From its inception, the purported aim of philosophy has been self-knowledge. This paper suggests, however, that the chief importance of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is to have revealed how our philosophising tends to be marked by self-alienation, by a blindness to what we ourselves are doing in philosophising, and how the difficulty of philosophy and of philosophical criticism – which Wittgenstein underlines perhaps more insistently than any other great philosopher – is tied to the difficulty of self-knowledge, of recognising the real roots and character of one’s own thinking. Finally, I suggest that there are, to put it cautiously, hints in Wittgenstein that philosophical confusions tend, in many cases, to be intertwined with our moral-existential difficulties.¹

1. Turning the examination around

“The beginning of philosophy”, Epictetus says, “is this”:

the realization that there is a conflict between the opinions of men [especially concerning what is good, and evil, what happiness and misery are, and so on], and a search for the origin of that conflict, accompanied by a mistrust towards mere opinion, and the investigation of opinion to see if it is correct opinion, and the discovery of a certain standard of judgement, comparable to the balance that we have discovered for determining weights, or the rule, for things straight and crooked. (1995, p. 99)

¹ When I speak of Wittgenstein, I primarily mean the author of Philosophical Investigations. I take no stand on how that work’s conception of philosophy relates to that of the Tractatus, or again to that of the “third Wittgenstein” some claim to find in the post-Investigations works (cf. Moyal-Sharrock, 2004). These questions are important, but space is limited. Whatever the changes in Wittgenstein’s views, however, there is clearly also a very significant continuity in his view of philosophy.

This statement would, I think, find the approval of philosophers still, and in some sense it seems simply to register a plain fact about the impulse to philosophy. In the hands of the Platonic Socrates, especially, this disagreement in “the opinions of men” is shown to be an internal disagreement in the thinking of individuals, as Socrates’ interlocutors prove unable to explain to their own satisfaction what their opinion really is concerning the most important matters. I suggest that Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy can be characterised as a kind of transposition of this traditional dissatisfaction with everyday thinking onto philosophical thought itself. In this sense, Wittgenstein is, as he says, “turning our whole [philosophical] examination round” (PI §108), but insofar as it can be seen as a radicalisation, rather than abandonment, of the search for self-understanding that has always been a crucial motivating force of philosophy, the turning turns “about the fixed point of our real need” (ibid.).

It has seemed so to some commentators (cf. Feyerabend, 1955, p. 480–81), that Wittgenstein simply stands the traditional picture on its head, claiming – in the face of rather loud facts, it would seem – a perfect clarity for our everyday talk and thinking that would only be confused when, and only because, we start philosophising. As I see it, however, he is not urging naivety with regard to the everyday, only combating naivety with regard to philosophy. In fact, he questions the very idea of a “philosophical thinking” that would have managed to free itself from “everyday thinking”, as in philosophising we are wont to imagine.²

To see more clearly how Wittgenstein’s approach differs from a more

² I’m not suggesting, naturally, that all philosophers before Wittgenstein were naïve about philosophy. Socrates’ maieutic questioning, too, might be said to have been aimed at exposing the empty pretensions of specifically philosophical theorising rather than everyday thinking. To mention only some thinkers with whom Wittgenstein has been compared, the ancient Pyrrhonists, (cf. Fogelin, 19xx), Kant, Kierkegaard (Conant, 19xx), Nietzsche and Derrida (REF to the literature) offer further examples of a systematic critique of philosophical pretensions, and a self-critical element is of course marked in any great philosopher, along, usually, with philosophical naivety in some respects. I must leave comparison between Wittgenstein and kindred thinkers aside, however.
traditional philosophical self-understanding, consider Russell’s conception of the
relation of everyday sense and certainties to their philosophical counterparts – a
conception Wittgenstein “studied closely and reacted against”, and that constituted,
as it were, “a centre of repulsion for his thought” (Baker and Hacker, 1980, p. 458).
According to Russell, it is a “curious fact in philosophy that the data which are
undeniable to start with are always rather vague and ambiguous”; thus, it may in one
sense be undeniable that there is a desk in front of you, but if you try to define
philosophical terms what this means and how you know it, “you find that what you
have said is most fearfully vague and that you really do not know what you meant”
(1918, p. 497). Russell goes on to point to the “rather singular fact”

that everything you are really sure of, right off is something you do not
know the meaning of, and the moment you get a precise statement you
will not be sure whether it is true or false, at least right off. The process
of sound philosophizing … consists mainly in passing from those
obvious, vague, ambiguous things, that we feel quite sure of, to
something precise, clear, definite, which by reflection and analysis we
find is involved in the vague thing we started from, and is, so to speak,
the real truth of which that vague thing is a sort of shadow. …
Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize till you have tried to
make it precise, and everything precise is so remote from everything that
we normally think, that you cannot for a moment suppose that is what we
really mean when we say what we think. (ibid., p. 497–8)

I have quoted at length, because this is such a vivid description of a central
philosophical experience; I immediately recognise myself in it. Whether Russell has
in fact outlined “the process of sound philosophizing” is another matter, however.
He seems to have no doubt that analysis shows the things we say in everyday life to
be vague and ambiguous; he does not appear to reflect on the possibility that plain
things may only come to seem vague when approached with a peculiar and perhaps
quite unclear notion of what precision must be like. To get a sense of how this might
come about, consider what, in another place, Russell says about vagueness and
precision:

[A] representation is vague when the relation of the representing system
to the represented system is not one-one, but one-many. For example, a
photograph which is so smudged that it might equally represent Brown
or Jones or Robinson is vague. … Vagueness, clearly, is a matter of
degree … Accuracy, on the contrary, is an ideal limit. … [M]any men
who look quite different when seen close at hand look indistinguishable
at a distance, while men who look different at a distance never look
indistinguishable when seen close at hand. Therefore, according to the
definition, there is less vagueness in the near appearance than in the
distant one. There is still less vagueness about the appearance under the
microscope. It is perfectly ordinary facts of this kind that prove the
vagueness of most of our knowledge, and lead us to infer the vagueness
of all of it. (1923, p. xx)

The idea that our knowledge can only be made ever more precise, but never
really precise, and that “all language” is indeed “vague”, as Russell also claims
(ibid.), may strike one as obvious – it is certainly one of those “natural”
philosophical ideas that many children spontaneously discover. At the same time,
reading the last sentence in the quote from Russell, we may wonder how “perfectly
ordinary facts”, can lead us to infer something that subverts our ordinary notions?
To be sure, this is how Russell thinks philosophy does and should proceed; it should
“start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and … end with
something so paradoxical that no one will believe it” (1918, p. 514). But how can
this be? What happens in this process of metamorphosis of the plain into the
paradoxical?

