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(In lieu of an) Abstract

What follows is an essay on the method of Wittgenstein in his late period. Allow me to explain the structure of the essay and how it is meant to be read. The main text of the essay begins on p. 3 and ends on p. 22. Each page in this range is split into two halves: a passage at the top half of the page (whose beginning is indicated by “→”) and a passage at the bottom half of the page (whose beginning is indicated by “←”). The top half of each of pp. 3-22 can be read as a linear, “objective/impersonal” account of the method of the late Wittgenstein, moving from left to right. A proper abstract for this part of the essay would be something like this:

“I investigate the method of the late Wittgenstein. I begin by pointing out certain similarities and dissimilarities between his early and late work. His ideas of the mystical, I claim, remain the same but his conception of “nonsense” undergoes a radical change. I then argue that the distinction between description/explanation in his late work functions very similarly to the saying/showing distinction of the *Tractatus*. Framed in this manner, I claim that the late Wittgenstein wanted to explain (by describing) that philosophy is merely a kind of human behaviour. It is his inability to state this as a thesis (since he himself is engaging in this behaviour) that ultimately informs the method of his late work. I finish by considering some objections and by pointing out that there is a fruitful analogy between his method as I conceive of it and the use of a certain technical tool (“sheaves”) in contemporary algebraic geometry.”

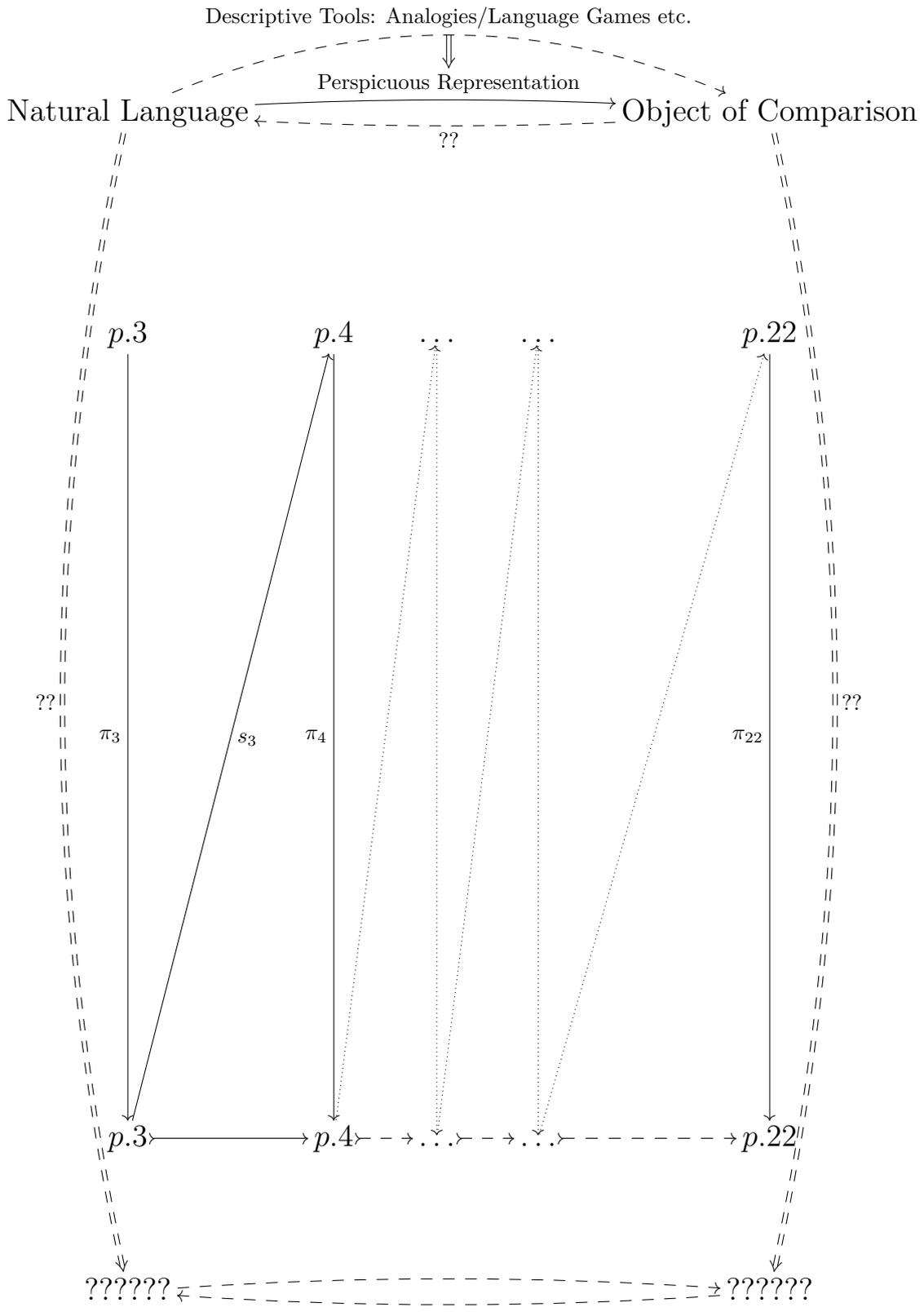
On the other hand, the bottom half of pp. 3-22 is a “subjective/personal” account of Wittgenstein’s impact on me, but it reads from right to left (i.e. it starts on p. 22 and ends on p.3). In addition, bottom and top are arranged so that the former can be read as a commentary on the latter. There are thus (at least) two “layers” of structure in this essay and therefore (at least) two (complementary) ways of reading it: firstly, by going left-to-right on top then right-to-left at the bottom; secondly, by going up-down in a zig-zag moving from left-to-right. The two diagrams on p. 2 and p. 23 merely express in diagrammatic form what I’ve just described. (The one on p.2 indicates that each zig-zag is a “local section” that patches together into a “global section” indicated on p.22.)

Finally, let me note that the peculiar structure of this essay is not meant as a mere exercise in “non-standard philosophy”. The form and the content of this essay were chosen together and are inseparable: this essay could no more be “linearized” as could the particular “non-linear” style in which it is written be about anything other than the late Wittgenstein and his impact on my thinking.

With respect to primary sources the following abbreviations are used: *PI* (Philosophical Investigations), *RFM* (Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics), *CV* (Culture and Value), *BLBK* (Blue Book), *BRBK* (Brown Book), *OC* (On Certainty). As for the exclusion of other late works, the spirit with which I want to look at Wittgenstein’s late work is perfectly described by Stern:¹

[B]oth the *Investigations* and *On Certainty*, like Wittgenstein’s other posthumously published works, are much more accessible if one approaches them as selections from a larger body of work. Looking at this larger body of work makes it easier to grasp the problems that occupied his attention.

¹Stern (1996) p. 446



—→ The question that concerns me is this: What was the method of the late Wittgenstein? To answer it, I begin with the notion of a *sheaf* from algebraic geometry. Suppose we have an object X (or “shape” or “space”) that we want to investigate, e.g. a table. One way of carrying out such an investigation is to attach to every region in our space some particular batch of information, e.g. in the case of a table: hardness, discoloration, texture. Ideally, we want this rule to satisfy two conditions:

1. **Compatibility:** Information attached to overlapping regions of X is the same.

e.g./i.e. If I pick two regions U, V on my table that overlap in some common region W then we want the information attached to W as a subregion of U to be the same as the information attached to W as a subregion of V .

2. **Local-to-Global (or the “Sheaf Condition”):** For each way I choose to split up X into regions $\{U_i\}_{i \in I}$ that cover it completely, there is a unique assignment of information to X as a region of itself that is compatible with all the U_i .

e.g./i.e. If I cover the whole table by some choice of its subregions then from the information attached to each of these subregions I can recover all the information attached to the whole table: we want the local information to be thorough enough such that only one unique table can be the object to which our rule applies.

A sheaf is thus a rule

$$F: \text{Space} \longrightarrow \text{Structures}$$

that is both *compatible* and satisfies a *local-to-global* condition and where a “space” is the object we are interested in studying and “structures” are those objects that we already “know enough about”. To construct a sheaf on some space allows us to “shift the discourse” from something less well-understood to something better-understood by ensuring that the less well-understood object is faithfully patched together from regions of better-understood structures – and this even though the better-understood structures in themselves may initially appear to have nothing to do with the less well-understood object that we want to study.

