justification, this can be said of *any* practice that reliably produces *any* kinds of result that we find agreeable. It is only by appealing to our needs and what we find acceptable that we can safely ignore the sensitive issue of how, at any given stage, we come to talk of scientific ‘progress’ as opposed to ‘mere change’. They are the only true measure. Where else do we find the criteria for judging the adequacy or success of a scientific development or new concepts? How else do we know if an analogy is fertile and appropriate or simply misguided? Without appeal to our background needs, talk of aligning our concepts so as to achieve a ‘best’ fit with our other theories or appeal to ‘inference to the best explanation’ is simply vacuous. Furthermore, contra the expectations of revisionists, there is often no genuine need to develop or revise our existing concepts. As Wittgenstein remarks:

Why don’t we form a simpler concept? – Because it wouldn’t interest us. – But what does that mean? Is it the correct answer?
Should I say: Our concepts are determined by our interest, and therefore by our way of living? (LWPP II §43–4e).

Although it is true that many concepts do not need to change, there is an even stronger reply to be made with respect to the philosophical topics of Wittgenstein’s concern, those in which we are subject to philosophical confusions. With respect to such matters, which cannot be fully conceptually framed, there is no possibility of conceptual revision – hence we have no choice at all in this regard, not even in some extended sense involving historical developments. With respect to questions relating to the most fundamental issues, those of meaning, mind and logic, the very issues that Papineau identifies as live targets for naturalist treatment, change is not an option. To change our ‘minds’ or our ‘logic’ would not be merely a conceptual alteration with

many ramifications; it would be nothing short of a complete change in our form of life. Hence, Wittgenstein holds:

Sometimes it happens that we later introduce a new concept that is more practical for us. – But that will only be in very definite and small areas, and it presupposes that most concepts remain unaltered.

Could a legislator abolish the concept of pain?

The basic concepts are interwoven so closely with what is most fundamental in our way of living that they are therefore unassailable (LWPP II, §43–4e).

Given their nature, our fundamental concerns cannot be addressed by empirical investigations. As we have seen, there is no justification when we hit the bedrock that forms the very foundation of our practices. If so, we encounter what is fundamental – indeed, what cannot be completely understood in conceptual terms. Philosophical puzzlement with respect to these sorts of concerns cannot be dealt with by the replacement of one set of concepts with another. These philosophical problems are nothing like genuine empirical problems. At best, we can try better to understand them. However it also crucially requires the breaking free of certain explanatory tendencies that engender confusions about these topics. To understand them we cannot offer up new hypotheses about them.

This is why Wittgenstein is adamant that, “It is the business of philosophy, not to resolve a contradiction by means of a ... discovery, but to make it possible for us to get a clear view of the state of [the matter] that troubles us” (PI §125). For this reason, “One might also give the name ‘philosophy’ to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions” (PI §126). Although Wittgenstein is quite aware that some of our concepts change and develop, he denies that properly ‘philosophical’ problems can be resolved by such activity (they cannot even be ‘removed’ by it). The crux of the matter is that those who see philosophy as progressive fail to recognise these important limits.

6. Understanding and the Descriptive Method

When Wittgenstein contrasts description with explanation, he is not offering his descriptions as an alternative means of getting at the very same target as philosophical theorists; since our relation to the target is in part what he wants us to re-think. Descriptions are therefore not a straightforward alternative to theories. Rather what drives his investigations should be understood against the background of his aim to get a clear view of, “something we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it” (PI §89). For it is only this that is, “something we need to remind ourselves of” (PI §89). In this light, it is clear that he is not advocating a single method of clarification or striving after completeness or comprehensiveness.

The description of word-usage. The word is uttered – in what context? So we have to find something characteristic of these separate occurrences, a kind of regularity. – But we don’t learn to use words with the help of rules. How could I give someone a rule for the instances in which he is supposed to say he’s in pain! – On the other

there is a ROUGH regularity in the use to which a person actually puts words (LWPPI, §968).

