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Wittgenstein, the Criticism of Philosophy, and Self-Knowledge

Abstract. The Philosophical Investigations can be read as a sustained meditation on the metaphysical effects philosophical requirements have on our understanding of the phenomena of philosophical inquiry. The present essay proposes the basic outlines such a reading might take by attending to Wittgenstein's distinctive form of philosophical criticism, a form that interrogates the theoretical and moral integrity of our requirements and the claims we enter on their behalf. On this reading, the moral perfection of thought can be said to consist in the criticism of the requirements that emerge in the course of philosophical inquiry or, in Kantian terms, the critique of the dialectical requirements of reason.

In philosophy we do not draw conclusions. "But it must be like this!" is not a philosophical proposition. Philosophy only states what everyone admits.

Philosophical Investigations, §599

Being unable – when we surrender ourselves to philosophical thought – to help saying such-and-such; being irresistibly inclined to say it – does not mean being forced into an *assumption*, or having an immediate perception or knowledge of a state of affairs.

Philosophical Investigations, §299

Make some arbitrary doodle on a bit of paper. – And now make a copy next to it, let yourself be guided by it. – I should like to say: "Sure enough, I was guided here. But as for what was characteristic in what happened – if I say what happened, I no longer find it characteristic."

But now notice this: *while* I am being guided everything is quite simple, I notice nothing *special*; but afterwards, when I ask myself what it was that happened, it seems to have been something indescribable. *Afterwards* no description satisfies me. It's as if I couldn't believe that I merely looked, made such-and-such a face, and drew a line. – But don't I *remember* anything else? No; and yet I feel as if there must have been something else; in particular when I say "*guidance*", "*influence*", and other such words to myself. "For surely," I tell myself, "I was being *guided*." Only then does the idea of that ethereal, intangible influence arise.

Philosophical Investigations, §175

Each morning you have to break through the dead rubble afresh so as to reach the living warm seed.

Culture and Value

I.

In *Philosophical Investigations* §89, Wittgenstein remarks that:

...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 that is already in plain view. For this is what

we seem in some sense not to understand. Augustine says in the *Confessions* “quid est ergo tempus? si nemo ex me quaerat scio; si quaerenti explicare, nescio.” – This could not be said about a question of natural science (“What is the specific gravity of hydrogen?” for instance). Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to remind ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself of)¹.

Something we all know when no one asks us is something I can be said to know so long as I do not ask myself. That I might seem no longer to know what I thought I once knew does not mean that I do not know; it means, rather, that my concept of what it means to know something, together with my understanding of the question posed, leads me in a certain direction. The question does not “in itself” dictate the course of this direction, for how I understand the content of the question is not a function of the question itself. It is a function of my concept of what it means to know something, for it is this concept that determines the form of account I take the question to require. The various possible forms of account determine the various possibilities of direction and understanding. Thus, from the fact that a certain direction might lead me to think that I do not know, it does not necessarily follow that I do not know.

Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to a difficulty, a philosophical predicament of mind. It is not the fact that Augustine does not know, but rather the sense that he does not know, that most interests Wittgenstein, its source. With Augustine, reasons have not come to an end, rather they have not yet so much as begun, and it is not at all clear where he might go about looking for them. Wittgenstein takes this to be an indication of what the difficulty of philosophical investigation might be said to consist in.

Philosophy has always been understood as the accounting-for of what is. The sense that I might not know what I thought I could not have failed to know need not be understood to emerge on the basis of a fact – the fact that I do not know – for if the form of account I take the question to require is itself misguided, the absence of an account becomes a function of the misguided form itself, not the absence of knowledge. I might then return to the question without hearing in it the form of account I once thought it to require. Let us return to the passage from the *Confessions*:

What is time? Who can explain this easily and briefly? Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words? Yet what do we speak of, in our familiar everyday conversation, more than of time? We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know².