I suggest that the point of Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing is precisely to
reveal this, not in a general way but through the painstaking analysis of the way in
which particular philosophical ideas come into being – where the individual
analyses will, to be sure, reveal certain recurrent patterns in the dynamics of this
process. Wittgenstein believes that we generally fail, in philosophising, to realise
how we actually arrive at our philosophical ideas. In particular, we fail to realise
that the questions we feel pressed by arise because we have already committed
ourselves to “a particular way of looking at the matter”; the “first step” in our reasoning “altogether escapes notice”, and what is in fact the “decisive move in the conjuring trick” seems to us “quite innocent” (PI §308). Wittgenstein’s critical focus is on these “first steps”; not on arguing for or against various developed philosophical theories – of meaning or vagueness, say – but rather on revealing what Warren Goldfarb has called the “proto-philosophical level”, the unnoticed ground of preconceptions, pictures and analogies “which then functions to establish what questions are to be asked and answered by philosophical theorizing” (1997, p. 78).

In the case of Russell on vagueness, Russell arrives at the idea of “an ideal of precision, to which we can approximate indefinitely … but cannot attain” (1923, p. xx) by extrapolating from some ordinary cases which seem to suggest the idea that we get ever more precision by getting ever closer to the object we observe. He seems to ignore, however, that while it makes sense to speak of “getting ever closer” to an object or “increasing precision indefinitely” in some cases – say in the case of constructing ever more precise microscopes or clocks for scientific purposes – this is by no means generally so. Thus, seeing clearly is generally not a matter of getting ever closer to the object, but of looking from a proper distance, where this is relative to what one is looking at, under which conditions. Contrary to what Russell seems to imply, Brown and Jones (i.e. pieces of their skin or other tissue) may well be indistinguishable under the microscope, although we never confuse them at the breakfast table. Russell, however, seems to presuppose that there is one absolute scale on which precision is measured, and so to ignore that, as Wittgenstein says,

“Inexact” is really a reproach, and “exact” is praise. And that is to say that what is inexact attains its goal less perfectly than what is more exact. Thus the point here is what we call “the goal”. Am I inexact when I do not give our distance from the sun to the nearest foot…? No single ideal of exactness has been laid down; we do not know what we should be supposed to imagine under this head… (PI §88)

Russell pays scant attention to the many dimensions in which we may speak of vagueness and precision – thus, the precision of an order or a line of poetry are not the same as the precision of a microscope, but there seems to be no reason (aside from scientistic or other prejudice) for claiming that any of these uses of ‘precise’ is more metaphorical or fundamental than the others – or to the many contexts in which the distinction between vague and precise knowledge (or language) seems to lack application altogether. I know the name of my neighbour, for instance, and the way to the bus station; are these pieces of knowledge vague or precise? I might be unsure about the name or the way, and in extraordinary circumstances I may quite lose my grip on what to think about these matters (say if my neighbour strenuously denied his name was what I was sure it was), but if I’m in no doubt, then in what sense is my knowledge vague? On the other hand, it would be just as odd to say that it was precise, because what would be the contrast?

Russell would no doubt respond to such characteristically Wittgensteinian “reminders” (cf. PI §§89, 127) with an impatient reminder of his own, to the effect that he is quite aware of how we normally speak about vagueness and precision; he just is not interest in that, but in the real or ideal “truth” of which our common-sense, everyday speech is a sort of vague “shadow” (cf. my first quote from him above). Incidentally, that reply would show how easily even avowedly anti-Platonic, empiricist philosophers such as Russell easily fall into a kind of Platonism, for once we start idealising, subliming, our actual concepts, what we take to be the Ideal tends to appear as more real than anything we actually encounter in real life; as Russell himself admits, as “logic habitually assumes that precise symbols are being employed” it is “not applicable to this terrestrial life, but only to an imagined

3 Here, as in some other cases, I have made slight modifications in the translations of Wittgenstein I quote from.
celestial existence” (1923, p. xx). Nonetheless, Wittgenstein is clear that such idealisations cannot, since they arise from a felt dissatisfaction with our ordinary ways of speaking and thinking, meaningfully be countered by any direct appeal to this ordinary reality. There is, he says,

no common sense answer to a philosophical problem. One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles, i.e., by curing them of the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense. (BB, p. 58–9)

To be sure, Wittgenstein famously says that, when faced with someone – perhaps a voice in himself – inclined to use words such as “being” or “knowledge” (or, in our case, “exactness” and “vagueness”) in a characteristically philosophical way, trying to “grasp the essence of the thing”, his task is to “bring [these] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” by asking how they are “actually used in … in the language-game which is its original home” (PI §116). This, however, has nothing to do with common sense realism, or with laying down some supposed linguistic law about the “correct” use of words according to which philosophers could be shown to be “misusing” language, as some commentators seem to imply. The point, I suggest, is rather to bring out how our philosophical claims actually depend for their apparent sense precisely on the everyday ways of speaking and thinking about phenomena which we claim, in making them, not to be concerned with. Insofar as this is indeed so, we are involved in a self-misunderstanding or even self-contradiction, in which what we say is at the same time revoked: that, and not some deviation from ordinary use, will be the problem (cf. RPP I §548). After all, if I don’t myself in any way undermine the sense I am trying to make, then the mere fact that what I say differs from what is usually said can hardly count against it.4

It might be objected that dwelling on the concrete examples Russell happened to use in one of his papers (even if a classic one) is beside the point: if we find something amiss with these examples, we can always substitute others, for the important thing is the meaning of our philosophical concepts, not the analogies we may make use of to indicate it. What Wittgenstein tries to bring out, however, is precisely how our understanding of the words we use in philosophising – a use we think must be very general and abstract because we take ourselves to be trying to grasp “the nature of all things … the basis, the essence, of everything empirical” (PI §89) – is still dependent on analogies from the application of these words in concrete cases outside philosophy. Our grasp of their sense threatens continuously to dissolve, however, insofar as we suppress this dependence and proceed to use our words “as if their sense were an atmosphere accompanying them, which they carried over into every kind of application” (cf. PI § 117). Thus we get, for instance, the Russelian notion of an exactness that is supposedly unhinged from any particular practice or inquiry, and in the light of which all our practices and the results of all our inquiries can be seen to be vague – which sounds very much like the notion of an answer that is not the answer to any particular question, and so of course impossible to find.

2. Locating the source of puzzlement

I don’t imagine my short remarks here will have convinced anyone inclined to defend something like Russell’s view on exactness; I merely offer them as an indication of the kind of questioning to which Wittgenstein subjects philosophical ideas.5 The Investigations and his other late manuscripts are essentially a long series

Hacker’s ability to survey which gives him license to rebuke philosophers for making “illicit extensions of the uses of expressions beyond their legitimate domains” (2001, p. 35). It is as if Hacker had said: “Whatever you wanted to say does not matter: I know that your words lack sense”.

4 In reading a commentator such as Peter Hacker, for instance, one gets the impression that our thought and language are limited by quite objective and definite “bounds of sense”.

5 For a recent and clear account of Russell’s view of vagueness, as well as of the various
of such deconstructive questionings, as they might well be called, much more searching than what I have offered. Their point is to show how the apparent sense of philosophical claims starts to unravel when subject to what we might call the pressure of concreteness. Naturally, this is something that really has to be shown in particular cases, rather than advanced as an arbitrary claim concerning the essential nature of philosophical claims – that would be a metaphysical thesis if there ever was one!

