

## ESCAPING THE FLYBOTTLE: SOLIPSISM AND METHOD IN WITTGENSTEIN'S *PHILOSOPHICAL REMARKS*

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**Abstract:** The paper supports a dialectical interpretation of Wittgenstein's method focusing on the analysis of the conditions of experience presented in his *Philosophical Remarks*. By means of a close reading of some key passages dealing with solipsism I will try to lay bare their self-subverting character: the fact that they amount to miniature dialectical exercises offering specific directions to pass from particular pieces of disguised nonsense to corresponding pieces of patent nonsense. Yet, in order to follow those directions one needs to allow oneself to become simultaneously tempted by and suspicious of their all-too-evident "metaphysical tone" – a tone which, as we shall see, is particularly manifest in those claims purporting to state what can or cannot be the case, and, still more particularly, those purporting to state what can or cannot be done in language or thought, thus leading to the view that there are some (determinate) things which are ineffable or unthinkable. I conclude by suggesting that in writing those remarks Wittgenstein was still moved by an ethical project, which gets conspicuously displayed in these reiterations of his attempts to cure the readers (and himself) from some of the temptations expressed by solipsism.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein. Solipsism. Dialectical reading.

*The solipsist flutters and flutters in the flyglass, strikes against the walls, flutters further. How can he be brought to rest?*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1993, p. 258)

*What is your aim in philosophy? – To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (PI §309)

*The solipsist, like the idealist, is caught in the net of grammar, and by disentangling the knots tied by his futile struggles one can better understand Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and its methods.*

P. M. S. Hacker (1986, p. 215)

Somewhat uncommonly for a member of the analytical tradition, Wittgenstein has made great efforts to uncover the sources of the dissatisfactions lying at the basis of the solipsistic temptation. As Peter Hacker pointed out – correctly, I will assume – the solipsist is “the archetypal fly in the original flybottle” from which Wittgenstein wanted to show a “way out” with his philosophy, and the “puzzles surrounding solipsism” became for him “the paradigm of the diseases of the intellect to which philosophers are so prone” (Hacker 1986: 215). Now, how exactly the “way out” of solipsism – and, consequently, of the other philosophical confusions for which it serves as a paradigm – is supposed to be shown in Wittgenstein’s writings? And, since there seems to be an issue about the very *continuity* of those writings, how are we to understand the historical development of his views about solipsism *and* philosophical method?

Hacker’s own answer to those questions – which, for historical reasons, deserves to be called the ‘standard reading’<sup>1</sup> – can be

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<sup>1</sup> As is well known, that reading has been strongly criticized in at least one front in the last few decades, by the so called “resolute readers” of the *Tractatus* – among whom notoriously figure Cora Diamond and James Conant (see esp. Diamond 1991, ch. 6 & 2000, Conant 1989, 1990, 1993, 2000 & 2002, and Conant & Diamond 2004). Although my own reading is surely more aligned to the latter approach (cf. n. 4) I do not think it is necessary to *assume*

summarized as follows: (i) for the “young Wittgenstein” (by which he means, basically, the author of the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus*), “there is a sense in which solipsism is true” (Ibid., p. 81); because he held solipsism to be, in some sense, true, we should conclude that “[young] Wittgenstein himself was not only tempted, but succumbed” to it (Ibid., p. 104); the particular brand of solipsism to which he would have succumbed is one of Schopenhauerian influence, which Hacker dubs “Transcendental Solipsism” (Ibid., p. 99). (ii) Against that young, sympathetic attitude toward solipsism, the “intermediate Wittgenstein” (i.e., the one who wrote during 1929-33) would have changed his mind, defending instead a “methodological solipsism” characterized by “a reductionist position on the problem of other minds” (Ibid., p. 218) in which the “I/self” would have been eliminated in favor of a “‘no-ownership’ theory” (Ibid., p. 220)<sup>2</sup>. (iii) Finally we would have the “later Wittgenstein” offering a “detailed refutation of solipsism in the post-1933 writings” (Id. *ibid.*)<sup>3</sup>.

Now, to present my disagreement in a nutshell, I do not think Wittgenstein was exactly trying, in any of the phases distinguished by Hacker, either to *defend* or to *refute* solipsism. Rather, I take it that both tendencies are *dialectically enacted*<sup>4</sup> in his writings, and are supposed to be

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its truth in order for my argument to be put forward, and if I mention that dispute here it is only in order to indicate that it has been at the background of my own reflections.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “no-ownership theory” comes from Strawson (1959, pp. 95 ff.).

<sup>3</sup> That “refutation”, in turn, has its own historical development, which Hacker summarizes in *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>4</sup> I am working with a contrast between a “substantial” reading of Wittgenstein’s text, which sees it as designed to contribute to the attainment of some sort of theoretical (say metaphysical) knowledge about reality by answering *bona fide* philosophical questions, and a “dialectical” reading, which takes as the central objective of the text to give voice to or enact a number of different views, which are then put into conversation, thus allowing the reader

*re-enacted* by the reader, with the ultimate end of being cured by her own means, i.e., by her being systematically shown that, contrary to what she is initially tempted to suppose, her attempts at formulating that “philosophical position” end up producing one of two equally unsatisfying results, namely, (a) apparently substantial yet empty and pointless statements (however superficially in accordance with logico-grammatical rules), *or* (b) meaningful yet trivial ones. The lesson, in both cases, is that resorting to solipsism (among many other such “positions”) is not really a matter of presenting and defending “theses” or “theories” about “the essence of reality” (as opposed, say, to empirical or scientific theses and theories about it); rather, it is a matter of deflecting some difficulties posed by (our reactions to) that reality.

In what follows I shall offer some support to the dialectical reading sketched above by means of an illustration<sup>5</sup>, focusing on some key passages from the *Philosophical Remarks*<sup>6</sup>, particularly its “chapter

to be alternately tempted by metaphysical questions, urged to uncover the sources of those temptations, and ultimately be freed from their fascination, achieving that kind of “peace” that Wittgenstein talks about in various contexts (e.g., PI §133). The main inspiration for this approach was an early essay of Stanley Cavell’s (1976 [first published in 1962]), where he distinguishes two main “voices” in Wittgenstein’s (mature) writings, namely: (i) the voice of temptation, which prompts the reader to theorize or philosophize, and (ii) the voice of correctness, which aims to return the reader to ordinary life – in particular, to ordinary linguistic practices. As it will become clear, I tend to distinguish among different inflections of those two voices – after all, one might be tempted by a number of different philosophical views, and accordingly might need to be ‘corrected’, i.e., brought back to ordinary life, by different means. (I am grateful to *Manuscrito*’s anonymous referee for indicating the need to make this clarification.)

<sup>5</sup> A parallel reading of the Blue Book’s treatment of solipsism are forthcoming in *Dois Pontos*, vol. 9, n. 2, 2012..

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, 1975; hereafter referred to as “PR”. It may be worth mentioning that this “work” is largely an editorial invention consisting of a selection from a vast, relatively unexplored stratum of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass*,

V”<sup>7</sup> which (similarly to its predecessor section 5.6 of the *Tractatus*), is clearly and centrally devoted to an investigation of the nature and limits of experience. By means of a close reading of those remarks I will try to lay bare their self-subverting character: the fact that they amount to miniature dialectical exercises – small ladders to be thrown away – offering specific directions to pass from particular pieces of disguised nonsense to corresponding pieces of patent nonsense. Yet, in order to follow those directions one needs to allow oneself to become (simultaneously) tempted by and suspicious of their (all-too-evident) “metaphysical tone” – a tone which, as we shall see, is particularly manifest in those (rather abundant) claims purporting to state what *can* or *cannot* be the case, and, still more particularly, those purporting to state what can or cannot be done *in language* or *thought*, thus leading to the view that there are some (determinate) things which are *ineffable* or *unthinkable*.