The final sentence expresses the peculiar predicament of mind that is brought about, not by an ordinary question (e.g., “What time is it?”), but rather by a uniquely philosophical question (“What is time?”), a question regarding the nature or essence of time as such and in general. What happens in the space of this question is a matter that merits patient reflection, for our understanding of a philosophical question regarding the nature of a certain phenomenon determines our subsequent understanding of the phenomenon itself, and this affects the kinds of things we are inclined to philosophically claim with respect to the phe-

¹ Wittgenstein L., (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, The Macmillan Company, § 89.

² St. Augustine, (1998), *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 230.

nomenon in question. This relation between the form of account we take a philosophical question to require and the kinds of things we are inclined to claim with respect to the phenomenon in question can be described.

In order to set up the required contrast between ordinary discourse and the requirements of philosophy, Augustine recalls to mind the fact that “in our familiar everyday conversation” we speak of nothing more than time, and that we “surely know what we mean when we speak of it”. Time is not the explicit theme of our familiar, everyday conversation, rather it constitutes the non-thematized “horizon” of our discourse insofar as that discourse is and cannot but be, from a grammatical standpoint, temporally inflected. Thus, it is only insofar as time remains buried in “our familiar everyday conversation” that “we surely know what we mean when we speak of it”. Once it gets “lifted” from out of this dimension and “taken up” as the thematic object of a general philosophical account, the sense that we know what we mean when we speak of it seems to elude us, and this marks the emergence of a kind of conflict between our familiar discourse and our philosophical requirement. I should like to trace the origin and genesis of this sense of conflict.

Once a phenomenon becomes the object of a philosophical account, our understanding comportment toward this phenomenon undergoes a certain modification. I describe this modification in terms of a shift from phenomenon to object, that is, from the pre-theoretical absorption in the phenomenon to the theoretical determination of the phenomenon qua thematic object of a form of philosophical account as it enters the philosophical claim-context. This distinction between phenomenon and object is Heideggerean in spirit, if not in letter, and in it lies the secret to understanding the genesis and structure of the objects of philosophical reflection and their relation to our pre-theoretical understanding of the relevant phenomena (see §II).

That the sense of conflict produced in the course of philosophical reflection on the form of account required by the philosophical question gets interpreted as a kind of intellectual lack is itself something that should be taken into consideration as itself a function of the form of account required by the question, not the present state of our knowledge. What we lack is not knowledge, but understanding. For Wittgenstein, the problem is not that there exists a genuine absence of knowledge, for as far as the materials required for responding to philosophical questions are concerned, we already know everything we need to know.

In what sense, then, do we already know everything we need to know? This is certainly not self-evident; it even seems to contradict all our intuitions regarding the nature of the philosophical enterprise. We have already indicated the extent to which these intuitions are themselves the product of a certain kind of understanding of the form of account a philosophical question is taken to require. Our question could thus be posed as follows: how does it so much as come about that we feel ourselves to lack knowledge? This sounds odd: we do not tend to understand the sense that we lack knowledge to be something that comes about as the result of something else, but rather as the default situation or pre-given background against which all philosophical inquiry takes place and from which it seeks to free itself. For Wittgenstein, however, this sense of lack is itself constituted – it belongs much more of the order of accomplishment than to the order of the merely given. We might say that it has certain conditions of possibility, and that these conditions, once described, allow us to actually see how the sense of lack is in fact accomplished. The difficulty encountered in articulating or expressing our knowledge might then be understood to simulate a gap in our knowledge only under certain conditions, and the description of these conditions casts light on the fact that this difficulty expresses something anterior to the order of mere ignorance. We can only sense that we lack knowledge of a phenomenon on the basis of a certain

conception of what we think knowing that phenomenon “must be” in order to be knowledge of that phenomenon at all.

That one might understand the sense of intellectual lack to be an indication of ignorance is itself a precondition to a certain form of philosophical questioning, a form which presupposes a certain interpretation of the difficulty it seeks, through philosophy, to surmount, and which, as such, it neither explicitly avows nor defends, which it takes as a matter of course. An entire philosophical *Weltanschauung* is condensed into this silent, unavowed gesture. That one might interpret this difficulty as a gap in our knowledge means that one is committed to the notion that it must be filled by something other than what we already know.