It is, however, a crucial aspect of Wittgenstein’s approach that he is not content with merely showing this unravelling of philosophical sense, or even with exposing the analogies and interpretations through which the semblance of sense was produced. As such, that will only produce frustration, for insofar as the motivation behind the claim is not brought out into the open, it will remain effective even after the incoherence of the claim in which it sought expression has been exposed (supposing there was any such incoherence, of course), and so the person who made the claim will not be convinced, but feel cleverly talked into or fraudulently argued out of something. While they have been unable to defend their claim or even state it coherently, what they tried to say has not been addressed. This is, I think, why Wittgenstein insists that we must try to get a hold of “the source of [the] puzzlement” (BB, p. 59), the apparent need, in other words, which prompted the philosophical claim as its apparent solution.

In Russell’s case, one reason that he distinguished between our everyday notions of exactness and a “real”, approachable but unattainable exactness, may have been that he felt – as many probably do – that this was needed to make room for scientific progress; for science, he says “is perpetually trying to substitute more precise beliefs for vague ones” (1923, p. xx). This would be connected with a notion of the essentially provisional nature not just of any scientific theory, but of any philosophical analysis. Using the human skeleton as an example, Russell writes:

> Bones, molecules, atoms, and electrons may each be treated, for certain purposes, as if they were unanalyisable units devoid of structure, but at no stage is there any positive reason to suppose that this is in fact the case. The ultimate units so far reached may at any moment turn out to be capable of analysis. (1959, p. 165)

Russell charges that, had an approach to philosophy such as Wittgenstein’s, which takes our ordinary, concrete forms of speaking as fundamental for our ability to make sense at all, been prevalent in Greece, progressive science might never have evolved at all (ibid, p. 169). This would seem, however, to be a misunderstanding of both Wittgenstein’s philosophy and of what we need in order to make sense of scientific progress. For Wittgenstein, workaday scientific uses of words, however imaginative and path-breaking, are forms of “everyday use” rather than something to be contrasted with and somehow limited by it; the operative contrast is “metaphysical use”, which for Wittgenstein is defined by the characteristic ways – of which I have suggested Russell’s philosophical use of “exact” gives an example – in which words come unhinged from any concrete (scientific, culinary, moral or other) application, thus allowing them to express an apparently profounder sense than our ordinary words precisely because we refuse them any concrete application, and so any determinate sense. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein says philosophical confusions “arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work” (PI §132).

Thus, the Wittgensteinian objection to Russell’s philosophical use of “exact”

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6 I use “deconstructive” as an ordinary description, not in Derrida’s special sense.

7 On this aspect of his conception, an idea which again is widely shared, see Hager (2003).
is in no way an objection to the introduction of new scientific or mathematical (or, for that matter, poetic or religious) concepts, insofar as they really do some work, have concrete applications – and only if they do can they help scientific progress, as opposed to creating hype about it. A new scientific concept may in some cases be characterized as more exact than some extant concept – but also as more fruitful or powerful or convenient for various purposes, say. As for the notion of scientific progress as itself a kind of endless approach to the true but ever unreachable account of reality, this is not only what arguably feeds Russell’s idea of exactness, but a variation of the same idea. And the problem with the idea is that while we can, given our concrete mathematical practices, make sense of the notion of an asymptotic progress to something, one that by definition never reaches its goal, the asymptote is defined whereas Russell’s “ideal limit” of exactness is not, and so we seem also to lose our grip on the idea of approaching “it” (what?).

Does science not make any progress, then? Certainly. What we might question on Wittgensteinian lines – here as in countless other similar cases – are the unquestioned assumptions concerning what we need to presuppose in order to make sense of the facts and phenomena we agree on. The common impression that Wittgenstein is constantly either denying obvious facts or siding with one competing philosophical theory or other – for instance that he is a kind of behaviourist who denies the obvious reality of our inner life – arises, as he himself tells us, precisely from his “setting his face against” the particular philosophical “pictures” of what must be admitted (in this case a particular, far from obvious notion of “inner processes”) on pain of denying the obvious (PI §305, cf. the whole passage §§303–9). In the case of scientific progress, we need not picture it as endless progress in one dimension towards the true account of things; we might think of it rather as a going-forward-from-something-specific than as a moving-towards-something-indefinable, and as moving in many, perhaps conflicting dimension, rather than just one; as a matter of correcting and improving on actually existing theories and scientific practices, where what constitutes correction and improvement is decided in concrete, richly textured negotiations within the various, historically evolving scientific communities.

Many writers in the philosophy of science have of course said things along more or less these lines; there is nothing original about this suggestion. What I would emphasise is only that taking these observations in a Wittgensteinian spirit would mean not taking them as a first sketch for a theory, perhaps a “social constructivist theory”, of scientific progress, but on the contrary as questioning the notion that there is something general about Scientific Progress that a theory could, and would be needed to, explain (but investigating the dynamics of given, perhaps very broad, historical changes in scientific thinking is quite legitimate, of course). In the same way, but moving to a more classically Wittgensteinian topic, in introducing the notion of family-resemblances (PI §65 ff.), Wittgenstein is not sketching a rival theory about what makes the meaning of general linguistic terms possible. Rather, by focusing very concretely on the varied considerations we bring to bear to decide, in actual cases, whether something is or is not, e.g., a chair or a game, he aims to relieve the feeling that there is something incomprehensible going on, which theoretical ideas of universals, of a mental picture or a determinate rule

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8 The mere fact that the person saying something does so in the official capacity of scientist or philosopher, or again speaks simply as a layman, obviously does not guarantee either the sense or senselessness of what they say. Metaphysical speech, in Wittgenstein’s critically diagnostic sense, does not come with a ready label attached.

9 On this, cf. Robinson, 1998, p. 205 f. – Note that Russell’s would-be definition of exactness in terms of “the relation of the representing system to the represented system being one-one” will not help, as the terms of the definition themselves lack any determinate sense. – On some interesting remarks of Wittgenstein’s on the idea of an indefinite approach to something that is not a defined point, see Faulkner (2009).

10 Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, Foucault, and Hacking – and, in some ways, Popper and Quine, just to name a few with obvious differences among themselves. The less well-known Robinson (1998) also deserves mention here.
underlying our use of general terms, are then called in to explain.\textsuperscript{11}

3. Knots in the will

In a way summarising what I have been trying to say in the preceding section, Wittgenstein said that the difficulty in philosophy is not that of finding the solution, but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. … This is connected … with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. The difficulty here is: to stop. (Z §314)

What I want to focus more explicitly on now, in line with my title, is precisely the \textit{difficulty} of philosophy, which Wittgenstein always stresses. He does not say, as some commentators do, that we are “unnecessarily perplexed” by philosophical problems, nor does he promise that by applying his supposedly “deflationist” insights we will finally enter the era of “complete demystification and solid philosophical progress” (Horwich, 2005, pp. 165, 6). Quite the contrary; he emphasises that in treating philosophical problems as though they could, in general, be resolved by arguments as traditionally understood, we fail to see \textit{how} perplexing and intractable these problems are; he does not claim to have found a sure and easy way of getting rid of the problems, but rather, through his patient work of reflection and questioning of various philosophical ideas, he reveals ever more deeply how difficult it is, not just to free oneself from their grip, but to realise that one is \textit{in} their grip. To focus, as Wittgenstein does, on the “proto-philosophical level” below our official views and theories is less like discovering a solution and more like stumbling on a difficulty – or, perhaps, opening a can of worms.