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from a period when his views were constantly changing, sometimes radically. The reason I think that does not preclude the usefulness of the following reflections is that my main intention is *strategic*, namely, to suggest how certain sorts of (exemplary) remarks might be read. That reading might well not apply to all the remarks collected under PR, let alone to the whole of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass*. In fact I myself will sometimes express some reserve about specific remarks, which seem a little off key given what I take as the main thrust of Wittgenstein’s ongoing project. (Thanks again to the anonymous referee for having asked for this clarification.)

<sup>7</sup> The numbering and grouping of paragraphs under different chapters is Rush Rhees’s editorial decision, not Wittgenstein’s.

## 1. “THE WORLD AS IDEA”: SOLIPSISM AND THE LIMITS OF EXPERIENCE

Chapter V of the *Philosophical Remarks* opens with the following passage:

That it doesn't strike us at all when we look around us, move about in space, feel our own bodies, etc., etc., shows how natural these things are to us. We do not notice that we see space perspectively or that our visual field is in some sense blurred towards the edges. It doesn't strike us and never can strike us because it is *the* way we perceive. We never give it a thought and it's impossible we should, since there is nothing that contrasts with the form of our world.

What I wanted to say is it's strange that those who ascribe reality only to things and not to our ideas [*Vorstellungen*] move about so unquestioningly in the world as idea [*Vorstellungswelt*] and never long to escape from it. (PR, p. 80, §47)

Remarkably, the passage above purports to criticize the attitude of some philosophers (call them realists) who take the things they (think they) perceive as being metaphysically independent from the *way* they are perceived, i.e., from facts concerning and conditioning the “form of our world”. Now does that criticism implies that Wittgenstein would be willing to support the opposite (call it idealist or solipsist) attitude? It surely *seems* so – after all, he explicitly says that the philosopher we are calling realist *is* moving himself “unquestioningly” and against his own self-understanding “in the world as idea”; he also claims, apparently in the same vein, that “there is *nothing* that contrasts with the form of our world” (my emphasis) – a view which is reinforced when he concludes, a little further in §47: “That is, what we neither can nor want to go beyond would not be the world.” The upshot of those remarks seems to be that there is no world, or reality, outside or beyond the limits imposed by our form of representing it. Yet, that this is only an *apparent* result shall become evident when we start asking *exactly how* Wittgenstein would be entitled to *state* it, given his former claim that it is simply *impossible* to “give a thought” to the

conditioned character of our experience, since there is no contrast available.

This shows how complex the dialectical situation presented by Wittgenstein's remarks can become. In the present case, I suppose one can portray it as follows: on the one hand, Wittgenstein seems to be tempting us to assume that there is a perspective from which one might consider, e.g., the dispute between the realist and the idealist/solipsist, and then judge that the former is wrong, since she is not taking into account the conditioned character of our experience (the fact that it is *always perspectival*); yet, as if the idea of such a "view from nowhere" was not puzzling enough, Wittgenstein also seems to be tempting us to accept, on the other hand, that such a view is itself *impossible* – a claim which now seems to be made from *no perspective at all*.

Confronted with that complicated dialectic, a reader acquainted with Wittgenstein's earlier work can be reminded of a Tractarian device apparently introduced in order to relieve us from the same kind of difficulty in which we seem to be involved now: the distinction between *saying* and *showing*. Actually, Wittgenstein resorts to a very similar distinction in a number of contexts throughout the *Remarks*, one of them being §54, where we read that "What belongs to the essence of the world cannot be expressed by language", and that "Language can only say those things that we can also imagine otherwise" (PR, p. 84). A bit further Wittgenstein repeats that "what belongs to the essence of the world simply *cannot* be said"; to this, he adds the following, more positive consideration:

And philosophy, if it were to say anything, would have to describe the essence of the world.

But the essence of language is a picture of the essence of the world; and philosophy as custodian of grammar can in fact grasp the essence of the world, only not in the propositions of language, but in rules for this language which exclude nonsensical combinations of signs. (PR, p. 85, §54)

Notice the smooth transition from the Tractarian view, according to which the essence of the world is indeed ineffable but would nonetheless be “made manifest” by logic/philosophy, to the newer one, according to which philosophy can “grasp” the (still ineffable) essence of the world by presenting grammatical rules, thus enabling one (the philosopher, say) to “exclude nonsensical combinations of signs”, just like the presentation of the “general form of proposition” would, according to the *Tractatus*’s official project<sup>8</sup>. Is Wittgenstein, then, resuming the Tractarian view that a line can be drawn separating sense from nonsense, thus enabling one to tell what *can* or *cannot* be said, and, consequently, what *can* or *cannot* be the case in the world, i.e., the *totality* of possible facts, the very *form* of the world? Or are we (rather unconsciously) projecting our own philosophical prejudices into the text, prompted by Wittgenstein’s (very self-conscious) use of “metaphysical language”?

In the following passage Wittgenstein himself seems to support the latter, more self-questioning view about the possibility of telling sense from nonsense:

If someone said: Very well, how do you know that the whole of reality can be represented by propositions?, the reply is: I only know that it can be represented by propositions in so far as it can be represented by propositions, and to draw a line between a part which can and a part which can’t be so represented is something I can’t do in language. Language *means* the totality of propositions. (PR, p. 113, §85)

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<sup>8</sup> An anonymous referee has called my attention to the fact the best candidate to the role of “showing the essence of reality” in PR is what Wittgenstein calls (e.g. in PR §54) “the application of language”, and that grammar *presupposes* that applicability of language to the world. Granted that thesis, it suffices for my purposes to indicate that grammar (and its rules) can still be seen as an *indirect* way of grasping the essence of reality, provided that the signs which comprise language are already connected to it through their application (i.e. the projection relation).



Does the categorical denial presented above allow us to settle the issue about the possibility of telling the representable from the non-representable, hence the thinkable from the unthinkable, sense from nonsense? I do not think so. In fact I think we should not accept so easily and uncritically *any* of Wittgenstein's overtly categorical denials of logico-metaphysical possibilities. Concerning the particular passage under analysis, the reason is *not*, N.B., that the opposite claim would be more plausible than its denial. The problem is, rather, that *none* of the alternative claims would have a clear sense; after all, *what* possibility would Wittgenstein be *excluding* by (categorically) denying that we can "draw a line" between what is and what is not representable "in language"? Does that denial imply that there is (a determinate, particular, specifiable) "something" that we cannot do, or talk or think about? How could we (possibly) give a determinate *sense* to such an ineffable and unthinkable "possibility"? And if we cannot, then what exactly are we saying, or thinking, when we read a "sentence" (a string of signs) like the one above – namely: "to draw a line between a part which can and a part which can't be so represented is something I can't do in language"?

By suggesting that we try to answer the questions above I am not implying that we simply *can't* give any sense to either of the alternative "claims". On the contrary, I am trying to question precisely that kind of *a priori*, categorical denial of linguistic possibilities. What I am implying is, rather, that we should not take so quickly something that *appears* to be a (determinate) proposition (in that it is composed of familiar words, in a grammatically or syntactically correct order) as in fact *being* so. Now I take it that Wittgenstein's text is precisely crafted to make us aware of that temptation, and ultimately overcome it. It does so by giving voice to some philosophical "theses" or "problems" so as to make their apparently incompatible demands perspicuous to the attentive reader, thus allowing one to use one's own linguistic expertise to unveil the (ultimate) emptiness, pointlessness, or utter confusion

behind the formulation of such “theses” and “problems”. Yet in order for that aim to be properly achieved (so as to really prevent one from falling back into a particular confusion) Wittgenstein first needs to tempt the reader to *accept* those (all-too-convenient) categorical “answers” to some (all-too-neatly formulated) philosophical “problems”. By self-consciously employing “propositions” without (as yet) any clear sense, and having us take such philosophical baits, he is ultimately trying to make us aware (and suspicious) of our own eagerness to accept such categorical, “metaphysical” talk of (im)possibilities.