In this light, we can begin to better understand his purpose in offering up descriptions in terms of what he calls ‘reminders’. Elucidations might then be used to initiate someone into a practice or to remind them of something about it they in some sense already know, but have seemingly forgotten or have never articulated. We are reminded of just what is necessary to disabuse us of certain misunderstandings and to clarify matters. The procedure is meant to reveal aspects of our ‘customary practice’, it need not be comprehensive and indeed the very idea that there is a comprehensive ‘description’ or account of practices – understood as giving us insight into the correct rules for applying words or concepts – is precisely one of the myths that Wittgenstein was trying to explode. There are no such general or final rules to articulate. This is why Wittgenstein’s descriptions are always ‘example-oriented’ or ‘case-oriented’.

Thus what we are ‘reminded’ of, what is made clear, is not a comprehensive set of rules or descriptions since these were never part of our initial training, or insofar as they were they were supplemental. We are reminded of our training itself or its background, or at least some aspects of these. This is what it means to re-educate philosophers – to help them find their way home. This is what it is to, “bring words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use” (PI §116). These reminders therefore neither provide nor make use of new information. There is no suggestion of a ‘final, correct’ description that could be used to simply replace some misleading philosophical picture.

Clarifying what it is he is trying to describe (or re-acquaint us with) is vital if we are to properly understand why and in what sense he regards the ultimate target of his grammatical investigations to be conceptual. In saying this, he is not expressing an interest in the merely ‘linguistic’ over the properly ‘metaphysical’. Rather, in rejecting the possibility of a privileged view of an independent metaphysical ‘reality’, he is making clear that what there is for us cannot be separated from our ways of understanding it. Philosophical investigations are neither merely factual nor super-factual, hence his claim that he is neither ‘doing natural science, nor yet natural history’ (PI, p. 230e).

To grasp the point of a ‘language game’ we must look not only at its intellectual dimensions but also at the character and point of the surrounding practices and at their relation to our basic responses, as well. He explains, “I am inclined to distinguish between the essential and the inessential in a game too. The game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a point” (PI §564). He bids us to attend not just to the use of words but also to the practices that surround them. Hence he says that, “For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be employed thus: the meaning of a word is its use in language” (PI §43). But this should be taken not as a theoretical proposal, but as methodological advice of the same sort he would have given during his early period about how to understand logical symbols. Certainly, he is not advancing a hypothesis or a dictum.

Indeed, it is precisely because there are no fixed or surveyable rules for the correct use of concepts that define ‘language games’ in which we are asked to imagine situations where ‘others’ use concepts differently than we do for the express purpose of getting a

better view of the grammar of our own language. It is because we lack a perspicuous representation of working of our grammar that he places such importance on reflecting on language games and ‘finding and inventing intermediate cases’ (cf. PI §122). He reminds us that, “The language games are rather set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities” (PI §130). This is all one can do in trying to capture the landscape of such a rough terrain.

We are not being asked to seriously imagine, per impossible, an alien form of life. Rather the imagined scenario is being used as a device to get us to reflect on the complexity of our own practice by way of comparison, and to recognise that it characterises an aspect of our form of life. In this way, imagining language games aids in the removal of the false pictures we may have developed. Thus, getting us to picture alternative language games serves as a dialectical tool. It is with this end in mind and not a theoretical one that he directs us to:

Let the use of words teach you their meaning (PI 220e, LWPP I, §856cf. also 340).

This is why, “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that” (PI §340).

7. Philosophy: Purely Contemplative or Purely Therapeutic?

Noting these features, Phillips holds that Wittgenstein’s philosophy is thoroughly contemplative, saying, “that its aim is to bring us to an understanding of what it is to have a world picture” (Phillips 1999, p. 54, cf. also p. 107). In this respect philosophy is not ‘for anything’ (Phillips 1999, p. 63). This is apparently supported by remarks such as the following:

By their very nature philosophical problems don’t have solutions but resolutions. If one doesn’t want to SOLVE philosophical problems – why doesn’t one give up dealing with them. For solving them means changing one’s point of view, the old way of thinking. And if you don’t want that, then you should consider the problems unsolvable (LWPP II, p. 84e).

Echoing Wittgenstein’s own sentiments, Phillips blames our inability to rest easy with this conclusion on the sort of desires that characterise our ‘technological’ age. For example, in a bid to mark recent progress in philosophy at the end of the 20th century as a follow-up to the 1998 World Congress of Philosophy, The New York Times reported that Quine’s dissolution of the analytic-synthetic distinction was held up as a milestone of philosophical progress. It is interesting to compare this claim with Wittgenstein’s response to a similar, if more pessimistic assessment of philosophy.