It will appear a \textit{solution} only as long as one imagines oneself standing somehow outside philosophy, untainted by the confusions one sees, or imagines seeing, others so obviously suffering from. If so, one should perhaps be less preoccupied by their confusions – which one may, in a particular case, have diagnosed correctly – and instead ponder the fact that they themselves are quite oblivious to their predicament. If I think I can see such failures of self-awareness in the thinking of others, is there not some risk that I may suffer from similar failures myself, albeit not necessarily (but of course quite possibly) in regard to precisely the same philosophical problems (i.e. how to understand exactness)? Taking Wittgenstein’s investigations into the roots of philosophical difficulties seriously will not put one in a privileged position beyond confusion, but at best give one a better grasp of the depth of our common confusions, their character as “diseases of thought” which unlike isolated mistakes in reasoning cannot be easily \textit{fixed}, and for which, therefore, “\textit{slow} cure is all important” (Z §382).

Wittgenstein certainly does not see himself as the healthy doctor on a mission to cure others; even a cursory reading of his texts make it clear that in them, he is struggling with his own philosophical problems. “Nearly all my writings”, he once said, “are private conversations with myself. Things that I say to myself tete-à-tete” (CV, p. 77). This does not imply, of course, that they are only of private interest: Wittgenstein’s philosophical problems will be ours too insofar as we \textit{share} them, are prey to the same blindness or bewilderment, and there is thus nothing paradoxical in his also affirming that he aspires to be – to be no more, but also no less, 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” (CV, p. 18). The remarks about the mirror and the private conversations are two sides of the same coin: both emphasise \textit{self-understanding}, that of writer and reader, rather than curing others or

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Goldfarb (1997) and (1983), to my mind two of the best expositions of the overall theme discussed in this section.
proving them wrong, as the aim of Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing.12

Connected with this, we should note that Wittgenstein’s “methodological” pronouncements – for instance the deceptively simple instruction, “Refrain from writing down any hypotheses and any vague general statements and you have made a philosophical investigation”13 – are not plain directives like “Give up the guitar and start playing piano instead!”, but more like “Stop trying to force the melody, let the melody carry you!” or “Attend to what you’re doing!” said to someone who is already, but fruitlessly, concentrating as hard as she can. Thus, the Wittgensteinian instruction just quoted could be rephrased as: Keep things concrete, and when you are inclined to make a claim about how things must or cannot be, or obviously are or aren’t – for instance that something in our brain obviously corresponds to our thoughts – then stop, and “ask yourself: what do you know about these things?” (PI §158). But then, the difficulty is precisely: to stop. Or, as Wittgenstein also puts it: “In philosophy, the difficulty is to say no more than we know” (BB, p. 45, emphasis added).

Wittgenstein’s instructions are, then, of the strange, although not that uncommon, kind which, while in one sense as simple as they get, may quite easily leave us at a loss what to do with them – where this lack of communication is not, in general, to be remedied by supplying more information. Why? Because, like the person concentrating very hard on the wrong thing or in the wrong way, we get in our own way. We are doing our utmost to solve our philosophical problems, and that is precisely what prevents us from doing so. To use a striking metaphor of Wittgenstein’s, we “want to straighten out a knot by pulling at the ends of the string. – And as long as [we] pull, the knot can’t come undone. [We] feel there is still a knot, so [we] pull. And the knot becomes smaller and harder”; we will get nowhere until we stop trying to pull the knot straight, and instead “try to unravel it”.14 But the difficulty is that as long as we are in the grips of the particular view of the problem that in fact creates it and makes it insoluble, we will keep on pulling instead of unravelling; in fact, the problematic view of the problem consists in the pulling itself, in our approaching the problem in a certain way. What needs to be changed is the approach, what we do. Thus Wittgenstein says to his students: “I don’t try to make you believe something you don’t believe, but to make you do something you won’t do.”15

This is related to a distinctive, and to my mind crucially important, trait of Wittgenstein’s discussions of philosophical problems, namely his characterisations of them in terms that relate, broadly speaking, to the will – or perhaps we should rather say to the conative and affective aspects of our thinking lives, for the point is that we tend to have a very intellectualistic, abstracted picture of what thinking is. Wittgenstein, by contrast, uses a much more full-bodied, vital and often also violent, vocabulary to describe it. He speaks constantly of our inclinations in thinking, of what we want to say or feel we must say; of the craving (BB, p. 17, LC, IV §12), temptation (BB, p. 18), or revulsion (BB, pp. 15, 57, PG, p. 382) we may feel with regard to saying, and thinking, certain things; of the charm (LC, III §20), fascination (BB, p. 27), or bewitchment (PI §109) that ways of thinking may exert on us. Trying to get free from a philosophical thought can, he notes, be “as difficult as holding back tears or containing an explosion of anger” (PO, p. 160).16

12 In terms of contemporary debates in Wittgenstein-interpretation, I’m suggesting that both more orthodox readers such as Peter Hacker, and “therapeutic” readers such as (the later) Gordon Baker seem, at times, to be rather too sure of inhabiting, thanks to their reading of Wittgenstein, a position as it were outside of philosophy, from which they can pronounce on the confusions of others without any real risk of being themselves prey to confusion. Both seem to think they have found their Rosetta stone in Wittgenstein’s method, they just read the stone differently, one side emphasising the power of generally valid perspicuous representations of “the grammar of our concepts” to end once and for all philosophical disputes, the other the power of therapeutic explications of the conflicts manifested in person-relative grammars to relieve the “patient’s” philosophical confusion. (REF)


15 From MS 155, p. 83 (c. 1931), quoted in Hilmy, 1987, p. 5.

Wittgenstein does not use these terms for mere rhetorical effect or as terms of abuse, but rather descriptively or diagnostically, to characterize the kind of difficulty he sees philosophy as having. This is all connected with his insistence that a confused philosophical idea “proves to be a superstition (not a mistake)” (PI §110). A mere mistake would, I take it, be a kind of isolated slip-up not connected in any interesting way with “general, deeply rooted, tendencies of [the person’s] thinking” (BB, p. 30), with the patterns of inclination and aversion in it, with what the person wants and fears – whereas the kind of terms Wittgenstein uses; superstition, prejudice (PI §340, RPP II §87), idol (LC, III §36), and myth (LC, 51, Z §211), all imply such connections. Thus, becoming aware of a superstition (prejudice, and so on) in one’s thinking reveals something important about the way one has related to things. Also – this is the critical force of these terms – as long as one is caught up in (e.g.) prejudice, one will not oneself realise the nature of one’s predicament; prejudice blinds one not only to the object, but to the character of one’s own relation to the object, and so to oneself. Therefore, to awaken to the fact that one looked at some matter in a prejudiced way is also, eo ipso, to come to see oneself in a new light; it effects a change not just in one’s view of the object, but in oneself – a liberation (as we say, one is freed from prejudice). Indeed, Wittgenstein characterises the aim of his philosophical activity as “trying to find the liberating word [das erlösende Wort]” (VC, p. 77). But again, the difficulty of finding this word, or of accepting it, is not intellectual in any narrow sense; rather, “the difficulty of a change of attitude. Resistances of the will are to be overcome” (PO, p. 161).