Now *how far* should one go with this self-aware (even self-suspicious) attitude in relation to (one’s reactions to) Wittgenstein’s writings? How would one know when to stop the (therapeutic) process, taking a particular result as final, as not further questionable? Where exactly is the limit separating “metaphysical” (mis)uses of language from ordinary ones? As it happens with many questions raised by the reading of Wittgenstein’s writings, I think the answers can only be found in (each particular enactment of) the therapeutic process itself – not surprisingly, given my contention that the ultimate aim of the whole self-subverting process is precisely to allow a reader to find her own way around, hence her own resolution of her own philosophical confusions, as they come to be mirrored by Wittgenstein’s text. Of course this puts a heavy burden upon the reader, who must, in a sense, alternately undertake the roles of analyst and analysand; yet I think Wittgenstein was indeed such a demanding author.

With these considerations in mind, let us to go back to §47, which closes as follows:

Time and again the attempt is made to use language to limit the world and set it in relief – but it can't be done. The self-evidence of the world expresses itself in the very fact that language can and does only refer to it.

For since language only derives the way in which it means from its meaning, from the world, no language is conceivable which does not represent this world. (PR, p. 80, §47)

What is this text stating? Again, a very natural and straightforward answer would be: a kind of (logico-metaphysical) impossibility – that of drawing the limits of the world in language. But let us stop for a moment in order to reflect about *what exactly* this impossibility would amount to. I think at least two competing and equally plausible interpretations are available, corresponding to two very different starting points from which that first, “natural” reading could be pursued, depending on the reader's philosophical frame of mind. On the one hand – for a committed realist, say – the message would be that since “language can and does only refer to [the world]” (and so on), then the world must be seen as *more fundamental than* our linguistic means of representing it (in the sense that the former would surpass, be independent from, even indifferent to, the latter). According to another philosophical frame of mind – that of a linguistic idealist, or even a solipsist – the message would be rather different, *viz.*, that since “language can and does only refer to [the world]” (and so on), then there must be an *internal relation* between language and world, and, consequently, the very idea of a world “outside of”, or “beyond” our linguistic means of representing it would be simply nonsensical, hence unthinkable – exactly the same message that was (apparently) stated in the opening remarks of §47.

Confronted with those interpretations, what are we supposed to do? Shall we choose one, presumably on the grounds that it is intended by Wittgenstein himself? But how could we be sure about *that*? As I said above, I think the strategy of trying to collect a number

of texts dealing with the same or related issues, in order to see which interpretation would better fit the whole set would be hopelessly flawed – as is in fact attested by the existence of an unending dispute, about virtually *any* piece of writing by Wittgenstein, whether it is to be taken as an instance of (some sort of) “realism” or “anti-realism”. In fact, I take it that it is precisely the *ambivalence* (or maybe polyvalence) of claims like the ones above which is of interest, given the (therapeutic) aims of the whole enterprise. By thus allowing *both* (or, more generally, any number of) interpretations to be (equally) defensible, Wittgenstein’s text would resonate with severally-minded readers, eliciting different reactions according to their own philosophical prejudices or inclinations<sup>9</sup>.

Let me try to clarify these claims by offering another illustration, which hopefully will also throw light on Wittgenstein’s view about the nature of philosophy as the “custodian of grammar” and support my contention that he should not be understood as being prone to either “realism” or “anti-realism”. The illustration I have in mind comes from §216, where Wittgenstein purports to criticize the use of a particular phrase: “sense-datum”. “A sense-datum”, he explains and illustrates, “is the appearance of this tree, whether ‘there really is a tree standing there’ or a dummy, a mirror image, an hallucination, etc.” (PR, p. 270). So far, nothing to worry about – after

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<sup>9</sup> One could here be reminded of Kant’s treatment of the Antinomies, and surely there is at least a family resemblance – with the important difference that, as I have been arguing, in Wittgenstein’s case there is no privileged *theoretical* point of view (say, “Transcendental Idealism”) from which the dispute would be settled, or else shown to be hopeless; rather, the only resource available to deal with cases like these is our practical mastery of ordinary language, and the only and ultimate aim of the process envisaged by Wittgenstein in presenting those “antinomic” claims is precisely to allow us to recover that (momentarily lost, repressed, or forgotten) mastery, i.e., to recover an awareness of how our words are used in concrete contexts, so as to overcome our own philosophical confusions.

all, one is surely allowed to define and employ a (technical) phrase in the way one wants, provided that it fulfils any number of practical functions (such as enabling us to see more clearly a conceptual distinction, etc.). But confusion arises when one – e.g., a philosopher – forgets her initial, determinate (theoretical) purpose in introducing a new description, and assumes that it is somewhat intrinsically more adequate than alternatives, or even “essential” (see *ibid.*) for representing reality. Now that seems to be precisely the attitude of the “idealists” mentioned in the remainder of §216:

Idealists would like to reproach language with presenting what is secondary as primary and what is primary as secondary. But that is only the case with these inessential valuations which are independent of cognition (“only” an appearance). Apart from that, ordinary language makes no decision as to what is primary or secondary. We have no reason to accept that the expression “the appearance of a tree” represents something which is secondary in relation to the expression “tree”. (PR, p. 271, §216)

In case you are wondering where exactly one could find an example of such an “idealist” notice that we don’t need to look very far; after all, wasn’t the “reproach” mentioned above already enacted in §47, where Wittgenstein himself (?) purported to criticize those who “ascribe reality only to things and not to our ideas”? – But if *Wittgenstein himself* (?) is now criticizing his own previous criticism, isn’t he contradicting himself at this point? – Well, yes and no; he surely is contradicting a “position” which was illustrated before in (and by) his text; yet, as I have been arguing, that “position” was not so much *defended* in that earlier context as it was *enacted* or *given voice to* in order to tempt us to (momentarily) accept it, following its (apparent) consequences, and (ultimately) become aware of its emptiness or confusion, thus becoming able to “overcome it” and “throw it away”. This, I repeat, is a very complex dialectical situation; and yet it seems an absolutely pervasive, structural feature of Wittgenstein’s remarks (which doesn’t mean, of course, that it is always visible from the mere

inspection of their surface). The implication, or moral I would like to extract by calling attention to that dialectic at this point is that one should *not* think of the “characters” being given voice in these and other remarks – including “the idealist” of §216 and “the realist” of §47 – so much as “others”, but rather as, say, so many facets of oneself (of *one’s self*), or, maybe more aptly, as echoes of one’s own (*inner* – perhaps even *repressed*) philosophical voices, which are unleashed (perhaps for the first time, or at least for the first time with this level of articulation) by Wittgenstein’s own use of carefully crafted, tempting (metaphysical) claims<sup>10</sup>.