A sheaf can thus be regarded as an answer to the following question: what kind of rule turns local *nonsense* into global *sense*? More suggestively put: A sheaf is a rule to patch together nonsense into sense. And if we are in possession of a sheaf then we can literally *replace* our object of study with a sheaf defined on it – and proceed to study that sheaf, forgetting all about the object we started with. This simple but vague idea of a sheaf was of monumental significance in 20th century mathematics. Unrelated as it may seem, I must ask you to keep it in the back of your mind while we move to Wittgenstein. For what I want to claim, eventually, is that the method of the late Wittgenstein is exactly analogous to the method of studying spaces using sheaves.

← ————[t]here isn't any particular relationship between the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects [but only] the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (Kurt Vonnegut)

—→ More precisely, what I aim to do is to show that the method of the late Wittgenstein is to construct a sheaf of objects-of-comparison defined on our natural language. But before any of that nonsense can be turned into sense, there are two aspects of Wittgenstein’s work that I want to draw attention to:

1. A continuity in the **purpose** of his late and early work.
2. A discontinuity in the **method** he used to achieve this purpose.

The early and late Wittgensteins are often treated as two distinct philosophers, originators of two irreconcilable schools of thought. This distinction has been put in many different ways: the early Wittgenstein was a “realist” while the later Wittgenstein was an “anti-realist”; a “logician” as opposed to a “mystic”; a “logical positivist” turned “radical critic” – and so on. There are undoubtedly many reasons to draw such distinctions, some of which even Wittgenstein would agree with, judging by his many explicit disavowals of the *Tractatus* in his later work (e.g. *PI* §114.) Yet we cannot ignore that there are also many important similarities between his late and early work. One such fundamental similarity is this: his conviction that philosophical propositions are a form of *nonsense* and that the aim of his philosophy is to unmask such philosophical propositions as nonsensical.

This conception of his “purpose” as a philosopher remained constant throughout his life. It was, we may say, the “fixed point of [his] real need” (*PI* §108) which was none other than complete clarity and the elimination of confusion. Compare for example:

The right method in philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, [...], i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy. (*TLP* 6.54)

For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. (*PI* §133)

In contrast with this continuity in his conception of the purpose of his work is a discontinuity in the *method* he saw fit for achieving it, i.e. for *revealing* philosophical nonsense as nonsense.

←— Which brings me, finally, to the real question: what really has been achieved here? What, really, have I described? To answer, consider the sentence above: “the method of the late Wittgenstein is to construct a sheaf of objects-of-comparison defined on our natural language”. It is a sinful sentence, if not outright nonsense and pretension bordering on idiocy.

The theory of sheaves and contemporary algebraic geometry offer no extra depth to this work. They are not meant to *substantiate* it in any way. Rather, this work *mimics* their methods. It is the *Harlequin* to their *Macbeth*. The same way analytic philosophy, once upon a time – before it became much too assured of its own method – used to mimic proof theory.

To think of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy as a sheaf is not meant to draw on the use of sheaves in algebraic geometry *as a formal tool*. It is not meant to *reveal* the technical structure of his thought. I am not using formalism *ideologically*, in order to suggest scientific substantiation. I am using it *stylistically, aesthetically, even playfully, comedically and provocatively* – and at the same time seriously.

I am envisioning here a “deep future” philosophy – that is all. Philosophy as a kind of science fiction, philosophy as a description of Humanity from the point of view of a joyful species that lies in its future. And all this, at the end of the day, merely in order to convalesce from Wittgenstein, from his RFM V §16. Which is no more than to say that the content and achievements of this sheaf-shaped essay is perfectly described by saying that – – – – –

—> Someone who wishes to reveal philosophical nonsense as nonsense is immediately faced with the problem of how to do this without himself producing philosophical nonsense. How do you draw a circle around philosophical nonsense without adding to it? To reveal X as Y you need to regard X from the “outside” – but this seems futile when it comes to philosophy.

Wittgenstein was well aware of the difficulty in the *Tractatus*: this is why he speaks of “throwing away the ladder” in *TLP* 6.54. He remains well aware of it even in his later period (though he is far less explicit about it):

I believe it might interest a philosopher, one who can think himself, to read my notes. For even if I have hit the mark only rarely, he would recognize what targets I had been ceaselessly aiming at. (*OC* §387)

His way of dealing with the problem is akin to a “skeptical solution”: he accepts the impossibility of the task, but thinks his method can bear fruit regardless. He accepts that he can reveal philosophical propositions as nonsensical only by producing nonsensical philosophical propositions – but he also believes that there is some kind of “mystical substratum”, some “inexpressible background against which whatever [we] could express has its meaning” (*CV*, p. 16) that vindicates his method. Wittgenstein saw his work as ultimately receiving its validation from some such background:

Is what I am doing really worth the effort? *Yes, but only if a light shines on it from above.* (*CV*, p.57) [My emphasis]

His conviction that he was himself producing nonsense that could only be redeemed by some “light from above” did not change between his early and late period. He did not come to regard the *Tractatus* as nonsensical in a way that his late work was not.

This, of course, raises a curious problem: in what sense could Wittgenstein have come to regard the *Tractatus* as flawed since he has already disowned the *Tractatus* as nonsense in *TLP* 6.54?^a The answer I want to give, roughly, is that the nonsense of the *Tractatus* was not positioned in the right way to receive the “light from above”. The *Tractatus*, as it were, did not consist of the “right kind” of nonsense (strange as this may sound). Whereas, presumably, his late work did? Indeed – but in order to make sense of these strange proclamations we need first to understand the shift in his view of what it means for a (philosophical) statement to be “nonsensical”.

^aSo-called resolute and irresolute readings of the *Tractatus* are essentially competing attempts to grapple with this problem.

← The point in all this of course is not to say: screw philosophy and let’s go save the poor. I don’t want to be guilty of such crassness, of such terrible bad taste.

Rather, what I am merely *pointing out* (even less: *hinting at* – like the dying invalid *hints at* the afterlife) in this sheaf of mine is a perspective (a *transpecial* one) from which poverty (respectively physical, chemical, psychological phenomena) *makes sense* – in the same way that *kidney stones* make sense (even before, let’s say, we figure out what causes them or how they can be alleviated).

“But all present-day economic theories (respectively physics, chemistry, psychology) do that too!” Yes but they do so by *explaining*. They do not do so in a “coordinate-free” manner in the same sense that e.g. general relativity makes sense of gravity in a “coordinate-free” manner – *that* is the difference. The fact that what I say may coincide with specific theories in specific co-ordinates (e.g. the present day) does not mean that they are *competing* theories. What I am saying is not a theory at all (I am no longer weaving cocoons).

The only thing we can be certain of, the only thing we can rely on, the only thing that the future will never look back on with scorn is *description*. And the only way mere description can ever prove sufficient (even worthy) is if a light shines on it from the deepest future.

—→ What did “nonsense” mean for early and late Wittgenstein?

In the *Tractatus* nonsense was a failure to “give [...] meaning to certain signs in [our] propositions.” (*TLP* §6.53) Roughly: to say something nonsensical is to say something that, when (fully) analysed in some ideal notation, has failed to attach a meaning to one of its signs. For example, when we try to say something *about* saying – a trap he thought philosophers (including Russell and Frege) constantly fell into. (Consider, as an illustration, Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Russell’s type theory (*TLP* §3.331-3.334) on the grounds that Russell articulates rules for his notation rather than letting the notation speak for itself.) Nonsense, in short, was a violation of the rules of some ideal logical syntax underlying a failure to take account of the “logically atomistic” structure of the world.

For the late Wittgenstein, on the other hand, meaning essentially becomes identified with *use* (*PI* §43). Thus, a proposition is “nonsense” (meaningless) if it *fails* to have a use. Or, to put it in Wittgenstein’s own terminology: a proposition is nonsensical if it fails to “make a move” in a natural^a language game (if it fails, that is, to have any *use* in our everyday life). He once again saw philosophy as replete with such nonsensical propositions, which fail to be of any use, to make any contribution to any (natural) language game. This is why so many of his critiques in the *Investigations* end in variants of the phrase: “But that fails to say anything whatsoever”. For instance: “we are inclined to say something which gives no information” (*PI* §298), “[t]hat gets us no further” (*PI* §350), “[s]o it really [...] says nothing at all, but gives us a picture” (*PI* §352), “What are these words for? They serve no purpose” (*PI* §398), “that is not a significant proposition” (*PI* §408) etc.

These two differing conceptions of nonsense can help us shine a light on the corresponding methodological differences between late and early Wittgenstein. So we can ask: How could (early/late) Wittgenstein make manifest the fact that philosophical propositions are nonsensical (in the early/late sense)? I’ll take these questions in turn.