I read: ‘philosophers are no nearer the meaning of ‘Reality’ than Plato got’. What a strange situation. How extraordinary that Plato could have got even as far as he did! Or that we could not get any further! (C&V, p. 15e cf. also, p. 7, p. 8e)

Phillips does not deny that philosophy can produce goods that will be of use in other explanatory endeavours. He says, “philosophical distinctions may be made in the service of [other] interests. I have also emphasized that this is quite different from a contemplative conception of philosophy, in which the interests themselves come from the fundamental questions of philosophy” (Phillips 1999, p. 102). There is something quite right about what Phillips’ is advocating. As I have argued, gripped by the need to supply explanations of fundamental phenomena, many philosophers will fail to recognize the nonsense that is uncovered. In pursuing their explanatory ends they promote a vision of philosophy that wrongly insists it must have an active and progressive role, adding to an ever-growing compendium of knowledge. Nevertheless, I want to resist the attendant thought that this eschews anything constructive in the sense of positive. Thus Phillips emphasises the utterly passive aspects of the notion of contemplation, which he sees as ultimately hailing from the pre-Socratics (Phillips 1999, p. 61).

Certainly, Wittgenstein is not constructing theories, but Phillips goes too far in suggesting that philosophy ‘does nothing at all’. For example, he is critical of certain other philosophers, such as Cavell, precisely because – despite recognising this distinction – they ‘run these two contexts into each other’ in viewing philosophy as having the role of a re-appraiser. On these grounds he completely rejects the therapeutic understanding, seeing it as yet another product of our forlorn desire to make philosophy ‘do something’. For example he rails against Conant’s reading, claiming that it, “seriously underestimates the independence of philosophy and the depth of its questions – for example, the questions that exercised Wittgenstein...in philosophical logic. These are not preliminary to anything” (Phillips 1999, p. 59). But if philosophy is an activity that aims to clarify our thinking on certain fundamental matters, it is bound to produce some results. Wittgenstein is explicit in several places about what we might call, for want of a better word, its therapeutic benefits. He tells us.

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language (PI §119).

We must bear in mind that Wittgenstein described his work on these fundamental issues as, “working on oneself” (C&V, p. 16). He thought of his writings as ‘conversations with himself’, but we can make sense of their wider value in that he also tells us that, “I ought be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that helped in this way, he can put it right” (C&V, p. 18). Thus, he stressed that his work was not meant to spare his readers from thinking and would only have the appropriate affect on those who had had the same or similar thoughts themselves and who approached his writings in the correct spirit (PI, p. viii, TLP, p. 3, C&V, p. 7e). The results of philosophical investigations and reflections, although decisive, do not add to our existing stock of knowledge in the way science does. Their effects are necessarily individual and case-by-case. One result of philosophical work is the change it brings in the individuals engaged in it. This contrast enables us to understand the following remark.

Philosophy hasn’t made any progress? – If somebody scratches the spot where he has an itch, do we have to see some progress? Isn’t it

genuine scratching otherwise, or genuine itching? And can't this reaction to an irritation continue in the same way for a long time before a cure for the itching is discovered? (C&V, p. 86e)

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to infer from this that therapeutic activity is the only legitimate end for philosophy. Philosophy is good for more than freeing us from false pictures and breaking our bad habits of thought. Wittgenstein's reminders have this effect but they are primarily assembled for the particular purpose of removing confusions about what troubles us and enabling us to get a clear view of the matter. His investigations, in both periods, were always prosecuted with the aim of clarifying the issues in question (TLP 4.0031, PI §122–7). Of course, clarity is only achieved when intellectual obstacles that prevent us from seeing things aright are removed (CV, p. 44e, PI §109).

Seen in this light its procedure, but not its aim, is therapeutic. Indeed, it becomes clear that these activities cannot be prized apart precisely because they are not in competition. Hence, it is fruitless to argue which was Wittgenstein's real 'aim' in terms of an imagined contrast between elucidation and therapy, or to debate which of these held priority for him. Their relation is not that of two distinct ends, but rather that of means to end.

It is rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it. We want to understand something in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand (PI §89).

This is at least a distinctive end for philosophy and there is a possible method for pursuing it.

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