Bearing that lesson in mind, let us see if we are in a better position to understand what exactly would be the problem of adopting the “idealist’s” reproaching attitude toward (ordinary) language. In order to start dealing with this issue, let us first try to get clear about the contrasting case presented in the passage above – namely, that of the “inessential valuations which are independent of cognition”, which, according to Wittgenstein, is the (only?) use of language correctly described as presenting “what is secondary as primary and what is primary as secondary”. In order to facilitate the analysis, let us first take note of the German wording of that description, which reads: “[...] *diesen unwesentlichen, und mit der Erkenntnis nicht zusammenhängenden Wertungen der Fall*”. What would be the reference of the description at

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<sup>10</sup> §87 of *The Big Typescript* (Wittgenstein 2005, p. 302-303; hereafter “BT”) is composed of a set of very interesting and clarifying descriptions of the philosophical task, all of them (I would submit) capable of offering further support to my own description. Let me highlight a couple of passages which may illustrate the point: “The philosopher strives to find the liberating word, and that is the word that finally permits us to grasp what until then had constantly and intangibly weighed on our consciousness”; “One of the most important tasks is to express all false thought processes so true to character that the reader says, “Yes, that’s exactly the way I meant it”. To make a tracing of the physiognomy of every error”; “For only if he acknowledges it as such, *is* it the correct expression. (Psychoanalysis).”

hand? The only hint Wittgenstein gives us in this passage is (what appears to be meant as) an *instance*. “‘only’ an appearance [*nur die Erscheinung*]”; yet, that doesn’t get us very far. In fact, nothing in the context surrounding this passage in the *Remarks* does. I take it that the difficulty here has editorial causes – I mean, is caused by Wittgenstein’s arrangement of his reflections to produce the *Remarks*. Some years later, when he once again took up those reflections for (re)arrangement, the result is much clearer. That result is recorded in §101 of *The Big Typescript*, which contains the full §216 of the *Remarks*, only prefixed by a couple of reflections which were apparently suppressed in its first iteration. Among those reflections, we read that “the words ‘seem’ [*scheinen*], ‘error’, etc., have a certain emotional emphasis that isn’t essential [*nicht wesentlich ist*] to phenomena. This emphasis is somehow connected to the will, and not merely to knowledge [*nicht bloss mit der Erkenntnis zusammen*]” (Ibid., p. 347.). As an illustration of such (cognitively) “inessential”, “emotional” emphases, which would be embedded in our (philosophical) assessments of reality, Wittgenstein offers the following: “We say ‘We can *only* remember something’. As if, in some primary sense, memory were a rather weak and uncertain image of what was originally before us with complete clarity” (Id. Ibid.).

Read against that backdrop provided by BT §101, the text of PR §216 seems to imply not only that it would be right to describe *some* particular uses of language – i.e., those expressing “inessential valuations which are independent of cognition”, and having more to do with the will (e.g., that “we can *only* remember something”, and so on) – as presenting “what is secondary as primary and what is primary as secondary”; it also implies that *there is no problem* in making such a “decision as to what is primary or secondary” in those particular cases. (Hence, to stick to the example of PR §216, that of “the appearance of a tree”, there would be no problem at all involved in the decision to employ, for a number of (non-cognitive) reasons (i.e., those having to

do with the *will*) a phrase such as “this tree is *only* an appearance”; perhaps one feels like saying it to oneself, *sotto voce*, reacting to a (pitifully) amazed reaction from an (inveterate city-dweller) friend, when faced with some particular (real) tree, placed all-too “naturally” among others in an (artificial) “forest” inside a big shopping centre.) Yet – and this is the important point for which the cases analysed thus far serve as a counterpoint – that is precisely *not* the sort of reason that we would expect an “idealist” to have in mind when making a “decision as to what is primary or secondary”, and, consequently, when “reproaching” (ordinary) language for making the wrong – indeed inverted – decision about that.

The upshot of these considerations is that the main problem involved in “the idealist’s” position lies not so much in her “revisionary” proposal to reverse the order of what is to be considered primary/secondary, but rather in a misleading *self*-interpretation of that proposal, as if the mere use of a new notation would enable one to take note of something “essential” about “the nature of reality” – something, i.e., which would be hidden (or even reversed) in our familiar forms of description. To sum up: by asserting that “ordinary language makes no decision as to what is primary or secondary”, Wittgenstein is calling our attention to the fact that (as one might put it) our language is “ontologically neutral”<sup>11</sup>, hence, that it does not privilege either “realism” or “idealism”, as far as those expressions are supposed to name two (competing) metaphysical stances towards the “essence of the world”. As Wittgenstein himself asserts back in chapter V: “[f]rom the very outset “Realism”, “Idealism”, etc., are names which

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<sup>11</sup> From the fact that our (ordinary) language is “ontologically neutral” and “makes no decision as to what is primary or secondary”, it does not follow (as I hope the preceding paragraph makes clear) that *we* (language users) are (or *have to be*) “neutral” in that sense – on the contrary, we make that sort of decisions all the time, and lucidity lies not in relinquishing all such decisions, but in knowing that *we* are indeed *making* them, and *for what purposes*.



belong to metaphysics. That is, they indicate that their adherents believe they can say something specific about the essence of the world” (PR, p. 86, §55). Yet, nothing “specific” is really said by means of their (revisionary) “theses” – let alone something specific about “the *essence* of the world” – as we are in a position to acknowledge as soon as we uncover *what* the utterer of those “theses” may possibly mean by uttering them, what purposes she would be trying to fulfil.

Now let us compare, or confront, the results of this analysis with the methodological claims made in §54 – namely, that “what belongs to the essence of the world simply *cannot* be said”, yet can be “grasped” (by philosophy) “not in the propositions of language, but in rules for this language which exclude nonsensical combinations of signs”. Notice, first, that in the passages analysed above, Wittgenstein is open to being read – i.e., has (on purpose) not armed himself against being read – as arguing that some “combinations of signs”, *viz.*, those sentences employed by philosophers in general, and by “realists” and “idealists” in particular (involving notions such as those of “sense-datum”, “visual image”, “appearance”) *may* in fact be excluded in some particular contexts as “nonsensical” (i.e., as pointless or empty). But the reason he offers is *not*, as a de-contextualised reading of those methodological remarks would imply, that those combinations are so to speak *intrinsically* nonsensical – as if they were trying to express something that is simply *ineffable*, i.e., something outside or beyond the limits of language and sense. Rather, the reason to “exclude” those signs is, simply, the realization that when they are employed in some particular (philosophical) contexts – like the ones depicted in, or rather prepared by, Wittgenstein’s text, which are (re)enacted each time a reader gets seriously engaged with their dialectic – they can be shown to be at best “wheels turning idly”, and, at worst, as resulting from philosophical (i.e., logical or grammatical) *confusion* (that, e.g., of privileging a form of description as if it were saying “something specific about the essence of the world”).

The main lesson I hope to extract from the analysis of this concrete application of the method of “grammatical investigation” in the *Remarks* is that we should be careful not to read too much into the idea of philosophy as the “custodian of grammar”, i.e., as an activity which would enable us to “grasp the essence of the world” as reflected in the “rules for excluding nonsensical combinations of signs”<sup>12</sup>. To depict philosophy as being capable of some kind of “extraordinary feat” (*više*, circumscribing the limits of sense) is yet another symptom – perhaps the ultimate symptom – that one has become victim of the kind of temptation of evading our finite (and thus conditioned) condition. The implication, then, is that we should be particularly careful in reading those (apparently dogmatic) judgements about the nonsensicality of “the philosopher’s” (metaphysical) claims<sup>13</sup>. And this connects with another, more general view which I take to be at work in the context of the *Remarks*, namely that there is no “external” standard for the meaningfulness of our signs – in particular, no *philosophical* “external” standard, no “book of rules” waiting to be “discovered” by means of (phenomeno-)logical or grammatical analysis. The only way to determine *whether* a (particular token of a) proposition really makes sense, and if so, *what* is that sense, is to ask what, if any, is its *use* (and purpose) in a concrete (possible) context. As Wittgenstein himself puts it: “If [someone] states that a certain string of words makes sense to him, and it makes none to me, I can only suppose that in this context he is using words with a different meaning from the one I give them, or else is speaking without thinking” (PR, p. §7; see also §114). The whole difficulty of the task lies in trying to get clear about which of the options is true, in each particular case, with the (ordinary) means at our

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<sup>12</sup> A claim which, N.B., will still be echoed in the *Philosophical Investigations* (see §371).