4. The temptations of language and culture

I have pointed to the kind of moves through which, according to Wittgenstein, philosophical confusions arise, and to their conative-emotional character. If we ask, in a more general way, why we get into such confusions at all, Wittgenstein’s answer may seem obvious. The Tractatus states that “[m]ost of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language” (4.003), and that philosophy is therefore properly “critique of language” (4.0031), and throughout his later work Wittgenstein affirms that “our investigations are about language and about puzzles arising from the use of language”. Confusions arise from the misleading “surface grammar” of the expressions of our language (PI §664), from the fact that “our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook” certain important distinctions (PI §108), or that we are mislead by “certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language” (PI §90). Also, similes that have been, as Wittgenstein says, “absorbed into the forms of our language”, may produce apparent contradictions which confuse us (PI §112), as when we say that “time flows”, and so on. Stephen Hilmy may thus seem to be stating the obvious when he says that Wittgenstein saw “the ultimate source of … metaphysics … as lying in language itself, in so much as language itself lures us, tempts us, tricks us into confusing conceptual and factual matters” and into various other misunderstandings (1987, p. 226).

And yet, there seems something not quite right about this. First of all, as most commentators agree, a central aim of Wittgenstein’s discussions of language and meaning is to deconstruct the idea that there is a well-defined thing called “language” which could in any straightforward way be separated from the life of its speakers, from our practices and reactions, our routes of feeling and interest, our modes of relation and response. But if this is so, it becomes unclear what could be

18 Similar statements abound in the literature; thus McGinn, 1997, p. 21, speaks about “misunderstandings which… language itself has the power to draw us into”, and Shanker, 1986, p. 7, claims that “Wittgenstein … emphasised that the source of philosophical problems lies in the very essence of language”. The prevalence of this view is hardly surprising, in view of the fact that Wittgenstein can express himself in precisely this way: in the mid-thirties, for instance, he wrote that philosophical problems are “linguistic errors … disquietudes that arise from the essence, the depths, of our language” (MS 157a, 52v, quoted in Hacker, 2007, p. 99).
meant by saying that philosophical problems arise from our difficulties with *language*; with language *as opposed to what?* Secondly, and connected with this, one might feel that talk of *Language Itself* sounds suspiciously metaphysical in the context of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Thirdly, it may also come to sound a little too *convenient*, from a moral-existential point of view. Might it not be that we are tempted by the notion of language itself as the tempter because we don’t want to assume responsibility for our own confusions: “It wasn’t me, it was language!”.

Perhaps we blame language in order to disguise as passive suffering our own, none-too-flattering *activity*, our not *wanting* to see certain things and therefore landing in philosophical confusions?

To take the last point first, we should note that Wittgenstein does not merely say that “philosophical problems … are solved … by looking into the workings of our language”, but that this is to be done “in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them” (PI §109). This suggests that the striking thing is not the fact that we are mislead by our language, but that we have a kind of craving to mislead ourselves about it. Even if we grant that our forms of expression in some sense tempt us, temptations are not like rocks that just lay in our path whether we like it or not. Temptations are always someone’s temptations, they express a person’s attitude, their way relating to things. The wallet left lying on the bar may tempt me to take it – but only if I’m a thief at heart. The problem is in me, not in the wallet. Certainly to me, with my thieving heart, it will feel as though the wallet exerted a kind of magnetic pull on me – “It’s lying there, quite unguarded, full of all that wonderful money…” – but this is a clear case of precisely the kind of projective illusion that Wittgenstein is always fighting, where one reads into the thing itself one’s way of representing it (PI §114).

Wittgenstein refers the apparent timelessness of the most ancient philosophical quandaries – those having to do with the nature of time or space, for instance – to the fact that “our language has remained the same and seduces us into asking the same questions over and over”, so that “as long as one talks about a flow of time and an expanse of space, etc., etc., people will keep running into the same enigmatic difficulties, and stare at something that no explanation seems able to remove” – but even in this case he adds that our running into philosophical confusions here is connected to a “longing for the transcendent” that we feel, “for when [we] think [we] see ‘the limits of human understanding’, of course [we] believe that [we] can see beyond them” (PO, p. 185–7). In short, while it is evident that the conceptual connections of our language *can* be misunderstood, there are questions to be asked about what drives us to grasp so eagerly for the possibility to misunderstand when it is offered us. In fact, Wittgenstein insists that what makes a philosophically speaking important subject difficult to understand is the contrast between the understanding of the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things that are most obvious can become the most difficult to understand. What has to be overcome is not a difficulty of the intellect but of the will. (PO, p. 161; cf. CV, p. 17)

Insofar as this is so – and at any rate Wittgenstein seems to have thought it was so – our propensity for philosophical confusion is not to be explained simply by reference to some kind of intellectual or linguistic incompetence, such as our poor skill in *describing* the use of concepts whose everyday *use* we master (e.g. Hacker, 19) In a later text (1995, p. 238), Hilmy rejects the idea of blaming language for our confusions, but retains, it seems to me, the mythological notion of “language itself” – only now it is supposed to be untainted by our misunderstandings. Baker stresses the “moral dimension” of Wittgenstein’s work; he says that “philosophical misunderstandings are *motivated* misconceptions … we are ourselves *responsible* for them” (2004, p. 198); Disappointingly, however, he gives no indications of what might motivate our misconceptions, thus leaving his claim vague. Hacker disagrees with Baker on this point: “we are, to a large degree, ‘victims’ of the misleading forms of our language”, he says (2007, p. 104). Why the scare-quotes around ‘victims’, however? On the other hand, Baker says that “we are, as it were, responsible for our ‘hang-ups’” (2004, p. 200, emphasis added). Again: why the qualification? Are we not *really* responsible for them? On the question of responsibility, unclarity seems to reign.
We are no doubt inept at such description, as Wittgenstein emphasizes (Z §111–121), but that does not explain, nor will a reference to any other kind of simple incompetence do so, why we should be struck by philosophical questions in the first place, rather than just staying with the ordinary language games we know how to play, why it is that we should hold on to the strangest philosophical views so stubbornly, or why philosophical puzzles are felt to be deep and important rather than just curious or absurd.

Wittgenstein says about philosophical problems that “their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language” (PI §111). As he also says, the language we speak – which from the point of view of philosophical investigation can appear as an “immense network of well-kept false paths” to philosophical confusion – has become what it is “because people had – and have – the inclination to think in [just] this way” (PO, p. 185). It is not, then, as though there were language, on the one hand, and on the other the people moving in it; it would be better to say that language is or traces the pattern of our movements, engagements, reactions, conflicts and reconciliations. Thus, Wittgenstein’s point in insisting that our difficulties are to do with our language can hardly be to claim that philosophical problems don’t have to do with our life or our feelings, with our existential and emotional difficulties – that they “have their seat in the form of representation … not in the weaknesses of individuals”, as Hacker puts it (2007, p. 99). Rather, his point seems to be to warn us, once again, of taking our way of looking at and representing things, which he often refers to simply as “our language”, to be given in the things themselves: “[w]e interpret a grammatical movement made by [ourselves] as a quasi-physical phenomenon which [we] are observing” (PI §401). If I’m right, then, Wittgenstein’s insistence on “language” is primarily simply another way of insisting on the need to “turn the investigation around”, towards our own unacknowledged role in the creation of the philosophical difficulties and puzzles we take ourselves to discover in reality.