^aWhat constitutes a natural language game is no easy matter to settle - and this is of course a line of attack that can be levelled against the late Wittgenstein, who certainly seems to require such a distinction. For if nonsense is defined as a failure to make a move in any language game, then philosophical propositions surely don’t come out nonsensical: they have a use in exactly the language games in which they originate, namely in “philosophical” language games. (cf. *PI* §121)

←— What kind of fortress of ideas allows the ethicists to ignore urine in favour of argument maps? *That* kind of fortress is impregnable, it is impossible to raze it without inventing new weapons – without changing our very form of life. To overcome it – to even *see* the need to overcome it without scoffing the thought away – transpecial thinking is required. And once we *see* it – once we are struck by it – then we are no longer *human*.

Yes, this corridor was in some sense the birth of me – and the thought of it now has the texture of a field of snow at night, covered in shadows. As you walk past the shadows they stand still and look at you. Then you go back home and look out the window. The shadows have disappeared - but you remember their *look* – their look has finally *struck you*.

(As always, this is not a matter of *understanding*. It is a matter of *understanding the seriousness*.)

—→ In the *Tractatus* the overcoming of nonsense is achieved by exhibiting the possibility of an ideal notation (one in which letters correspond to simples, facts are truth-tabular combinations of simples etc.). In this notation, Wittgenstein argues, no philosophical propositions could be coherently framed. And how do we come to see this fact? Roughly, when we grasp what this “ideal notation” would look like. Thus the overcoming of nonsense, through the *Tractatus*, is achieved by exhibiting (the possibility of) such an ideal logical notation which functions as a “yardstick of sense”: measured against this yardstick, philosophical propositions come out senseless.

A cautionary remark: the fact that this was how the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* understood nonsense does not mean that the *Tractatus* itself provided a *general method* with which any nonsensical proposition could be demonstrated to be nonsensical (in the above sense.) Cora Diamond puts this point nicely:

The fact that such remarks can be shown to be nonsensical does not mean that there is available any special *Tractatus* principle which would enable one to give a direct demonstration of the nonsensicality of such propositions [...] [T]he *Tractatus* does not provide a general principle which can be used to demonstrate that philosophical propositions are nonsensical [...] [but its] approach to philosophical confusion is [...] piecemeal; it depends essentially on enabling a person to see that the attempt to clarify the use of his or her words falters.^a

That is to say, Wittgenstein’s goal of unmasking philosophical propositions as nonsensical is achieved *indirectly* in the *Tractatus*. A philosophical proposition is proved nonsensical if it fails to be analyzed in the ideal logical notation; but not necessarily because some explicit violation of that syntax can be uncovered by a general method. For the *Tractatus* certainly does not develop such a general method.^b

^aDiamond (2004) p. 206

^bFor more on this point cf. Diamond (2004) pp. 201-206.

←— There is a narrow corridor at Penn Station linking the subway with the NJ Transit platforms. The walls of this narrow corridor were always lined with vagrants and bums, wrapped in trash bags, sleeping on cartons, hugging their few belongings crammed into little trolleys, most of them soaked in their own urine, all of them half-crazy, mumbling to themselves, delirious. The great American workforce flowing in from New Jersey every morning would have to squeeze through this small tributary – this corridor of urine and bums. The sight hardly slowed anyone down. They passed it by, unflustered, like a river passes over the pebbles on its bed.

I had to pass through it too – going upstream, into New Jersey. Every day I had to go through this corridor of urine to end up in the Ivory Tower Room at Princeton to engage in a calligraphy of argument maps, a feast of cream-cheese bagels and grapes – all the while a million people pass through the urine-soaked bums of Penn Station (me included) without ever being *struck*. (Of course they *understand*.)

And I too would pass them by as I got urinated out into New York in the evening. But now I must pass them...as one passes kidney stones. These vagrants are the kidney stones that no system of ideas has managed to pass. And just as microscopic kidney stones are capable of incapacitating an entire organism, so these vagrants are capable of shutting down the kidney function of the whole of Humanity.

To see these pebbles as kidney stones: to be *struck* by a new “aspect”.

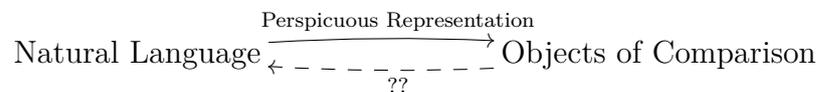
—> So what about the late Wittgenstein? How can he make manifest the fact that a proposition “makes no move” in a language game? Simply put: by proving it useless. And how does he do that?

Firstly, he takes a philosophical proposition and regards it as a proposition that may be used in natural language, i.e. in our day-to-day life. Through a “perspicuous representation” (*PI* §122) the use of this proposition is regarded as analogous to the use of a homologous term in a “simplified” situation, namely a “language game” acting as an “object of comparison” (*PI* §130). This much is explicit in what he himself says of his work:

A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions.’ [...] [It is] of fundamental importance for us. (*PI*§122)

[L]anguage-games are set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language [...] (*PI*§130)

But that is only half the task. We must now make our way from the “object of comparison” back to our natural language. For nothing we say about the object of comparison need necessarily apply to our natural language. Schematically:



Notice that we have moved from the global (natural language) to the local (language games as objects of comparison). In order to get back, we need to “patch” together the local back into the global. In other words, we need to see the rule that takes us from our natural language to perspicuously represented objects of comparison as a *sheaf*.

And here lies the essential methodological difference between early and late Wittgenstein. Gone is the appeal to logic, so prevalent in the *Tractatus*. Logic is replaced by *description*, which now assumes a central role. The distinction between saying and showing in the early Wittgenstein is replaced by the distinction between description and explanation. It is on this latter distinction that the whole method of his late work is based. Description becomes the *sayable* and explanation becomes what is *showable* through the sayable. Just as what can be shown cannot be said (*TLP* 4.1212) what can be explained cannot be described – and just as what can be shown is *revealed* through the form of what can be said (logic) so is what can be explained *revealed* in the perspicuity of what can be described (language games as objects of comparison).

The early Wittgenstein’s method was to *show* by *saying*. The late Wittgenstein’s method is to *explain* in order to *describe*. But the late Wittgenstein can no longer rely on “logic” as the bridge between description and explanation. What *can* he rely on? This is the question we must answer if we are to figure out his method.

←— How the inequality between the West and the rest of the world, for example, fails to *strike* anyone, even though everyone *understands* it.

And what is important here is that *this* kind of pronouncement must not be regarded as a *proposition* with a truth value, but it must be regarded much as Wittgenstein regarded his own propositions. As *nonsense* that can *strike* you.

Everyone can *understand* the above situation – anyone can throw explanations at it, clothe it in data and theories. But they do so at the cost of *being struck* by it – and the only appropriate reaction to it – once it’s *stricken* – is illness or suicide. Or the *transpecial*.

(I take here a sharp and only momentary turn to the “political” – because this is the right way to approach the political: as a sharp turn from the aesthetic, the philosophical, the literary. A “rational” approach to the political, on the other hand – we have a name for such a thing: *ideology*. The political needs to be glimpsed, momentarily, as one glimpses a distant sea on a winding mountain road.)

—> So let us now get clear on what explanation and description meant for the late Wittgenstein. He repeatedly insists that what he is trying to do (what “we” must do) is to move from *explanation* to *description*.^a Indeed most of the methodological remarks he makes (about his own method) amount to restatements of that principle. He writes, for example, that “it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really *is* ‘purely descriptive’ ” (*BLBK* p. 18) and that “our method is *purely descriptive*; the descriptions we give are not hints of explanations” (*BRBK* p. 125) and, in a slightly different context that “what [he] has to do is something like *describing* the office of a king;-in doing which [he] must never fall into the error of *explaining* the kingly dignity by the king’s usefulness, but [he] must leave neither his usefulness nor his dignity out of account” (*RFM* VII §3 (my emphasis)) and “one has to pass from explanation to mere description.” (*OC* §189) And finally, the most forceful statement of all, in the famous *PI* §109:

We must do away with all *explanation* and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. [...] The problems are solved, not by reporting new experience, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language.

We *arrange* what we already know (by *describing* it) – we do not postulate theoretical terms that could *explain* what we *want* to know. This is – in broad strokes – the fundamental methodological *constraint* of the late Wittgenstein: to do as much as possible using only descriptions. (And note, once again, the implicit local-to-global principle at play here: using only local descriptions we must somehow arrive at a “global” explanation.)