<sup>13</sup> In fact, Wittgenstein’s text itself sometimes becomes overtly (self-)critical about such judgements, suggesting a more balanced view; this clearly applies to some of the opening remarks of the book (see esp. §6-9).

disposal. With that conclusion in mind, let us go back to the analysis of chapter V.

## 2. TIME, MEMORY, AND SUBLIMATION

Having given voice, in the opening passages of chapter V, to the logico-metaphysical problem of trying to go beyond the limits imposed by the “form of our world”, thereby prompting the reader to examine its sense (or senselessness), Wittgenstein’s reflections turn to a new set of questions involving a particular, although ubiquitous, condition of our experience, namely, time. Among those questions we find the following: “If the world of data is timeless, how can we speak of it at all?” (§48); “If memory is *no* kind of seeing into the past, how do we know at all that it is to be taken as referring to the past?” (§50); “Can I conceive the time in which the experiences of visual space occur without experiences of sound?” (§50). As with the previous remarks of chapter V, Wittgenstein’s overt intentions in facing these questions are to unveil (at least some of) the logico-grammatical confusions behind the formulations of the “problems” they express – e.g., the “confusion of the time of the film strip with the time of the picture it projects” (§49) – and to offer a perspicuous view of the syntactical rules for employing the relevant concepts in their respective contexts – e.g., “we cannot use [...] the syntactical rules that hold for the names of physical objects, in the world of the image” (§49). Notwithstanding those overt aims, a different, more self-questioning reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks is also available, suggesting a much more complex and subtle dialectic going on.

In order to flesh out those claims, I would like to focus the analysis on a rather limited subset of remarks, dealing with (what may be called) “the problem of the flow of time”, and the related problem of the metaphysico-epistemological status of memory. The following

passage, which comprises the first half of §52, will serve as an entry point:

It's strange that in ordinary life we are not troubled by the feeling that the phenomenon is slipping away from us, the constant flux of appearance, but only when we philosophize. This indicates that what is in question here is an idea suggested by a misapplication of our language.

The feeling we have is that the present disappears into the past without our being able to prevent it. And here we are obviously using the picture of a film strip remorselessly moving past us, that we are unable to stop. But it is of course just as clear that the picture is misapplied: that we cannot say "Time flows" if by time we mean the possibility of change. What we are looking at here is really the possibility of motion: and so the logical form of motion. (PR, p. 83, §52)

The passage above strikes me as remarkable in many ways. For one thing, it is intriguing that Wittgenstein should introduce the problem of the flow of time by relating its appearance to a *feeling* (of not being able to *prevent* such flow) as well as by saying that it arises *only* "when we philosophize", and (hence) not "in ordinary life". On the face of those claims, it seems even more remarkable that he should open the passage saying that it is strange that "in ordinary life we are not troubled by [that] feeling"; and yet, it is precisely because such trouble would not arise in ordinary life that Wittgenstein seems so confident (maybe all too confident) in saying that some "misapplication of our language" would be the cause of the "idea" of there being such an unstoppable flow. – Now, can we really take in the claim that "in ordinary life we are not troubled by [that] feeling"? After all, don't we commonly *say* such things as that "time is slipping away", and "we are unable to stop it"? And, in employing such sentences, are we not purporting to express some *feelings* we are experiencing – say, e.g., disappointment at not being able to achieve some of our goals in

(ordinary) life? Or is it the case that, by employing such sentences, we would be already involved (however involuntarily) in philosophizing? – But how could we tell the difference? How could we know when our sentences become “misapplications of language” – hence, when philosophy starts?

In the second paragraph Wittgenstein adds, again very remarkably, that when we are caught by that feeling “we are *obviously* using the picture of a film strip remorselessly moving past us [etc.]” (my emphasis). Now even if one grants that the application of *some picture or other* would “obviously” be involved when we are caught by the feeling of the “unstoppable flow of time” (I take it that he doesn’t mean that it is “obvious” that we shall employ that particular, cinematographic picture – rivers or infinite measuring tapes being unrolled in front of one would equally do), what would be the *rationale* for saying that it is “just as clear that the picture is *misapplied*” in the context Wittgenstein describes (that, i.e., of a metaphysical investigation of time, taken as the “form of motion”, and so on)? For a picture to be *misapplied*, there must be something as a legitimate or *bona fide* application of it – hence, in the case under analysis, there must be some *other* context(s), e.g. “ordinary life”, where one could describe time-related phenomena by applying pictures such as that of the film strip. In fact, it is arguable that without resorting to such pictures our ordinary descriptions would almost certainly become less clear and perspicuous, or otherwise less powerful than they actually are: to say, e.g., that “time flows”, or “flies”, or “is passing by”, etc., may be effective (both economical and clear) ways to express *lots* of things “in ordinary life” – from one’s regret for not having taken all the opportunities life offered in the past, to impatience with an overly long philosophical disquisition.

This consideration goes some way toward answering the question whether one should conclude, from the mere fact that a person is employing a picture like the ones under analysis, that she

would be (however involuntarily) philosophizing. The answer, as it will become clear, is: No. But that doesn't answer the further question of how to tell (ordinary, legitimate) applications from (philosophical) *mis*applications of the same pictures. Now Wittgenstein, as I said above, seems rather confident of having such a criterion at hand – after all, he all-too-quickly concludes that our “trouble” only arises because of a particular *mis*application of the picture of the film strip in an *extra*-ordinary (philosophical<sup>14</sup>) context – namely, one in which we would like to speak (“metaphysically”) of time *qua* “possibility of change [...] and so the logical form of motion”, and say of *it* that “is slipping away from us”, and so on. But again, why does he present this case as a *mis*application – as opposed, say, to a legitimate application like the ones mentioned above? There is, clearly enough, an important *difference* in the (purported) applications, in that when the “metaphysical sense” of time

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<sup>14</sup> But, what makes a context a *philosophical* one? Suppose someone – a child, perhaps – asks: “What happens to things when we are not looking at them?” Is she not “philosophizing”, in the above sense? And yet, might one not suppose her question being made in an (otherwise?) very *ordinary* context? What this shows is – as Cavell once put – that “one does not know, in advance, where philosophy might begin, when one’s mind may be stopped, to think” (1996: 264); or again that language can “go on holiday” anytime, in no special setting or frame of mind, that the “metaphysical” is our everyday predicament. There can be a number of causes inclining one to start *questioning* the (ordinary) ways of going on applying our words and pictures, or to imagine (even to crave for) *different* applications, and one cannot know in advance if those new applications will amount to (recognizably) legitimate extensions of a previous concept / picture, or become (recognizably) *mis*applications of it. To tell the difference is a burden that any member of a linguistic community faces from time to time, having as her only resource (ordinary) linguistic expertise. I take it that when Wittgenstein says that a particular use of a concept / picture is a (philosophical) *mis*use he too is deploying just that expertise, thus making a claim for his judgement to be acknowledged and assented by other language users. There is, in sum, no “sure-fire”, *a priori* way to tell the difference between ordinary and philosophical contexts.

is in view, a sentence like “time is slipping away” would hardly be used to hurry up someone or to regret something. But what, then, would be its point?

One answer suggested by the text is that *there is no point at all* in the philosopher’s (purported) use of that sentence: *if* time is taken as a condition of possibility of change, and, in that sense, as “the form of motion” (which is just a philosophical jargon for referring to a very ordinary use of our concept of time, namely, as that dimension in which *events*, as opposed to *things*, extend themselves, and where change and motion can be *measured*), *then* there is no point in saying that “*it* is slipping away”; for something to slip away it must be *possible* for it to be grabbed, maybe to be stopped or accelerated, and so on (a grammatical reminder); now time *as* the very dimension where events occur and change can be measured cannot *possibly* undergo any such modifications; hence, one cannot (legitimately or sensibly) apply a picture such as that of a film strip (or any other *moving* or *modifying* thing – i.e., any other event) in order to describe *it*. – One might here say: time as a dimension and the events which occur in it are incommensurable, really incomparable phenomena. – And finally – if, i.e., one cannot apply any such picture to describe time-as-the-form-of-motion – the very feeling that we are unable to stop the “flow of time” should disappear; in other words, if there is *no sense* in the idea of such a “flow”, there is equally no sense in the idea of trying (or even willing) to stop it.