None of what we have said so far does full justice to Wittgenstein’s remark on Augustine. Wittgenstein is pointing to a difficulty involved in reminding ourselves of what is already in plain view. What we want to understand are the conditions under which such a difficulty is possible, for there is clearly a sense in which what is already in plain view is not visible to us. Something, then, must be obscuring our vision.

II.

In *Philosophical Investigations* §109, Wittgenstein reminds us that our investigation “gets its light from the philosophical problems”. Understanding what this does and does not mean requires some meditation, for we do not as yet understand in anything other than an intuitive sense what Wittgenstein takes a “philosophical problem” to be, how “philosophical problems” come about, why our investigation is said to “get its light” there from, nor yet what the relation between “philosophical problems” and the difficulty involved in reminding ourselves of what is “in plain view” consists in, supposing there to be a relation at all. And it is only by coming to greater clarity about these questions that we might be in a position to understand why it can be so difficult to remind ourselves of what is already in plain view.

The key to understanding what Wittgenstein might mean by “philosophical problem” lies in understanding the source of the philosophical anxieties expressed by his interlocutor throughout *Philosophical Investigations*. In §§156–171, Wittgenstein turns to a brief description of the use of the word “reading” in our language in order to clarify his earlier remarks on understanding. Wittgenstein’s interlocutor insists that the criterion for (whether someone is) “reading” is to be found in the mental process that accompanies the actual “act” of reading; that that is what reading is. Wittgenstein proceeds to consider a series of cases, reminding his interlocutor of the things he already knows: viz., that the criteria for the application of this word are different under different circumstances, that there is no one thing we call “reading” (§156), that different modes of reading (e.g., reading printed words off a page, listening to morse code, feeling along the surface of braille) do not on the face of it appear to exhibit the “same mental process” (supposing there to be criteria for identity here), and yet are each instances of “reading” (§167), that the alleged “characteristic sensations” of reading may be present (this often happens in dreams, for example), and nevertheless not yield an instance of reading (§160). Wittgenstein concludes that there is no sense in searching for the criterion for this word in a special sort of mental process that may or may not accompany the actual act of reading, for there is no single “act” that is (what we call) “reading” – the lesson to be learned here is not simply that our words have a variety of uses in a variety of contexts (the usual platitude about “family resemblances”), but that they do not permit (i.e., cannot be made the objects of) a certain form of philosophical account:

Wittgenstein is drawing our attention not only to the complex life of our language, but to how certain forms of philosophical account can affect our understanding of that life.

“But surely – we should like to say – reading is a quite particular process!” (§165). Here, Wittgenstein’s interlocutor is expressing a requirement: reading “must be” a particular process in order to be “reading” at all – for something rather definite takes place here, something that must underlie all our acts of reading, something that is perhaps not yet well understood by us, but might be better understood in the future as a problem for natural science or philosophical psychology (§158). Here, Wittgenstein’s interlocutor expresses the sense of intellectual lack the origin and genesis of which we have already attempted to trace in broad outline.

What he refuses to accept – what he needs to be reminded of – is “what we should say when” we talk about a certain phenomenon (here, “reading”), for only then can he open himself to the fact that, despite the pretensions of our educated, scientific culture, the criteria for our words do not in the first place derive from the place a possible philosophical psychology or natural science might go about looking for them; they are not the kind of thing psychology, be it mentalist or materialist, requires them to be in order to be the proper objects of psychological research: our words do not fit their paradigm or form of philosophical or scientific object.

What, then, is the source of this anxiety? Wittgenstein’s interlocutor is dismayed at the conflict between his requirement, which anticipates the form of his object, and the pre-theoretical modes of the phenomenon as these modes are expressed in our language. His requirement has misled him into searching for the phenomenon there where it cannot be, overlooking it, meanwhile, there where it already is. We are now in a better position to appreciate the way in which the sense of intellectual lack is in fact constituted by the form of account our understanding takes a philosophical question to require.