^aThere is some ambiguity as to what the Wittgensteinian “we” is supposed to refer to in general. It can refer both to the generic confused philosopher that Wittgenstein is trying to cure (e.g. “What reason have *we* for calling ‘S’ the sign for a *sensation*?” *PI* §261 [first emphasis mine]), as well as to himself, in which case what “we” think and do is what he (Wittgenstein) thinks and does (e.g. “What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” *PI* §116) In all of his methodological remarks, like the ones above, the “we” can be unambiguously interpreted in the latter sense.

← The undercurrent here is a radical expansion of the domain of what we take to be a “rigorous argument”. Initially, methods of argument in the new domain must be contrasted with methods in the old domain and must, in being so contrasted, necessarily appear as unrigorous, irrational. This is the point at which this essay is written – the contrast between this essay and a linear argument in analytic philosophy should be obvious. What is not yet obvious is that the method underlying this essay is also *rigorous* – but in an expanded sense, a sense that takes into account a new foundation and a new method in mathematics, of which sheaves in algebraic geometry are but one aspect.

“A logic of analogies, of metaphors, of mimicry!” Isn’t this really a kind of comparative literature clothed in robes of rigour, with category theory in the role of a false prophet? Yes and no: this is an *expansion* of rigour, not a rejection of what we now see as rigorous. The process is systematic: with mathematics, always, as a guide. (I am willing to say: without a new vision of mathematics, there can be no new vision of philosophy. Perhaps this means that my soul belongs to Plato rather than to Aristotle.)

(All this must surely sound “crazy” now. “Transpecial perspective”, “forget about evolution”, “mimicry as methodology” etc. And they will remain crazy unless I supplement them with a suitable expansion of a notion of “rigour” that can accommodate them. This I intend to do – more than that: to this I am *devoted*.)

→ The importance of *description* for the late Wittgenstein is that it ensures the *perspicuity* (PI §122) of the representations (language games) that he employs. Any such representation that involves *explanation* (theoretical propositions, generalizing principles etc.) fails to be perspicuous. Explanation adds into a representation unnecessary, ideal elements (e.g. mental states) – instead of focusing on what is already immediately available to us: “Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain.” (PI §126)

But Wittgenstein is not merely interested in the description of the use of words in language – he is no “ordinary language philosopher” even when he writes things like “[w]hat *we* do is to bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” (PI §116)^a For he clarifies:

[O]ur method is *not merely* to enumerate actual usages of words, but rather deliberately to invent new ones, some of them because of their absurd appearance. (BLBK p. 28) [my emphasis]

Namely, Wittgenstein does not limit himself to descriptions of natural language as he finds it. He allows himself more tools: descriptions of analogies and dysanalogies; similarities and disimilarities; descriptions of imaginary as well as “realistic” language games. All of these, and more, are used by Wittgenstein. And they are all, if read correctly, *descriptive* and never *explanatory*.

What is important therefore is that *only* description takes place in his philosophy. Descriptions are not preludes to a general explanation. They are assembled there for the reader, who must then turn them into an explanation – but they do not *offer* an explanation. Only the reader can turn these descriptions into explanations that may enlighten him:

Anything your reader can do for himself leave to him. (CV p. 77)

I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right. (CV p. 18 (1931))

^aThat is not to say that “bringing a word back to its everyday use” may under no circumstances consist solely in the thorough description of its everyday use. But this might not always be the case.

← The impulse is thus no longer to *discover* more and more, but to *mimic* better and better.

Discovery and science must become secondary to the enterprise of mimicry, in exactly the same way that philosophy became secondary to discovery and science at the dawn of the technological age.

I am asking you to imagine the age where scientific discoveries that would have in other times been considered epoch-making will greeted in much the same way that a new book on metaphysics is greeted now. For then limits will have been placed on physics in the same way that limits have now been placed on philosophy.

The notion of a “scientific discovery” will seem then as laughable as the notion of a “philosophical discovery” seems to us now. Imagine *that* kind of situation - can you? *That* is where transpecial philosophy begins.

But crucially: it is not that this outlook must be *grasped*, but rather it must *strike*.

A time when humanity cares only about description and not at all about explanation (a time in which *thinking* has truly become a kind of *behaviour*): this is the “deep future”. It is only against the light of this deep future that I was able to overcome RFM V §16. (It is also, I think, only against such a background that Wittgenstein’s late philosophy can be salvaged from skepticism or quietism.)

—> But is pure description really sufficient for Wittgenstein’s purposes? Can we really only rely on these “descriptive tools” to make our philosophical points? If pure description is what makes a representation perspicuous, then what is it about description that “produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’ ”? (*PI* §122)

Take *PI* §409 as an example:

Imagine several people standing in a ring, and me among them. One of us, sometimes this one, sometimes that, is connected to the poles of an electrical machine without our being able to see this. I observe the faces of the others and try to see which of us has just been electrified.

Wittgenstein is here analyzing the relation between the grammars of the words “know” and “pain”. Observe *how* he goes about doing that. He is not simply describing the use of “know” in everyday language; he also provides us with a description of an imaginary situation. His remark is meant to be taken not in the spirit of: “Let me *explain* to you the meaning of the word pain by imagining this scenario” but rather in the much more open-ended “Think of what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘pain’. Now let me *describe* a game for you.”

But *why* should I understand such descriptions of objects of comparison (fictional or otherwise) as related to the grammar of the word “know”? Perspicuous they may be, but how does that make them philosophically relevant? Why should I understand them as related to epistemic concerns about introspective knowledge?

I cannot: pure description is indeed not enough to “see connexions.” But Wittgenstein is aware of that: consider the second sentence in *PI* §109: “[T]his description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems.” Wittgenstein admits that it is not really *pure* description that will do the trick of getting us to the relevant object of comparison. It has to be *pure* description *seen in the light of* a philosophical problem. The problem and the description have to first exist side-by-side – and then one must *be struck by it*.

We arrive at the key notion: *being struck*. This is the extra datum: this is what can turn a representation into a sheaf. This is what can shed the “light from above”.

←— With the development of contemporary foundations of mathematics in the 20th century the dominance of philosophy over mathematics comes to an end (its dominance over physics perhaps ended even earlier). Free from philosophy, secure in its foundations, mathematics assumes a completely different form, in which even *proof* and *rigour* assume secondary importance, overshadowed by *structure* and *construction*. (Mathematics and philosophy have now entered a state of profound discord and misunderstanding. At root it is a *methodological* discord.)

This opens up room for a new act of mimicry: how to immitate new mathematics when doing philosophy. This – initially purely stylistic – attempt is what I have in mind when I speak of writing *like* a sheaf. The idea here is to *immitate* mathematics, but not to import its results in order to make points and prove theses. And this initially vacuous stylistic break needs a completely new background to substantiate it, to make it pack a punch: this is where the *transpecial* comes in.

In transpecial philosophy, we are no longer engaged in clarification. We are engaged in mimicry. (Mimicry and simulation is what a species must do after it develops a “theory of evolution”.)

→ To try and get a grip on what it means to “be struck”, let us take a typical example of a “descriptive proposition” that Wittgenstein employs in his own philosophy:

(P) Let us not forget this: when ‘I raise my arm’, my arm goes up. (*PI* §621)

Is (P) nonsensical? To answer this we must ask: does it have a use? Well, it very well could: If, for example, (P) is used to distinguish between someone with a phantom limb and someone with an actual limb. But what concerns us here is whether or not it has a use in the context in which Wittgenstein employs it. That is to say, in his philosophy. And here the answer seems to be no.

But if propositions like (P) do not have a use, then what is left? What can they possibly accomplish within the context of Wittgenstein’s philosophy? Does (P) *cause* behaviour? Does someone, e.g., raise their arm or fetch a slab because of it? Not quite - more accurately, it is the kind of proposition that stops a conversation in its tracks: (P) is uttered; it strikes everyone as obvious, as almost a joke; no-one reacts, except perhaps to ask for clarification. But the very point of something like (P), for Wittgenstein, is that we must allow it to strike us as remarkable: “Don’t look at it as a matter of course, but as a most remarkable thing.” (*PI* II.x)

(P) doesn’t have a *use* but it has an *effect*. This effect is achieved by seeing (P) *in the light of* a particular philosophical problem. The use of (P) does not consist in causing or responding to behaviour, engaging in our form of life, acting or reacting, etc. It consists in *striking* us, in the sense of *PI* §129: “[W]e fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.” “Being struck” by (P) requires no movement and no activity. It accomplishes nothing within our form of life (what it accomplishes transcends our form of life) and thus has no use within that part of it comprised of “late Wittgensteinian philosophizing”. It is nonsense – but nourishing nonsense.^a

And we must now also come to see Wittgenstein’s whole late philosophy in the light of something – and allow it to strike us. This is the final piece of the puzzle – *in what way* is his late philosophy supposed to *strike us*?