It would seem, however, that Wittgenstein’s insistence on language here has (at least) one other point, too, namely to underline the communal, cultural and historical dimensions of our life and troubles with concepts; the way in which our puzzles tend to be more than mere private idiosyncrasies. There are changes from one generation or epoch to the next in how we move and speak and think together, changes in intellectual preoccupations, styles, and fashions, and corresponding changes in typical philosophical confusions; such broad changes give the concepts of ‘generation’ or ‘epoch’ their sense. Wittgenstein emphasises the power over our thinking, philosophical and otherwise, of such communal shifts in interest. He remarks about his own philosophical activity: “At present we are combating a trend. But this trend will die out, superseded by others, and then the way we are arguing against it will no longer be understood; people will not see why all this needed saying” (CV, p. 43). The very fact that one can become aware of and fight such trends shows, however, that their power is not absolute, and this is a crucial point.

The quote I just gave does not, I think, announce an interest on Wittgenstein’s part in cultural diagnostics or in our thinking as distinct from or opposed to the focus on personal confusions that we have seen him insisting on, for “our” interests and confusions are “mine”, insofar as I am “one of us”. It is not given in advance how far this is the case, however, how far we share our philosophical problems; rather, to see the extent to which we do, each one of us must ask, quite personally: What troubles me? How do I really view this matter? There is no other way to find out how close or distant we are in our thinking. If, instead, we start out from some allegedly more general diagnosis of “the times”, we will end up thoughtlessly repeating current notions, which reveal not how we think but at best how we think. Rather than helping us understand our times and ourselves, our analyses will then merely express the spirit of the times with its prevalent prejudices and misconceptions.
This – imbibing and expressing the collective spirit around us – is what do
by default, as it were, insofar as we do not struggle for clarity about ourselves.
Philosophy, certainly as Wittgenstein practices it, is precisely this struggle for
clarity, however, and so a struggle against the domination of collective conceptions
and identifications.\(^\text{20}\) It is in this sense that Stanley Cavell suggests, rightly it seems
to me, that Wittgenstein’s primary concern is with a kind of cultural criticism, that
is to say with a criticism of the cultural and collective traits in ourselves:

What directly falls under [Wittgenstein’s] criticism are not the results of
philosophical argument but those unnoticed turns of mind, casts of
phrase, which comprise what intellectual historians call “climates of
opinion”, or “cultural style”, and which, unnoticed and therefore
unassessed, defend conclusions from direct access – fragments, as it were,
of our critical super-egos which one generation passes to the next
along with, perhaps as the price of, its positive and permanent
achievements: such fragments as “To be clear about our meaning we
must define our terms” … “Language is merely conventional” … “Moral
judgments express approval or disapproval” … “Knowledge is increased
only by reasoning or by collecting evidence”. “Taste is relative, and
people might like, or get pleasure from anything” … (19xx, p. 26)

5. A moral-existential dimension?

As we have seen, Wittgenstein emphasises that philosophical confusions are not due
to mere oversights or intellectual mistakes, but rather reveal urges to misunderstand;
something in us wants to picture things in certain ways and resists other ways of
looking at the matter – while we are typically blind to these dynamics driving our
own thinking. Now moral difficulties typically show a similar structure, in which
understanding and change is blocked not by simple misunderstanding but by a
blindness or refusal to see the character of our own motivation and involvement in
situations; thus, the envious person does not see her envy, she only sees how
“unfair” it is that others are so “undeservedly” successful, the parties to a quarrel
both see the other as the quarrelsome one, the vain person is expert at finding vanity
in others, and so on. If this is right, one might ask whether philosophical difficulties
may not be connected, in perhaps important ways, with unresolved and
unacknowledged moral difficulties – but to avoid any unintended, narrowly
moralistic interpretations, it is probably better to speak of moral-existential
difficulties.

There is, alas, no sustained discussion in Wittgenstein’s texts where this idea
would be pursued. On the other hand, there are many hints: remarks, some of them
very striking, in which Wittgenstein seems either directly to claim that philosophical
difficulties have a moral-existential dimension, or makes other claims which seem
to imply this. In this vein, Rush Rhees reports Wittgenstein saying: “Of the two,
character is more important than intellect, if you are going to do philosophy” (2001,
p. 161). I will discuss written remarks of a similar tendency below. First, however, a
few preliminaries.

On a general exegetical level, it is notable that the moral-existential theme in
Wittgenstein’s writings seems strangely persistent and yet at the same time
strangely anomalous; it is like a subterranean stream which now and then bursts
forth in an sudden, explicit, and often forceful remark, only to apparently disappear
again. Wittgenstein himself famously said of the Tractatus that the “point” of the
book was “ethical” (Letters to Ficker, REF), and there are many who feel, with his
friend Drury, that all of Wittgenstein’s writings – despite, or perhaps in, their refusal
to say almost anything explicitly about ethics – “point to an ethical dimension”
(1984, p. 81). What exactly this means is usually left rather unclear, however.\(^\text{21}\)
Joachim Schulte offers a different, perhaps more common, view when he claims
that “the man Ludwig Wittgenstein” no doubt had strong ethical views, but made it

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\(^{20}\) Here one might consider Wittgenstein’s strikingly Nietzschean references (PO, p. 185) to
“the herd”, i.e. the collective, and to an “instinctive rebellion” against language of the herd as
a precondition for engaging in fruitful philosophical criticism.

\(^{21}\) Drury, 1984, p. 80–83, says something about what he takes this to mean. For other
suggestions, see REF.
clear that “there could be no useful philosophical discussion of these things”, and that the scattered remarks which bear on “the ethical, religious, and other ‘dimensions’ not explicitly discussed in his other writings” – collected, by von Wright, not by Wittgenstein, in *Culture and Value* – “did not normally form part of what he was basically writing about in the manuscripts the printed remarks are taken from” (1986, p. 69, text of fn 2).

It seems to me, however, that Schulte begs the question by assuming a separation of the remarks into those that do and do not form part of the philosophical discussion: even if, as von Wright tells us, Wittgenstein himself frequently “hinted at such a separation – by the use of brackets or in other ways” (CV, Preface), the salient point is surely that these remarks crop up, and were left standing, in the midst of discussions of apparently quite unrelated questions. Thus, in 1931 he wrote in pencil in a notebook “A confession must be part of the new life”; as Rhees notes, there is “Hust the one sentence. Then he goes on to discuss the philosophy of mathematics” (1981, p. 191). To me this raises the question: what was Wittgenstein “basically writing about” in his philosophical manuscripts? How did he see the character of the problems and difficulties he was dealing with?