At first sight these considerations offer a sound explanation of the (otherwise very remarkable) claims made by Wittgenstein in the passage under analysis. Additionally, they seem to offer a good illustration of how one can be freed from a “philosophical trouble” by means of getting the application of language – of its words, sentences, and, in particular, its pictures – right, which means, at least in part, bringing some descriptions (e.g., “time is slipping away”) back to the rough ground of ordinary life, where they would be employed for a

number of different purposes (e.g., hurrying up people or regretting something)<sup>15</sup>, instead of becoming very *complex* but *useless* mechanisms, full of “wheels turning idly” (as one might say of the Augustinian set of queries about time). (We may express that methodological lesson employing Wittgenstein’s favourite turn of phrase for making grammatical reminders in this context, saying that one should be careful not to confuse ordinary, “physical” descriptions with the “phenomenological” ones, i.e., those which would be fitted to describe the “immediately given”.)

Yet – if one was really tempted to take the trouble about the flow of time seriously from the beginning – there would seem to be something inherently dissatisfying about that kind of (dis)solution. Wittgenstein is aware of that apparent shortcoming, as we can see in the following passage:

If, for instance, you ask, “Does the box still exist when I’m not looking at it?”, the only right answer would be “Of course, unless someone has taken it away or destroyed it”. Naturally, a philosopher would be dissatisfied with this answer, but it would quite rightly reduce his way of formulating the question *ad absurdum*. (PR, p. 88, §57)

Notice that the passage above is introduced as *an illustration* or *instantiation* of a philosophical exchange – one which, in fact, is recurrent and characteristic in Wittgenstein’s writings. Given that

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<sup>15</sup> Of course the “rough ground of ordinary life” includes some theoretical (e.g., scientific) purposes as well as (more) practical ones. Nowadays physicists do not speak of the “flow” of time – physical time is (as Wittgenstein already knew) space-like. I suppose that (theoretical) view could be expressed (if roughly) by a sentence like “time does not flow”; if that were the case, we would have another instance of purposeful use of a description, as opposed to a “philosophical” one, in the sense here in view.



illustrative purpose, one might apply a kind of “universal generalization” to the passage, thus getting a useful model or blueprint for such exchanges, which would go as follows:

If, for instance, you ask, “ $x$ ” [a philosophical question], the only right answer would be “ $y$ ” [a grammatical reminder<sup>16</sup>]. Naturally, a philosopher would be dissatisfied with  $y$ , but it would quite rightly reduce his way of formulating  $x$  *ad absurdum*.

Bearing that (generalized) version of the passage in mind, the question I would like to ask is how we are to understand Wittgenstein’s own assessment, as it gets expressed in its final sentence, of the results of applying his grammatical method (an assessment which, it is worth noticing, strikingly reminds one of proposition 6.53 of the *Tractatus*). There are, I take it, at least two ways of interpreting it. The first, and probably the more natural rendering, would have it that:

(1) notwithstanding the philosopher’s dissatisfaction with  $y$  – a dissatisfaction which, given the purposes of logical clarification, would be ultimately negligible – his original “question” ( $x$ ) was in fact “reduced *ad absurdum*” (i.e., shown to be just a *pseudo*-question) by means of the use of grammatical reminders, and that is the end of the matter. The philosophical, elucidative task would be over at that point.

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<sup>16</sup> An anonymous referee has contended that the answer given in the original quote – namely “Of course, unless someone has taken it away or destroyed it” – would be a trivial answer, instead of a *grammatical reminder* (that is, a reminder as to how a word or sentence is ordinarily used in particular contexts). My sense is that at least on *some occasions* – but surely not in all of them – grammatical reminders *can* be given in the form of “trivial answers” like the one above. In other words: *to be* a grammatical reminder is *to function* as one – it is not a matter of *form*, but of *role*, and that role can only be evaluated or tested on particular contexts.

Yet a second interpretation is available, according to which

(2) notwithstanding the logical correction of such a *reductio* – which, from the perspective of someone genuinely puzzled by the difficulty in view, would be ultimately negligible (in that it completely misses the point) – the use of grammatical reminders would leave the philosopher dissatisfied, and (*hence*) that cannot be the end of the matter. More is necessary for a (successful) philosophical therapy.

I find that many readers of Wittgenstein’s writings (myself included, at least in some moods) are rather oblivious – or even blind – to the possibility of the latter rendering of the exchanges between (say) Wittgenstein and his philosophical interlocutor(s), and accordingly are all too prone – even anxious – to stop their reflection when they reach a (rather dogmatic) result similar to the one depicted in the first one. – Why is that? One possible reason is that we (at least in our dogmatic and self-indulgent moods) would be trying to repress something – a difficulty, say, that we would rather not face *seriously*; hence the convenience of accepting that our “trouble” (e.g., about the unstoppable flow of time, or, as in the original version of §57, the unperceived existence of objects) is mere nonsense after all – that our “questions” are actually just *pseudo*-questions.

Bearing that (as yet abstract and speculative) possibility in mind, let us ask whether a philosopher puzzled by the problem of the flow of time would be dissatisfied with the solution offered above. I take it that our philosopher would have an immediate reply to the charge that her (purported) use of a sentence like “time is slipping away” (made in an extra-ordinary context) is simply pointless: granted, its point is not exactly ordinary, but human beings have other purposes and interests in addition to the ordinary ones. And, however incoherent the attempt may ultimately be, it remains a fact that reflection about (e.g.) time might inexorably lead one to *try* to express, to describe, to call attention to, some extraordinary, peculiar, even astonishing (metaphysical) features of the phenomenon under analysis – e.g., that

the past, which is *no more*, keeps *becoming distanced* from the present, which, in turn, has *no extension*, and keeps *slipping into* a future which is *not yet*. Faced with such an impulse, the claim that one is employing a picture which cannot (should not?) be employed, because it is “incommensurable” with the phenomenon one wants to describe, is very dissatisfying indeed, not exactly because it is wrong or false, but rather because it is beside the point, and leaves the *real difficulty* simply untouched, thus amounting to an attempt to change the subject completely. (Notice that our dissatisfied philosopher need not be characterized as ignorant of the grammatical rules of ordinary language; she would, as I said, happily accept the charge of not being able to express her trouble employing ordinary descriptions – but so much the worse for those descriptions!)

Supposing the reply I just imagined (or another to the same effect) is plausible, how would the exchange continue? For the time being, I will let it stand – the philosopher having the last word – and turn to the analysis of some subsequent remarks which may help us to resume that exchange in a more productive way. So let us examine the second half of §52, in which Wittgenstein presents a related “trouble” arising in the philosophical investigation of time – namely, one having to do with the role of memory in our experience of the past:

In this connection it appears to us as if memory were a somewhat secondary sort of experience, when compared with experience of the present. We say “We can *only* remember that”. As though in a primary sense memory were a somewhat faint and uncertain picture of what we originally had before us in full clarity.