^aOf course, there is no fact of the matter as to what makes certain nonsense more nourishing than the rest. Attempting to state such a fact would be the late Wittgensteinian analogue of trying to state a proposition *expressing* the logical form of propositions. Logic is now replaced by descriptive propositions like (P) – and their capacity to *strike* can no more be *described* than logical form can be *said*.

← Many have probably written about the need for a philosophy true to the kind of methods exemplified in post-Grothendieck algebraic geometry – e.g. Fernando Zalamea or Albert Lautman. But none have written it in a new way, i.e. none have written it as if they actually took this idea *seriously*. (*Too* seriously? Perhaps – but taking something *too* seriously is exactly how style is born. (Or, if it goes wrong, pedantry.))

Badiou, for instance, may have written all that I have to say, may have known it, may have suspected and anticipated it. But he did not write *as if* he did. And to write *as if* you do – to actually go forth and carry out your imitation – that is the most crucial (indeed the first non-trivial) step.

A *stylistic* tradition, not a *dialectical* tradition is the target here – a certain *style* is what I am trying to break free from. Initially, this new *style* is used only in order to bring the contrast in sharp relief but without reducing itself to mere gimmickry. (Gimmickry is mimicry lacking purpose.)

To be *struck* by their contrast, this is what must initially take place. (At this point, this essay might not have a use – but it has an effect.)

→ If descriptions are merely nourishing nonsense, then what is wrong with (philosophical) explanation? What right does Wittgenstein have to discard explanations i.e. the propositions of traditional “dogmatic” philosophy, his own included (e.g. “The world is all that is the case” (*TLP* 1), “The general form of a proposition is: $(\bar{p}, \bar{\xi}, N(\bar{\xi}))$ ” (*TLP* 6))? As mentioned on the left, what is it that makes the *Tractatus* nonsense the “wrong kind” of nonsense? Wittgenstein cannot simply resort to saying that explanations are nonsensical, since as we have seen his own descriptions come out just as nonsensical according to his late conception of nonsense. Surely his exhortations to abandon explanation in favor of description lose their force if it merely means abandoning one type of nonsense for another. Wittgenstein must require that there is something special about his “descriptive nonsense” – something that sets it apart from “explanatory nonsense”.

The answer is as simple as it is unsatisfying: what he has against explanation is that it is part of the sort of traditional philosophy he is reacting against, no less, no more. He cannot distinguish his own “descriptive” nonsense from the “explanatory” nonsense of traditional philosophy any more than he can distinguish “nourishing nonsense” from “mere nonsense” within his own work: for they both fail to have a use and it is by virtue of this fact alone that they become nonsensical. But what he *can* do is distinguish his philosophy from traditional philosophy, if merely in its *spirit*^a and *style*. (He cannot *explain* why his philosophy is any less nonsensical than the philosophy he wants to prove nonsensical – but he can *describe* how they differ in both spirit and style. And this allows us to place them side by side – and be *struck* by their difference.)

Thus, the late Wittgenstein turns to descriptions of our natural language in order to shift our thinking to a perspicuously represented object of comparison - perspicuous exactly because only description was involved in attaining it. Yet these descriptive tools also turn out to be nonsensical by Wittgenstein’s late standard. In order to use them to gain the insight aimed at, we must transcend them by allowing them to *strike us*.

Utter confusion! We have been led to a patchwork of objects of comparison – perspicuously represented – and yet we are now stuck. Nonsense here, nonsense there – what, really, is the point? What is it exactly that can shed “light from above” on this nonsense?

^aIn an incomplete Preface to *PI* he begins by stating: “This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written. This is not, I believe, the spirit of the main current of European and American civilization.” (*CV* p. 6)

← And after I had come up with the symbol of the “future species”, after I had given the name “transpecial” to the “light from above” that could give my intellectual work its meaning once again – then I started finding evidence for it *everywhere*! I began reading voraciously again, and I was amazed to find that this exact same insight had been had by so many thinkers before me! This is what Kant thought the critical philosophy was to be applied to, this is what Nietzsche meant when he spoke about “the proposition ‘the species is everything, one is always none’” (*The Gay Science*, §1), this is what Kierkegaard meant when he spoke about this or that, this is what Badiou meant when he spoke about “generalized communism” etc. I found transpecial thinking everywhere around me! Hidden in plain sight!

Of course, I very soon realized that I had as much right to be amazed at all this as one has to be amazed to find the same reflection of oneself in different mirrors. For I was not finding my ideas in these texts – I was merely seeing my own ideas reflected on them.

Had I lost my capacity to read and learn? Perhaps – but at least I was no longer transparent. When before I saw nothing in the mirror that I held up against my ideas, I now saw something – except now *everything* had become a mirror of my ideas. Or, put more modestly: I has become a mirror myself – I was *imitating* everything around me.

And this, finally, is what led me to abandon the “evolutionary” model of knowledge in favour of a model in which “mimicry” becomes primary. It is the idea of “mimicry” that finally led me back to mathematics.

—> The answer is hidden in the following crucial remark:

I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination. (*OC* §475)

Wittgenstein scholarship tends to focus on the last sentence, which has acquired some well-deserved infamy. I should instead like to focus on the first (bolded) sentence. I think it is the clearest expression of the “transcendental” aspect of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy. It expresses exactly what I think Wittgenstein’s target was throughout his late writings: to make us regard ourselves as (mere) animals. And thereby to view our philosophizing as no more (or less) meaningful as the barking of dogs or the roaring of lions.

But crucially: not – as in the *Tractatus* – because “philosophy is beyond us” and we should therefore pass it by in silence, but because *what we call philosophy* is no more than a human form of roaring and barking. Wittgenstein is no longer urging us (as he did in the *Tractatus*) to abandon metaphysics because it goes beyond what can be said precisely (propositions of the empirical sciences) but he is urging us to let metaphysics *strike us* as a uniquely human form of barking or roaring. In other words, I urge we take his remarks on the “natural history” of human beings as seriously as possible. When he writes

Commanding, questioning, storytelling, chatting are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (*PI* §25)

I say we understand Wittgenstein as urging us to take this pronouncement in the most serious way possible: that there is simply *nothing* (not even philosophy) that human beings can do that is not merely just another kind of human behaviour.

An absolute triviality? Yes, but of the most serious kind! (The “thesis” is simple, even sophomoric. But to be *struck* by its seriousness? That is remarkably difficult. And *that* is the achievement of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy.)

Yet clearly we cannot view this as an *explanation*. We cannot view his philosophy as espousing this as a *thesis*. He can only deduce it, as it were, *transcendentally*.

←— “Transcendental”: a scary word - god knows I’ve both laughed and cried in its presence. Here we must confront it, in order to both demythologize it and recast it – in some sense to “naturalize” it but perhaps even better to *biologize* it.

The perspective we are aiming at is not the divine, unknowable, noumenal: it is the *taxonomic*, from which we view our species as one prior node in the evolutionary graph. But we have not jumped out of the graph, merely moved further along on it. The background against which I say we make sense of my “great unravelling” is the species-genus tree of our evolutionary history – and the “transcendental” aspect of it consists in looking *ahead* as well as *behind*, indeed it consists in thinking/philosophizing/speculating *as if* we could view *homo sapiens* in the same way that we can view *homo neanderthalensis* now.

This – in barest outline – is what I mean by the term *transpecial*. This is the perspective that I had to invent in order to escape from Wittgenstein. And in this *transpecial* perspective, the mystical, unknowable, noumenal background remains. Except it no longer has the form of some impenetrable darkness, but rather that of the impenetrable shadow of some unknown animal (the animal that belongs to the species that lies ahead in our “evolutionary” future).

(And let me say here that the introduction of the term “transpecial” is not made lightly. It hides behind it an immense amount of confusion caused in me when RFM V §16 knocked me off the Tower. It brings to my mouth the taste of blood and to my bones the ache of an old injury. It is not my own blood and it is not my own ache: I introduce this term because I am convinced that it points to a *universal* ache. But how exactly to *share* it? That is the question.)