Our requirement gives rise to a form of conflict, for our language does not “fit” our requirement. This form raises significant questions regarding the relation between philosophical requirement, the possibility of the objects of philosophical reflection, and the generation of philosophical problems. Our requirement institutes constraints on what the phenomenon under consideration “must be” in order to be the phenomenon that it is; it constrains us to see the matter in a certain way. It “mediates” our relation to the phenomenon, furnishes the prism through which the phenomenon is seen, understood. Our understanding of the phenomenon becomes a function of our requirement. This suggests that the objects of philosophical reflection are not simply given. The objects of philosophical reflection might then be understood as the constituted products or accomplishments of the specific philosophical requirements “mediating” our relation to the phenomena under consideration. The objects of philosophical reflection are constituted in accordance with our requirements, and should our requirements require something of the phenomenon that contradicts the facts of language, a conflict emerges: our language resists our requirement, does not furnish the proper form of object. The transition from our pre-theoretical understanding of a particular phenomenon to the theoretically determined understanding of that phenomenon cannot in this case be made without generating a conflict between the phenomenon and the object of philosophical or theoretical reflection. Understanding philosophical requirement means understanding, not only its role with respect to the entering of concrete claims, but, and perhaps more importantly, understanding its role with respect to the constitution of the objects of those claims. In this case, “assembling reminders” has the force of undermining the paradigm of object specific to philosophical psychology as constituted by the institutive requirement of that science.

Our language denies us our requirements, and our requirements render us blind to the facts of our language. Our requirements, then, obscure our vision, prevent us from seeing what is in plain view, for what is in plain view, what we cannot have failed to know, does not conform, or only imperfectly conforms, to our requirement, and thus cannot be pertinent to us, since “pertinence” has itself become a function of our requirement. What enters our field of vision in philosophy is not and must not be taken to be the undisturbed calm of the phenomena of our world, but our world as seen through a prism the form of which oftentimes forces upon us a certain blindness with respect to the facts of our language. What does and does not enter our field of vision when we are doing philosophy must itself become a problem for philosophy, for that the objects of philosophical reflection might be the constituted products of the requirements guiding that reflection, bearing little or no resemblance to the phenomena reflected upon, means that the significance of philosophy might be lost on us.

Every genuine philosophical requirement has the force of something not chosen, something demanded by the phenomena themselves, something philosophers have a special ear for. But phenomena do not demand anything, they rest in silence. We are ourselves the elsewhere that we hear. And yet we do not have complete control over what, within us, compels us, nor do we always recognize ourselves to be thinking at the behest of a requirement. What appears to be a necessary state of affairs can be recognized as a requirement only after another path of thinking has been laid down. This other path opens us onto a hitherto unheard of possibility of thinking, a possibility that takes responsibility for the requirement and makes of it an object of criticism. The requirements that have emerged in the course of the history of philosophy – metaphysical, epistemological, logical, ethical – are so deeply our own that they have oftentimes appeared to possess a necessity wholly independent of all human being. We project our requirements onto the phenomena themselves and proceed to investigate them on that basis.

The “moral perfection” of thought consists, then, in occasioning within ourselves the disposition to understand things not beyond but, as it were, *before* our requirements determine the field of thinking, and this despite an urge to misunderstand, despite the force of our requirements³. Requirements compel conviction, they exercise a certain power, they haunt us, and our wanting to avail ourselves of them and their effects in no way secures us against their imminent return. To question a requirement is to take on the enormous task of rearrangement for the sake of undoing, within the space rearranged, the conviction that requirement compels. But the life of words is stubborn, and our attempts at leading them back does not guarantee that they will stay for any longer than a night. There is always the morning drift, the hold of a requirement, the return of the must, and the daily labor of breaking free.

³ Wittgenstein L., (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, The Macmillan Company, p. 190: “Don’t look at it as a matter of course, but as the most remarkable thing, that verbs like ‘believe’, ‘wish’, ‘will’ display all the inflexions possessed by ‘cut’, ‘chew’, ‘run’”.