In the language of physical objects, that’s so: I say: “I *only* have a *vague* memory of this house.” (PR, p. 84, §52)

The reason for presenting this new “trouble”, and relating it to the previous one, should be by now clear – after all, once one is caught by the feeling that the present inexorably “disappears into the past” it is only natural to think of the experience of the past itself (i.e., of the

stretch of the “strip of time” which has already “mov[ed] past us”), as it is recorded in our memory, that it becomes only a “faint and uncertain picture” compared with the original (i.e., the experience of the present). Now, if read against the backdrop of the previous analysis, the last sentence of the passage above will have the following implications: (i) that there is no problem in putting the situation that way – applying that kind of picture – in “the language of physical objects” (hence, “in ordinary life”); but (ii) trouble may arise “when we philosophize” about those familiar facts, and start *mis*applying that familiar (kind of) picture. Actually the next set of remarks (§53) can be read as elaborating just those implications. Here is how it goes:

And why not let matters rest there? For this way of talking surely says everything we want to say, and everything that can be said. But we wish to say that it can also be put *differently*; and that is important.

It is as if the emphasis is placed elsewhere in this other way of speaking: for the words “seem”, “error”, etc., have a certain emotional overtone which doesn’t belong to the essence of the phenomena. In a way it’s connected with the will and not merely with cognition.

We talk for instance of an optical illusion and associate this expression with the idea of a mistake, although of course it isn’t essential that there should be any mistake; and if appearance were normally more important in our lives than the results of measurement, then language would also show a different attitude to this phenomenon. (PR, p. 84, §53).

One can discern in this passage the two characteristic “voices” running through Wittgenstein’s text, namely the “voice of temptation” and the “voice of correction”<sup>17</sup>. The specific temptation here illustrated is that of making a “leap” from ordinary descriptions (e.g., “We can *only* remember that”), which can have many clear and legitimate uses in our common linguistic practices, to the extraction of some (supposedly) substantial philosophical conclusions – here: the

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. n. 4.

metaphysico-epistemological thesis that memory offers just a “faint image” of the “reality” originally experienced. Once again, what the voice of correction highlights is that this kind of temptation occurs only when one (“the philosopher”) starts employing some pictures which would be fine in their original context for some supposedly new (philosophical) purposes; thus, even though our current use of some descriptions may be from the beginning impregnated with certain “emotional overtones” – after all, we actually *say* that memory allows us *only* to remember facts, and we actually *draw a contrast* between that (mnemonic) access to the world and a more direct one, namely, present experience – the kind of trouble that the philosopher would like to indicate, concerning the epistemic limitations of memory, does not arise in the ordinary situations which are the original home of those descriptions. And this is what is shown by the very possibility of an unbiased (re)description of the situation, indicating that the “emotional overtones” associated with normative words like “error”, “mistake”, etc. are not essential to the phenomena described<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> I owe this point to an anonymous referee, who also remarked that one can see in the passage under analysis a straight application of the philosophical method outlined by Wittgenstein in PR §1 (namely, that of comparison of modes of presentation of immediate experience). Interestingly, in the last paragraph of §53 Wittgenstein describes a language which would be free of such “emotional overtones” – one which “would not permit any way of expressing a preference for certain phenomena over others”, and, hence, “would have to be, so to speak, absolutely *impartial*” – as “primary”; in so doing, he offers an important (and, to my mind, much overlooked) key to understand the role of a “phenomenological language” in freeing us from philosophical confusion: the idea is *not* to use that (“primary” or “phenomenological”) language to correct the ordinary one, or even to show that the latter is intrinsically misleading, but rather to use it as an object of comparison, which may show to “the philosopher” (in us) that some of the features that s/he takes as troublesome in the analysis of the phenomena are *not essential* to them, and have to do more with will than cognition *in our ordinary life*.

What about the claim that the wish to “put [things] *differently*” is “connected with the will and not merely with cognition”? My sense is that the kind of trouble illustrated in the passage above arises only when those “emotional overtones” – which (N.B.) are characteristic of ordinary language, to the extent that language is to record our (natural and other) reactions to the world, including time and its flow, as well as our experiences of it – are sublimated by philosophical reflection, so that instead of facing the (real) anxieties that are mirrored in those descriptions, attention gets redirected to some (supposedly) “cognitive” (i.e., logical, metaphysical, epistemological, etc.) “problems” like the one about the “limitations of memory” as a guide to reality. Yet memory, as far as the “essence” of this phenomenon is concerned, is *not* “a somewhat secondary sort of experience”, *nor* does it offer “a somewhat faint and uncertain picture of what we originally had before us”; those are descriptions we may feel *inclined* to make (and non-problematically so) in our *ordinary* life – hence, “in the language of physical objects” – because of the *emotional responses* which we (naturally?) connect with, or superimpose upon, our mnemonic experiences of the past (experiences) – a matter which clearly has more to do with the will than with cognition.

These considerations prompt me to resume the exchange between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor on the problem of the “flow of time”. I said above that one reason for our rather quick acceptance of some “reductions *ad absurdum*” of philosophical questions enacted in Wittgenstein’s writings would be our willingness to repress some existential difficulties – what the *Tractatus* (6.52) called “problems of life” – behind those questions, to avoid facing them *seriously*; but, let’s face it: isn’t it the case that, at least for some of us, some of the time, it is really difficult to accept that the past has gone, inexorably – and that

*we cannot change it?*<sup>19</sup> By the same token, don't we sometimes feel *burdened* when facing the fact that the future *is not yet* – and, hence, that at least in part, it is our responsibility to bring it about? Little wonder, given this (doubly) difficult situation, that we should react toward the present as if it were, on the one hand, always already becoming past – as if escaping us, becoming unchangeable, together with our deeds (or lack of them) – and, on the other hand, as if it were always already pointing toward the future – as if accomplishing it, making it happen, thus reminding us of the burden of having to choose how to act (and to live) henceforth. But again, there is a clear sense in which none of those descriptions captures the “essence of time”; rather, they are ways of expressing our own (all-too-human) reactions toward (our experiences of) time and its flow, and, ultimately, toward (the awareness of) our own mortality; now, similarly to the case of memory analysed above, these are all matters which have more to do with our *will* – yet it is all but impossible not to sublimate them in philosophical reflection, where they keep being presented as having to do *merely with cognition*.

Let me take one further step back in our discussion: I asked above if we were really supposed to take in Wittgenstein's claim, in §52, that “in ordinary life we are not troubled by the feeling that [e.g.,] the phenomenon is slipping away from us [...] but only when we philosophize”. Having reached this point in the analysis, I find I would like to answer that question by saying that it is only in their *sublimated form* that the “troubles” which Wittgenstein presents us do not arise in ordinary life; yet, it is precisely for that reason that the (dis)solution of the logical confusions behind (the sublimated versions of) those “troubles” would not solve or dissolve the life problems which get

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<sup>19</sup> Normally, that is a difficulty felt when one realizes that some *specific* event or deed one would like to change cannot be changed. As a (rather dramatic) illustration, think of the quest of Alexander Hartdegen (Guy Pearce) to rescue his girlfriend Emma (Sienna Guillory) from death, in the beginning of Simon Wells's remake of *The Time Machine* (2002).

deflected, or displaced, by them. – Does that make logical clarification any less valuable? Well, yes and no: what it shows is that – against some self-indulgent expectations – there is a *rationale* behind the kind of “dissatisfaction” that Wittgenstein himself has diagnosed as an inevitable reaction of “the philosopher” faced with his grammatical reminders; only the real difficulty would end up being once again deflected if that *rationale* were presented (as my own dissatisfied philosopher’s reply presented it) in an intellectualized garb, as if the trouble were really derived from the analysis of the “phenomena”, or their *essence*, and our language should be blamed by not being capable of expressing it. The point I am trying to make, then, is that any effective and satisfying (to the philosopher, i.e.) use of clarification – hence, of the grammatical reminders employed to achieve a perspicuous view of the syntax of ordinary language – would have to be made in a larger therapeutic context, in which “the philosopher” were not only (intellectually) shown to be asking *pseudo*-questions, but, additionally, were enabled to become aware of the real difficulties which were getting unselfconsciously repressed, deflected or sublimated by her very attempts at expressing them.