—→ What I see Wittgenstein as trying to do is, essentially, what was beautifully described by Cassirer as the attempt

[to] consider man as an animal [...] which produces philosophies and poems in the same way as silkworms produce their cocoons or bees build their cells.^a

Such a perspective is nothing new. (Post-Darwinian thought often circles around this insight.) The problem this position faces is obvious and well-known: there is no “view from nowhere” from which it can be asserted. My contention, therefore, is that Wittgenstein’s late philosophy is an attempt to assert such a perspective, in order to *explain* (by *describing*) in what sense exactly philosophical propositions are nonsensical: they are the human equivalent of the threshing of a fly trapped in a fly bottle.

But if that’s all Wittgenstein is after – then why doesn’t he just *state it*? It’s easy enough: Cassirer did it. Yes, but Wittgenstein cannot: for in being stated as a *thesis* it immediately becomes contradictory (“the logocentric predicament”). Wittgenstein comes very close to stating it in many places. For example:

The evolution of the higher animals and of man, and the awakening of consciousness at a particular level. The picture is something like this: Though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light. [...] [The picture] already points to a particular use. This is how it takes us in. (*PI* II.vii)

In this difficult passage Wittgenstein appears to be saying that the picture itself is misleading: “it takes us in”. But in what way does it “take us in”? It sounds very much as if Wittgenstein is telling us that this picture is *false* and that therefore the “silkworm thesis” above is *true*. Convenient as it would be, we cannot take him to be doing any such thing. What we must see him as doing, instead, is applying his method to such statements themselves: for to advance the “silkworm thesis” as an *explanation* will lead us nowhere.

Just as the silkworm cannot “talk” about its cocoon through the process of weaving it, so Wittgenstein cannot assert the falsehood of this thesis through the human process of making assertions.

^aCassirer (1944) p. 20

←— With the Darwinian theory of evolution, with cosmology, with particle physics, with statistical science, Humanity has finally built for itself an ideological framework (a “conceptual scheme”) from which it can understand itself as the result of chance, of coincidence, of probability. The mistake we have made is to regard this insight as the beginning of the solution to the problem of the future of Humanity. In fact, this insight constitutes the very *statement* of the problem. For in order to *understand* Humanity as the product of chance does not mean we can *see* it as the product of chance. (Physics tells us that *what* we see is 4-dimensional curved spacetime. But physics can never tell us *that* we see it.)

We must still, somehow, *create* a direction for ourselves. The oft-repeated “worry” that in coming up with the theory of evolution we have thereby become immune to its influence on us says nothing more substantial than that a tribe which has come up with the notion of divine retribution has thereby become immune to being divinely retributed. Just as the notion of divine retribution spurred tribes to new means of organizing themselves and conceiving of their futures, so must modern evolutionary thinking spur us to new ways of conceiving of the future of Humanity. But this must be non-evolutionary thinking: it must be *transpecial* thinking.

And in transpecial thinking, mimicry is what provides direction – not the search for explanation, not *progress*, not *evolution*.

—→ We are therefore faced with a methodological absurdity, similar to the one of the early Wittgenstein: we must somehow draw a circle around the human activity of “making assertions” without making an assertion. In the late Wittgenstein’s own terms, this reduces to “blowing up” objects of comparison to the size of our own natural language. But this is clearly a formal impossibility, an absurdity. But this is no mere “size issue”. This impossibility is not the impossibility of inhabiting a styrofoam model of a house as though it were real. For such a styrofoam model can be seen as a “first approximation” to a house, whereas an object of comparison is not even that, as Wittgenstein makes clear in *PI* §130. This impossibility, rather, is akin to that of trying to *see* in four dimensions. Or, perhaps, of seeing a 2-dimensional object as a 3-dimensional one.

What is required is that we leap out of his objects of comparison and return to our own life. But how? We know how to get to objects of comparison, namely through descriptive tools constitutive of perspicuous representations. But, once there, how do we get back?

The impulse, of course, is to try and explain. But explanation has already come to an end when we have placed ourselves inside an object of comparison. For *within* it, there can be no explanation *about* it. The language game is a brute fact: it is our form of life, it is “what has to be accepted – the given” (*PI* §192). So the only thing we are left with and which we must now try to do is to find a kind of wonder just by looking into the phenomena that are perspicuously represented by objects of comparison. As Malcolm puts it:

When we perceive the futility of trying to explain the phenomena, then we can focus on the phenomena themselves, and even be awakened to a kind of *wonder* at their existence. (Malcolm (1993) p. 73)

“But what does this wonder consist of? And where can it lead us to? And how do you awaken to it?” Aren’t all these questions merely seeking an explanation? And isn’t that that must be given up?

←— To awaken to a kind of “wonder”? You know what – in the silence that followed the passing of Alexandria, free from poetries and exultations – I found that it was possible to think, to do mathematics even. That mathematics itself is an activity just like walking did not mean I could not walk. And slowly, steadily, I did it: I started walking again.

But where to? I could not ask that: for I would be seeking an explanation (producing more cocoons). What, then, was left? Perhaps I could just think of myself as just one stage in the evolutionary development of mankind, no more no less. But isn’t that, too, an explanation? Am I not still weaving cocoons? Isn’t the “evolutionary” explanation just that – an explanation that pre-supposes an objective stance towards the whole of humanity, but is produced *by* it? And this kind of thinking quickly leads you back to an examination of different dogmas, a pursuit of explanations – thinking that Wittgenstein’s problem revealed to me as fruitless.

There were two options. Either the problem that had struck me had struck no-one else before or no-one else had ever thought of this as a problem. The former seemed to me extremely improbable and the latter – given how forcefully the problem had struck me – seemed utterly incomprehensible. But one thing was certain: the world around me still functioned – and the people around me still went about their business largely untroubled. Everyone around me seemed capable of walking. And so, as a beginning, I could start *imitating* them. If nothing else, I had a certain bedrock to lean on: a community of people around me that seemed to have either solved the problem or to have been left completely unmoved by it.

Mimicry, after all, provided a kind of *direction* – and one that required no explanation to justify it. (The child, for instance, mimics its parents not because it has found a *reason* to do so.) I could not ask whether or not anyone around me felt the same way about humanity, nor could I pursue a solution to my problem. But what I could do: I could *mimic* those around me who seemed to behave as though the problem had never occurred to them.

—> The proposed solution thus strikes us as almost a joke: we must wholly abandon the idea of *seeking an explanation*. What is there is simply this: the human form of life. And all we have (the given) is our own part in it. In other words, as a philosophy, we are entering the realm of the subjective.

This “subjective turn” is similar to what Kierkegaard urged, in a different context and with different problems in mind – and also to what Nietzsche had in mind when he wrote that

[T]he great problems all demand great love [...] It makes the most material difference whether a thinker stands personally related to his problems, having his fate, his need, and even his highest happiness therein; or merely impersonally, that is to say, if he can only feel and grasp them with the tentacles of cold, prying thought. (*The Gay Science*, §345)

This is all similar, indeed, to all good irrationalists, but there it no lack of rationality here. This is exactly *antiphilosophy* in the sense of Badiou (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are all examples of what Badiou calls *antiphilosophers*.)

With fanfare and imagination, with an open mind and the taste of blood in our mouth, *accompanied by an invisible procession* – we enter the realm of personal *experience*. Wittgenstein is right there with us:

Working in philosophy - like work in architecture in many respects - is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s way of seeing things. (*CV* p. 16 (1931))

We are entering the un-philosophical, the quasi-aesthetic, quasi-subjective, quasi-mystical, the ineffable, ridiculous, hymnal, the comical, the juvenile, the ethical: we seek now the “philosophical insight” that can only be had on the streets outside the cathedral and only after we have chucked the gospels in the bin.

So much the better! A sure sign that our head is not stuck in the sand! A sure sign that our heads are not stuck up a scientist’s backside!

←— *The God Abandons Antony*

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don’t mourn your luck that’s failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive – don’t mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.
Above all, don’t fool yourself, don’t say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don’t degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion, but not
with the whining, the pleas of a coward;
listen – your final delectation – to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

—> Wait just a second! Let us rein in the excess for a moment. For we must pause to ask: even if one agrees with my “reading” of Wittgenstein why must we then immediately jump to Byronian romanticism? Even if this was the kind of thing that Wittgenstein *really* was after in his late philosophy, why can’t he be systematic about it? He certainly reads like someone who thought and wrote systematically. So why can’t there be a *theoretical method* that one can extract from his late philosophy that – if followed – would lead one to regard philosophy as the barking of dogs, the roaring of lions, the cocoon-weaving of silkworms etc.? For Wittgenstein certainly gives us many tantalizing clues as to what such a method might look like: “inventing new similes” (*CV* p.19), “philosophy as poetic composition” (*CV* p. 24), “to make it possible for us to get a clear view [...] [to put] everything before us” (*PI* §125,126).