What I try to do below is to sketch one possible way of understanding the implications of Wittgenstein’s scattered explicitly moral-existential remarks on the character of philosophical difficulties. I don’t pretend that what I say is what Wittgenstein really meant, but for some reason did not explicitly say; his former student Elisabeth Anscombe was no doubt giving sound warning in recounting that “predictions of ‘what Wittgenstein would say’ about some question one thought of were never correct” (1995, p. 407). I offer only an attempt to think about certain matters which are raised in my mind by Wittgenstein’s remarks, and which seem – quite apart from any concern with Wittgenstein-exegesis – both important and neglected.

Turning now from exegetical matters to the substantial question at issue, we should note that even if philosophical difficulties have, at least sometimes, a crucial moral-existential aspect, this is not to deny that they can be seen as confusions of, or concerning, language, in the way Wittgenstein stresses, for such confusion of tongues may be regarded as one central symptom of, or form taken by, our moral-existential difficulties. The question is not, then, whether philosophical difficulties appear as linguistic confusions – they do – but rather how we are to understand their roots and character. A second point is that focusing on the moral-existential dimensions, if such there be, of philosophical difficulties does not, anymore than in the case of the general shift in Wittgenstein towards an interest in the work of unacknowledged analogies and pictures at the “proto-philosophical level”, mean ignoring the obvious intellectual and argumentative aspect or form of these difficulties. What it means is rather a new way of engaging with the arguments. In the same way, the point of Wittgenstein’s remark about character being more important than intellect in philosophy is not, of course, that it doesn’t matter how you think as long as you’re a decent person, or some such thing. On the contrary, the point is that your character, for good and ill, will manifest itself in your thinking. In bringing in the question of character Wittgenstein has not, then, changed the subject from the unravelling of philosophical confusions to something else, rather he is – so I’m suggesting – pointing to the roots and character of these confusions.

As he emphasised, a philosophical difficulty must be grasped deep enough down that it can be “pulled out by the roots”, for “grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was” (CV, p. 48), and his point about character would seem to be that, as James Conant puts it, in the kind of criticism that reaches the roots of our philosophical difficulties it is impossible “neatly to distinguish between criticism of the thought of a person and criticism of the person whose thought it is” (2002, p. 95). In this spirit, but on a positive note, Wittgenstein said of William James that what made him a good philosopher was that he was “a real human being” (Drury, 1984, p. 106). I don’t know precisely what Wittgenstein had in mind here,
but to perceive, say, a freedom from pettiness and pretension in someone’s philosophical thinking is, I believe, a very important kind of judgment. To be sure, it would be remarkable to find someone who was full of pettiness and pretension in their everyday dealings with others to be miraculously free of it in their thinking, but however that may be, the judgment itself, fully moral as it is, concerns not any external biographical facts about the thinker, but the character of the thinking as it is revealed in their talk or text.

A last point, which is really implicit in what I just said, but should perhaps be made explicit, is that while focusing on the moral-existential dimension means focusing on fears and wishes, and more generally on what motivates adherence or resistance to certain philosophical views, this is not to be conceived as a search for hidden psychological causes. Whatever interest such a search might have, by Wittgenstein’s lights (and I agree) “what is hidden … is of no interest” in philosophy (PI §126). Faced with an inclination of thought, the philosophical task is not, then, to explain it but to acknowledge its existence and character; “Whatever the explanation, – the inclination is there” (PI, p. 216). Finding the cause of a belief does not, as such, change our understanding of what the belief is: finding out that you believe it will rain tomorrow because I told you so does not tell us anything new about what it is you believe. By contrast, seeing a motive, perhaps a fear, at work in inclining one to a belief may give a further characterisation of the belief in the sense of showing what one is being drawn to in it, which aspect of it one fastens onto, the light in which one sees it. I’m suggesting that a moral-existential focus may make possible such further elucidation of what attracts and repels us in various philosophical views.

6. An example: the charm of scientism

In the light of the above, let us now consider an example of what Wittgenstein certainly considered to be a philosophical prejudice: the inclination to privilege scientific thinking as the model for thinking as such; an attitude that is properly characterised as the metaphysical world-view of scientism, to be sharply distinguished from the businesslike (which is not to say uncreative) attitude of a scientist working on a scientific problem. Where does the inclination to privilege science come from? To say that science has proved by its successes that it deserves this privileged place is no answer, for the issue is not how successful scientists are in doing what they do, but why we should think that the kind of understanding the sciences can give us is the most important kind there is?

I would suggest that much of the charm of scientism comes from a hope which could perhaps be expressed like this: “The scientists will find out how things are – what life and death and love and morality and thinking are. Thus I don’t have to put myself through the wonder and terror of thinking about these things, because answers will eventually be forthcoming to all our questions, objective answers which make what I or anyone else may think irrelevant.” To someone tempted by this prospect, the “scientific worldview” may look just as irresistible as the unguarded wallet looks to the thief, and they may allow themselves to be taken in by superficial analogies between scientific and existential questions (e.g. a biologist, too, could ask “What is death?”), precisely because they do not want to go further into the existential questions; terrified or perhaps disgusted by their personal nature, they present them as being scientific, impersonal, questions in disguise. Perhaps Wittgenstein had something along these lines in mind when he wrote: “Man has to awaken to wonder … Science is a way of sending him to sleep again” (CV, p. 5). At any rate, he was not complaining about the misleading surface-grammar of our expressions, but diagnosing a particular attitude to life, one in which the urge to find, or even just to imagine, a scientific explanation for everything is turned into a kind of barrier against contemplating anything, in a way analogous, Wittgenstein suggests, to how tourists who busy themselves with “seeing” all the sights rob themselves of the time to actually look at any one of them (CV, p. 40).
What I have just said may sound outrageous. Who am I, whether with Wittgenstein’s help or not, to allege unconscious and unflattering motives at play in determining what is, after all, the attitude of many, if not most, serious philosophers today? And might it not just as well be said that those who resist, in the name of religion or humanism or something else, claims made on behalf of scientific explanation of human life are moved by unflattering motives of their own; by an obscurantist wish, perhaps, to claim a false immunity for their illusory notions of a privileged status for humanity in the order of things? Yes, certainly that might be said, and the diagnosis may have much truth in many cases. And clearly, a wish for definite answers, however illusory, may be served by a religious or any other brand of dogmatism no less than by a scientistic one – while on the other hand the apparently open-minded idea that we can give no final answers to the most important existential questions but only communicate our personal opinions or inclinations with regard to them, can itself function just as effectively in closing one’s mind to them, blocking further inquiry as meaningless, as any pretended “answer” does.

I accept all of this, nor do I claim that the only possible attraction of scientism is the one I just sketched – although I do as a matter of fact think it is an important factor. The point of my short sketch of a possible charm of scientism was merely to indicate the kind of way in which philosophical prejudice might arise from and express moral-existential difficulties. A general point here is that in trying to understand philosophical debates our focus should not only be on what is said in them, but just as much on what is not mentioned, and on the patterned avoidance of certain matters that might indicate the motives for this. If my sketch for a sample-diagnosis of the allure of scientism seems unpromising, the reader may perhaps substitute one that seems more convincing. At the same time, however, it should not be hard to see that a characteristic of the kind of difficulty we are now discussing is, that if the difficulty is indeed present, if one is moved by certain unflattering, but disowned, motives, then this fact will itself tend to make one reject a correct diagnosis of one’s difficulty; one will instinctively feel that it is, for instance, outrageous or unconvincing or in some other way false.