### 3. SOLIPSISM OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

To the extent that one is really puzzled by the “troubles” examined in the last section – about, i.e., the “flow of time” and the experience of the past – one might be tempted to go one step further, and hold that “only the experience of the present moment has reality” (PR, p. 85, §54). Let us call that thesis “S”, and the position expressed by it “solipsism of the present moment”<sup>20</sup>. Immediately after presenting S, Wittgenstein says that “the first reply must be: As

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<sup>20</sup> This is a phrase employed by Wittgenstein himself in another context – see 2001b, p. 25.



opposed to what?” (ibid.). Clearly, that question aims to bring the prospective solipsist “back to earth”, compelling her to think about the possible use(s) of S in concrete situations of ordinary life<sup>21</sup>. Again, that is a very characteristic textual move, which perfectly fits the blueprint indicated above, in that we are presented, first, with an implicit philosophical question – say, “How would I know whether anything *but* the experience of the present moment has reality?” – and then a reply based on a grammatical reminder – namely, that in any concrete situation, to claim that something “has reality” implies distinguishing it from something else, which has *no reality*. One might summarize that grammatical point by saying that in such cases, “real” and its derivatives are *relational* or *comparative* qualifications, and, hence, they do not have an *absolute* sense. Yet – so the reply would continue – what a solipsist would like to express using S depends on assuming the (supposed) absolute sense of those qualifications, and that explains why the resulting position would be incoherent (“reduced *ad absurdum*”). After all, if only (my) *present* experience has reality, and, consequently, there is *nothing* with which I could possibly compare it, how would I be able to “pick it out” from the rest (?) of experience in order to confer on it some kind of “privilege”?<sup>22</sup>

Wittgenstein takes up that conclusion in the continuation of the text, by claiming that:

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<sup>21</sup> I suppose the same would apply to concrete situations of *extraordinary* life – in times of crisis, danger, catastrophe, and so on, words such as those comprising S could undoubtedly assume particular (albeit far from ordinary) meanings, and (hence) have many possible oppositions.

<sup>22</sup> In order to indicate more clearly the incoherence involved in the solipsist’s attempt to express her “position” Wittgenstein presents (and immediately discards) two candidates for the role of counterpoint to S – see PR, p. 85, §54.

The proposition that only the present experience has reality appears to contain the last consequence of solipsism. And in a sense that is so; only what it is able to say amounts to just as little as can be said by solipsism. – For what belongs to the essence of the world simply *cannot* be said. And philosophy, if it were to say anything, would have to describe the essence of the world. (PR, p. 85, §54)

Read against the backdrop of the preceding analysis, I take it that what Wittgenstein means by saying that solipsism – presented here as an *instance* of a philosophical position – cannot say what it purports to say by means of S – something belonging to the *essence* of the world – is not that there *is* something which cannot be said, but rather that the very idea of there being such an “essence” – some feature of our experience which could be “picked out” and presented as that which *alone* (or *ultimately*) “has reality” – is essentially misguided. To go back to a claim quoted above: “if appearance were normally more important in our lives than the results of measurement, then language would also show a different attitude to [...] phenomen[a]” (PR, p. 84, §53). Yet, I think that part of the point Wittgenstein is here trying to make is precisely that there is no such a thing as a/the “correct” attitude toward phenomena – as some philosophers, and, in particular, our solipsist, would have it. Language, as he would later say, is “the expression of our interests” (PI §570). (Now, as things are, it surely *is* of our interest to honour some aspects of our experience with qualifications such as “real”, “genuine”, “legitimate”, thus distinguishing them from aspects which we prefer to diminish as “unreal”, “illusory”, “mere appearance”, and so on. Only the impulse to make such distinctions has (again) more to do with our *will* – with our way of *reacting* to the contents of our experience – than with *cognition*.)

Would our solipsist be satisfied with such a reduction *ad absurdum* of her position? The answer is, of course: “No”. After all, I imagine she (we) could grant the grammatical point about comparative and absolute senses of the words involved in the formulation of S, and

still feel inclined to hold that, notwithstanding the incoherence of such an attempt to *express* her sense of “losing touch with *reality*” (in particular, at least in this context, with the past), there remains a (possibly ineffable, but nonetheless very real) *experience* or *feeling* of being isolated from, or out of attunement with, the world, particularly its (presently) unperceived aspects<sup>23</sup>. In the face of such a condition, *both* the attempts at escaping our metaphysical loneliness by resorting to philosophical fantasy (e.g., “solipsism of the present moment”, which takes reality as internal to our all-embracing experience) *and* the (dogmatic) denials of the legitimacy of our troubles can be seen as repressions of our own humanity<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly, there is such thing as the experience, or feeling, of being separate of, or out of attunement with, others, particularly their (externally) unperceived states. Stanley Cavell has argued that behind the (eminently epistemological) quests for justification of our claims to *knowledge* of the “external world” and “other minds” stand the prior issues of *acceptance* (of the world) and *acknowledgement* (of others). Supposing, as I am inclined to do, that his diagnosis is sound, an interesting question arises whether an analogous point might be made concerning skepticism about the past. Although I will not try to pursue further that possibility here, I think it would be worth considering a positive answer to that question, starting with the intuition that behind the (epistemological) troubles concerning “cognition” of the past, there may be the prior (existential) difficulties of acknowledging *and* accepting one’s own past – as part of the task of coming to terms with one’s own mortality and finitude. (Nietzsche’s notion of *amor fati*, as well as Heidegger’s attempt to unveil our own condition as “Beings-toward-Death” – which in turn should enable a more authentic attitude of *Dasein* toward life, as opposed to a mere identification with the impersonal “one” – are instances of the kind of alternative, non-sublimated philosophical stances I imagine one might adopt in dealing with these issues.)

<sup>24</sup> I am here echoing Richard Eldridge’s very apt formulations of these points (see Eldridge 2001, p. 194).

As I read Wittgenstein, his is a text where both kinds of repressions are (alternately) *enacted*, none of them to be simply *taken in* as the “final word” on the subject by his readers; little wonder, then, that one may find commentators willing to ascribe each of those attitudes to him, saying either that he was tempted by some form of solipsism, or that he refuted it by means of his grammatical clarifications. Yet solipsism – as one among so many instances of our all too human attitudes of philosophical indulgence in the face of the problems of life – is neither *refuted* nor *defended* in these texts. What is shown is that, contrary to what one would initially suppose, there is no such thing as a (meaningful, *bona fide*) formulation of that “philosophical position” – hence, that resorting to solipsism (among many other such “positions”) is not really a matter of presenting and defending “theses” or “theories” about the essence of the phenomena; rather, it is a matter of deflecting the attention from the real difficulties faced by creatures endowed with such capacities (and burdens) as we have of taking up our experiences, our condition in the world, and give them sense – or fail to. Yet in order to accept that diagnosis one has to be prepared to counteract old philosophical habits, which may be deeply rooted; faced with that challenge, it is all but impossible to fall back, taking those very grammatical reminders presented by Wittgenstein as further paths, or excuses, to sublimation, only reinforcing repression.

Again, it is up to each of us to find a resolution to this situation – to take Wittgenstein’s reminders as laying down the (grammatical) Law, or as mere rungs in so many ladders to be thrown away once the whole therapeutic process is over. Having reached this point in the analysis of the *Remarks*, my own inclination would be to emphasize that, in writing the reflections we have been reading,

Wittgenstein was still moved by an ethical project <sup>25</sup>, which gets conspicuously displayed in these reiterations of his attempts to cure the readers (and himself) from some of the temptations expressed by solipsism.

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<sup>25</sup> I am here alluding, as it shall be clear, to Wittgenstein’s famous claim (made in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker) that “the point of the [*Tractatus*] is ethical” (see Monk 1990, p. 178)

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