But the key observation to make here is this: the (nonsensical) descriptive tools (analogies, similes etc.) which lead us to objects of comparison are *at the same time* the very source of our ailments! For recall some of Wittgenstein’s descriptions of the origins of our confusions:

[A] simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance. (*PI* §112)

A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. (*PI* §115)

But similes and analogies are exactly what Wittgenstein himself uses! As Baker summarizes the point: “[Wittgenstein’s method] could be called a kind of homeopathy: a way of ‘treating’ pictures with other pictures.”^a We fight language with language. Nonsense is revealed through nonsense. We attend to the workings of our language exactly in order to overcome its seductions (to fly out of the fly bottle) – the same way we protect ourselves from a virus by vaccinating ourselves with weakened forms of it. But this kind of “attending” is not the cure itself – it is only what triggers the immune response.

^aBaker (2004) p. 187

← “The beauty of mathematics! The divine in logic! We are cats! We are silkworms!” I had to strip these clownish exultations down and place them in front of a mirror and keep them there until they broke down in tears. I had to turn the mirror on myself not in order to understand, but in order to pity. I had to stare long and hard but not in order for a new “aspect” to reveal itself, but until what I saw could only fill me with grief and pity.

One of the strangest pronouncements I ever heard: “Knowledge begins with grief.” This is now how I do justice to these words, which carry the unmistakable form of a penetrating insight.

I had to sit in front of a mirror long enough to be able to perceive my bliss (my exultations) as something worth grieving over, indeed as something devastating. There was no sudden insight, no “realization in a flash”, no discontinuity. There was rather an erosion, over a very long period of time, at no point of which was I aware of the changing shape of my reflection. But erode I did: and then – suddenly – I had become *perfectly* smooth, a *perfect* reflective surface able to bounce back any idea: a thermodynamic “white body” – but *not* a sceptic.

Looking in the mirror, I saw *nothing*: no idea could affect me but there was also no idea I could hold on to.

What became clear then: the proper *philosophical insight* is that which you *do justice to*, not *attempt to communicate*.

—→ And we must also keep in mind that Wittgenstein’s *targets* were not philosophical theories. For to negate a theory is also to assert a theory: the negation of a philosophical thesis is itself a philosophical thesis. But for the late Wittgenstein, one ought never “advance *theses* in philosophy” (*PI* §128). And we can only see Wittgenstein as an anti-theorist by seeing him as a theorist, i.e. by carving out a position for him comprised of the negations of what he argued against and thus read a thesis into his work. This mistake is common: Crispin Wright and Michael Dummett reading him as an anti-realist, for example, or Kripke reading him as a sophisticated skeptic.

To illustrate, regarding Wittgenstein’s discussion of pain in the *Investigations* Kripke writes: “Clearly much more needs to be said here: a few sketchy and allusive remarks on the analogy between ‘I am in pain’ and a groan hardly give a complete theory...”^a That it doesn’t give a complete theory is true – but what Wittgenstein is asking us to do is to allow it to strike us *as* a complete theory. Imagine that all philosophy of mind *is simply* a kind of musicology of different types of groaning – this is what Wittgenstein is asking us to do. And *from* such a perspective, what does our philosophy look like? About as useful as a musicology of groaning.

The right way to read him is not as an anti-theorist but as an “anti-theory-ist”. His target is not this or that token philosophical theory but Theory and Theorizing in philosophy in general. His targets are the many ways in which philosophers theorize, generalize and explain instead of *describing, looking* and letting themselves be *struck*. And to make *that* point through philosophical language (a theoretical anti-theory), one must become a clown and a malcontent: for one is forced to communicate one’s mockery through its very target. This is in some sense philosophy as a kind of self-loathing: a “philosophical anti-philosophy.”^b But whatever it is – it is not theory-building. It is not problem-solving. It is a kind of clowning around – but of the most serious kind.

^aKripke (1982) p. 145

^bBadiou (2011) p. 69

←— When a clown said to me: *To whom he was not announced, they shall see; and those who have not heard shall understand.* A clown made me understand without hearing, and this noise I pass on.

To understand me, you must close your ears to what I am saying.

For when you close your ears to him and focus only on his face, even the clown becomes a tragedian of the highest competence.

Let the clown explain – and you will only hear his jokes. But let the clown describe – and you may *see* his sadness.

—→ Even so, the question remains: can we perhaps extract a single, unified “formula” (rather than “theory”) from Wittgenstein’s late philosophy? Wittgenstein of course doesn’t think so:

There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies. (*PI* §133)

But can a single consistent *practice* can be extracted from his late philosophy? No, it cannot – for we can easily see that Wittgenstein’s actual philosophical practice cannot cohere with his method as he describes it. As Kenny accurately puts it: “[T]here were more things in his philosophy than could be confined within his metaphilosophy.”^a Consider the following examples:

The meaning of a word is its use in language. (*PI* §43)

A philosophical problem has the form: “I don’t know my way about” (*PI* §123)

It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. (*PI* §241)

Essence is expressed by grammar. (*PI* §371)

An inference is a transition to an assertion; and so also to the behaviour that corresponds to the assertion. (*PI* §486)

The point here is this: Even if the only propositions Wittgenstein deemed worthy of philosophy were those that “everyone would agree to” (*PI* §128) he still could not write a philosophy that makes this point by using *only* such propositions. (The same way that, say, one cannot write a textbook on logic without employing some natural language to make it understandable.)

^aKenny (2004) p. 182

←— RFM V §16 had infected me – and I found myself bedridden. Then – there is no other way to put it – began really what was a grand and glorious unravelling: *Once you have given up the ghost, everything follows with dead certainty, even in the midst of chaos.* (Henry Miller.)

If you see even mathematics and logic as an *activity*, then you must be willing to face the (not so exquisite) music: and this involves giving up (or suspending) all wonderment, all thirst for understanding. There are tremendous consequences. You are left bruised, bloodied, intellectually comatose – and what’s more: *foolish*.

The problem, to be very precise, is this: if you come to regard the totality of your thinking life as a human activity, then what can your thinking life possibly accomplish over and above human activities? I saw myself as a silkworm which tries to think and speak but only manages to weave cocoons – and if the silkworm were to see itself as a silkworm we would still only see it as producing cocoons. And if the silkworm tried to avoid this problem, it would still be weaving cocoons. (Comparing ourselves to silkworms leaves us no better: we are merely weaving more cocoons.)

I had not, of course, uncovered a kind of universal problem, a “new form of skepticism”. The problem was not a dialectical one: it was a *personal* one. I was in possession of no conceptual scheme that could soften the blow: the web had been broken, and I fell through it and ended up destroyed. Yet somehow, I *had* to recover from it.

This is my “exegesis” of Wittgenstein: a *description* of the problem he made me feel – and my attempt to recover from it.

—→ Wittgenstein was aware of this inconsistency. Often in his late work, when he traps himself into a theoretical-sounding aphorism, he immediately reprimands himself:

Isn't what I am saying: any empirical proposition can be transformed into a postulate-and then become a norm of description. But I am suspicious even of this. The sentence is *too general*. One almost wants to say "any empirical proposition can, theoretically, be transformed...", but what does "theoretically" mean here? It sounds all too reminiscent of the *Tractatus*. (*OC* §321)

So the prospects for drawing out a single consistent philosophical *practice* from his late work looks grim, partly because his own philosophical practice (what he *wrote*) does not fully cohere with what he seemed to suggest philosophical practice ought to be like. (Kant, for example, would be the paradigm of a philosopher who tried to make his own philosophy cohere with his views about what philosophy should do.) We are still, it seems, stuck inside objects of comparison – and we have no way of jumping back to real life. There is no "Doctrine of Method" that Wittgenstein can provide us with that makes it clear to us exactly how to transfer our insights about objects of comparison into insights about our natural language. (That would lead to a new kind of critical philosophy.)

What we do have is the exquisite music – the idea that he wants to make us regard ourselves as animals, as primitive people in a primitive state...But is that enough to salvage Wittgenstein's philosophy? Exquisite though the thought might be, it is no more substantial than a musical phrase, heard in passing, from some "invisible procession" on the street below. (It is no more an *idea* than a poem inserted in the middle of a stream of thought is an *argument*.)

"What's all this nonsense about music? We want to know: what is the *point*?"

The point is this: the method of the late Wittgenstein requires an altogether new metaphor. Visual metaphors have run their course. (We are near the end of the era of the mirror and the glass.) I don't yet have the words to *describe* the metaphor – but what I *do* have is sheaves.