It might be said that this very fact shows how unfruitful it is to embark on a hunt for secret motives; we will end up hurling abuse at those who think differently from ourselves, accusing them of “only saying that because they in fact…(giving the unconscious motive)”, and dismissing their protestations that it is not so as mere disingenuous defences – and they will pay us back in kind, thus making reasoned discussion impossible. I agree that there is a formidable difficulty here, and that insofar as one sets about the discussion in the sensationalist spirit of a “hunt for secret motives”, the likely result is either arrogant superficiality or paranoia. However, insofar as the presence of important but unacknowledged motives in fact contributes importantly to making philosophical discussions so intractable – which is what I’m suggesting that Wittgenstein is suggesting – then the difficulty can not be avoided but only evaded by disregarding, instead of trying to reveal and subvert, their possible influence.

In order for the debate not to deteriorate into mutual abuse and accusation, the most important thing is to keep firmly in mind that the aim of philosophising should not be to defeat others in argument, but to challenge oneself. As Wittgenstein said in an oft-quoted remark, “Working in philosophy … is really more a working on oneself … On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them)” (CV, p. 16). From this perspective, the thing to strive and hope for in philosophy is, to put it paradoxically, that one may prove oneself wrong, come to see through one’s own illusions. The important thing is to be on guard against unacknowledged motivations at play in oneself when one philosophises, not to take the moral high ground against others by imputing such motives to them. But again, I’m not suggesting that this is easily done; I’m pointing to what I take the difficulty to be.
7. Courage without heroism

Being a matter of the motivation or spirit or style which pervades and carries a person’s thinking – and Wittgenstein’s main interest is always in diagnosing and subverting “styles of thought”, rather than in correcting isolated mistakes or misunderstandings\(^{22}\) – judgments of the kind I have sketched cannot be arrived at by somehow adding together the validity of individual arguments or conclusions. Thus, someone may construct brilliant arguments, raise pertinent questions and make keen observations, and yet you may feel it is all no use, because she doesn’t really want to understand anything, but rather systematically tries to avoid the existentially challenging questions – by apparently undercutting the possibility of raising them, perhaps, or by giving persuasive but ultimately futile answers to them. Certainly these weaknesses will show as weaknesses of her individual arguments too, but the point is that she will not see this; even if she acknowledges individual problems, she will not see the pattern in her avoidance of certain issues. Although you may, if you don’t share her blind spots, learn from the arguments, she herself will not. She may say things that are true, but only as long as it does not threaten her self-evasion, or even helps her uphold it by diverting attention from what she does not want to understand. Perhaps Wittgenstein had something like this in mind when he wrote:

No one can speak the truth if he has still not mastered himself. He cannot speak it; – but not because he is not clever enough yet. The truth can be spoken only by someone who is already at home in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood towards truth on just one occasion. (CV, p. 35)  
You can’t be reluctant to give up your lie, and still tell the truth. (CV, p. 39)

But as Wittgenstein also confesses, “Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself” (CV, p. 34), and evasive strategies of the kind just sketched are everywhere in philosophy, it seems to me. Their presence is often betrayed – but again, only to those who don’t themselves share them – in abrupt changes from great penetration to complete failure of discernment of the kind Wittgenstein found in one of the intellectual heroes of his youth:

Schopenhauer is quite a crude mind … though he has refinement, this suddenly becomes exhausted at a certain level and then he is as crude as the crudest. Where real depth starts, his comes to an end. One could say of Schopenhauer: he never searches his conscience [er geht nie in sich]. (CV, p. 36)

Whether or not Wittgenstein’s judgment of Schopenhauer is fair is beside the point for present purposes, since we are discussing the kinds of criticism that may be made, and that Wittgenstein sometimes made, of philosophical thought, rather than the merits of particular instances of such criticism. The constant difficulty in philosophising, Wittgenstein said, is that “one doesn’t put the question marks deep enough down” (CV, p. 62), and in this instance his criticism is, we might say, that Schopenhauer puts the question marks only as deep down as it suits him; he scrupulously – which doesn’t mean consciously – avoids driving them deeper, to levels where he would start to feel uncomfortable. And here we should note that the truth Wittgenstein said is hard to speak need not – and unless we want to muddy the waters, I think should not – be thought of in a metaphysical way, provoking questions such as “How do we know it?” or “Is it the same for everyone?” The hard truth at issue here is not a speculative notion, but something concretely experienced precisely as the peculiar discomfort we feel around certain questions (and some of the questions may well be different for different people).

If and insofar as our problems have this character of anxious avoidance, however, then intellectual acumen is not what is needed to drive the question marks deeper. What is needed, then? “What I do think essential”, Wittgenstein writes, “is carrying out the work of clarification with COURAGE: otherwise it becomes just a

\(^{22}\) On “styles of thinking”, see McGinn, 1997, pp. 20, 30.
clever game” (CV, p. 19). Again, this is one of those remarks it seems hard to make sense of if one shies away from a moral-existential interpretation of the character of philosophical difficulties. To reflect on one’s inclinations to use words this misleading way or that may be difficult and demanding in all kinds of ways – and I’m in no way trying to minimise these difficulties – but as such it hardly takes courage. When might it take courage to acknowledge, even to oneself, thoughts or inclinations one finds in oneself? To put it differently: when might it seem dangerous to do so? It seems that the answer, at least a good part of it, is: when it threatens isolation from or confrontation with others, when it raises the unsettling question ‘How can I think this, feel that, when everyone else thinks or feels differently’?

To think for oneself has always been the heroic ideal of philosophy, but we rarely give much thought to what this really means. It seems to me that here, if ever, we need, if we are to see what is actually at stake, to heed Wittgenstein’s advice to “describe in practical details and objectively how a reality looks which corresponds to the general world-description of philosophers”, to “[t]ake the general (vague) talk (chatter [Gerede]) of philosophers seriously and make a practical application of it!” If we consider what it is like to be thought of by colleagues and by those one knows and loves as a dangerous fanatic or an incomprehensible freak or a ‘difficult’ character always raising awkward questions, or a vulgar and disgusting person, then the deceptive air of heroism quickly evaporates, and we are left with a nasty and terrifying prospect. But that is the prospect that thinking for oneself threatens, and that, I suggest, is a main difficulty of philosophy.

References
[including some extra items, and omitting some]


23 Cf. Nietzsche’s remark “Even the bravest of us rarely has the courage for what he really knows” (1990, p. 33).

25 For an illuminating example of how thinking may involve an acute, personal challenge, see Norman Malcolm’s account (2001, pp. 30, 93–4) of a conflict he had with Wittgenstein. I discuss the example in Backström, 2007, p. 106 ff.


Cavell, Stanley (19xx). *The Claim of Reason* [I quote from the reprint of an excerpt in Cray & Read, *The New Wittgenstein*].


Wisdom, John (1965). *Paradox and Discovery*. XXX