←— The very idea of a foundation of mathematics becomes superfluous – an extravagance! If mathematics is seen as an *activity* there is no more need to set foundations for it as there is, say, for the *activity* of walking, fetching and so on. In that vein consider also the following passage, in which Wittgenstein urges an analogous shift of perspective:

When I say: "If you follow the rule, this *must* come out," that doesn't mean: it must, because it always has. Rather, *that* it comes out is one of my *foundations*. (*RFM* VI §46)

And this made me see the doing of mathematics by humans as no more mysterious than what a cat does when she hesitates before leaping from one rooftop to the next. Wittgenstein, in short, wants us to see ourselves as cats, even when we're scrawling formulas on blackboards, even when we calculate solutions to the field equations. But this, of course, cannot be *argued for* in the usual sense (what I'm describing is not the adoption of an "anti-realist" view) – it cannot be communicated except perhaps as a joke, as a kind of prank. And that's how I saw it too, initially: "Wittgenstein wants me to see myself as a cat!" But the joke, eventually, wears off. And what is left?

Thus it was for me: questions of "certainty" concerning mathematical propositions lost all their depth. The problem of the "nature" of mathematics had disappeared. But I was not "cured" – in fact this was the beginning of a *disease* (skepticism). For once you can get rid even of mathematics – once you can see even mathematics and logic itself as an activity – then what is left? If Wittgenstein was really aiming at a therapy, then he must've failed – for I felt more diseased than ever!

—> Recall the sinful and mysterious statement: *Wittgenstein's late philosophy is a sheaf*. We are now finally ready to do justice to it, right at the moment of maximum confusion. (Indeed, of maximum exhaustion.)

Let us think: What has Wittgenstein provided us with? A *rule* by which to attach to each part of our natural language certain information (our natural language is the “object” or “space” to which this sheaf is applied). This information consists in a patchwork of perspicuous representations in simplified, primitive settings (language games). We have, therefore, a rule taking us from the global to the local – and we must now regard it as a sheaf. This is the feat the late Wittgenstein requires of us. This is the act that gives his whole late philosophy its meaning (thereby rendering it trivial): the patchwork of representations he has provided form a sheaf: they collate local nonsense to global meaning.

Thus the method of the late Wittgenstein is this: to provide us with a constant flow of “local” representations as opposed to one final comparison of natural language against some impregnable standard. Think of how much the late Wittgenstein wrote: if you can no longer explain, then all you can do is describe more and more. (We move, in short, from the analytic ideal of a “perfect deduction” to the category-theoretic idea of representation.)

But *that* the method is adequate, *that* the rule of perspicuous representations is a sheaf: this is the mystical, the inexpressible. To *see* that our language is a patchwork of language games and *no more* is to see ourselves as silkworms or lions. And that cannot be argued for: explanation, at this point, comes to an end.

“But this,” you cry, “is so utterly juvenile! This is quietism not even worthy of a sophomore!” To this we can only respond as someone else did – someone occupied with the same kind of move from the objective to the subjective that we are about to undertake:

It is exactly [the] seeming triviality [of the task] that makes [it] infinitely hard, since the task itself does not beckon directly, in a way that promises support to the aspirant, and because the task works against him, so that it needs an infinite effort just to discover the task [...] (Kierkegaard (2009), p. 108)

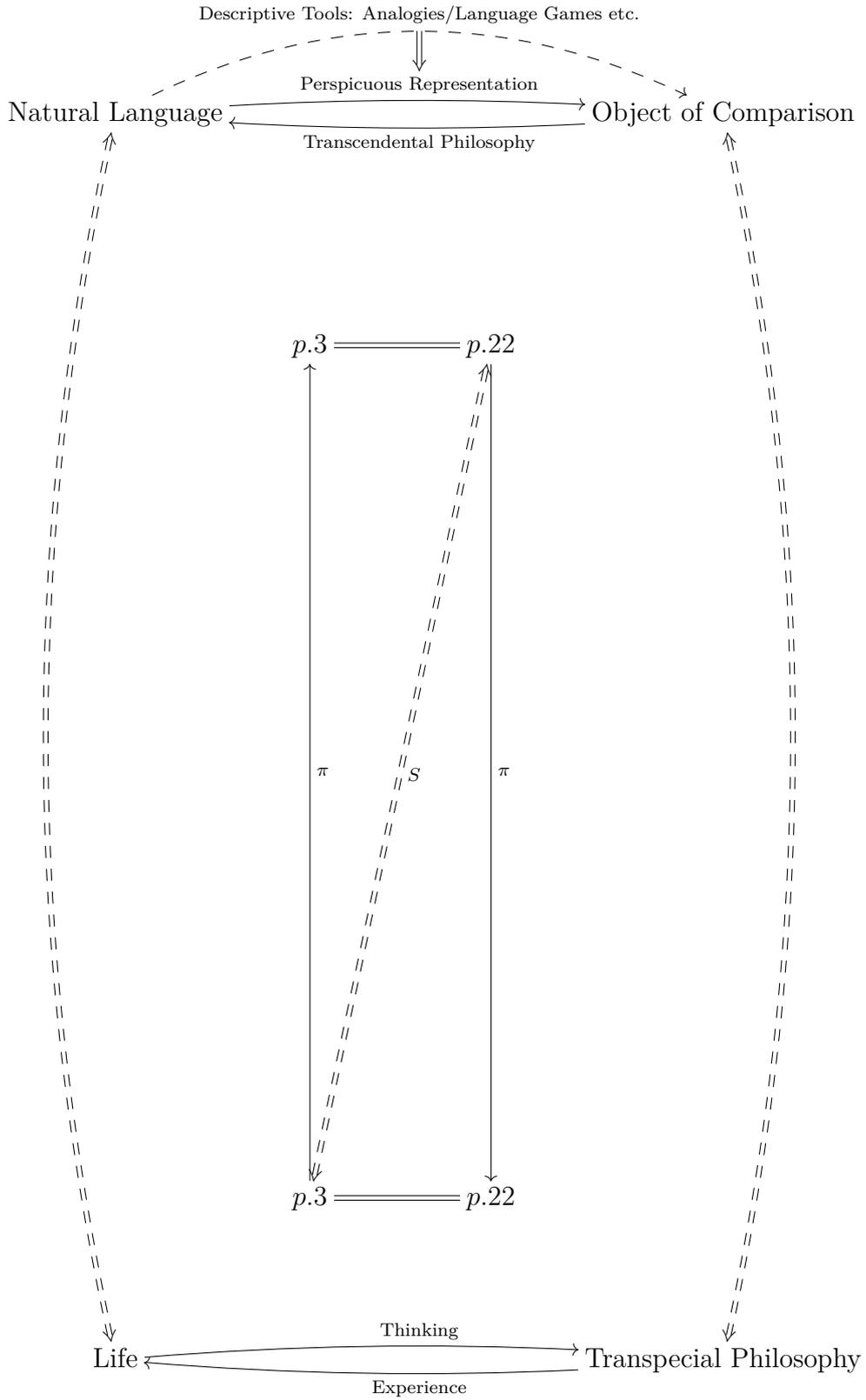
Yes, indeed. We are talking about a leap of faith here (this is our sheafification), though our destination has nothing to do with God, and is still very much about *humanity*. Down we slide! But neither to Dadaism, nor to irrationalism, not to the ineffable or transcendental or the mystical, not to the continental or the analytic, not to postmodernism or to art – we slide, instead, to the *transpecial*.

←— What kind of insight is encoded by this “sheafification” of Wittgenstein’s objects of comparison? Let me give you a remark that had this effect on me (what exquisite music it made me hear! And all of this is but the crudest attempt to *describe* it):

Strangely, it can be said that there is so to speak a solid core to all these glistening concept-formations. And I should like to say that that is what makes them into mathematical productions. (RFM V §16)

I took Wittgenstein to be making the following “trivial but infinitely hard” point: It is not that our solid core *is* mathematical, but that we *call* our “solid core” (whatever it may be) mathematics. We call mathematical exactly that which does justice, so to speak, to how we use the word “certainty” in our everyday life. It is not that we had an idea of what it is for something to be certain, *and then* figured out that mathematical propositions are of that sort. Mathematical propositions, it suddenly occurred to me, must not be seen as *examples* of certainty, but as part of the *definition* of “certainty”.

RFM V §16 has *struck me* – but not as an “argument” that establishes a “thesis”. It had struck me in the most personal way possible – and I found myself floored.



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