

# WITTGENSTEIN, McDOWELL AND THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

WITTGENSTEIN, McDOWELL  
AND  
THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

By

MATTHEW BARBER, B.A., B.Sc.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

Copyright by Matthew Barber, March 2003

MASTER OF ARTS (2003)  
(Philosophy)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Wittgenstein, McDowell and Therapeutic Philosophy

AUTHOR: Matthew Barber, B.A., B.Sc. (Queen's University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Barry Allen

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 121

## ABSTRACT

Kripke argues via an interpretation of Wittgenstein that any speaker's claim to have meant something determinate by an utterance is vulnerable to a sceptical challenge. The rules pertaining to the meaning of one's words can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways, and there can thus be no objective fact about one's past mental history that can be invoked to authoritatively determine what one meant. McDowell states that the sceptical problem dissolves if we cease to look at the meaning of words on the model of interpreting signs, and instead see meaning as emerging from the communal practice of individuals who have been trained into reacting in customary ways to linguistic signs. This allows for an anti-sceptical or "therapeutic" position according to which there is no philosophical problem with respect to one's grasping the meaning of a speaker's words. We face a potential problem, however, with respect to how linguistic signs have determinate identities. This is because a sign can only be followed if it is recognized as a sign, but it can only be recognized as a sign if there is a custom of reacting to it in regularly-patterned ways. The key to avoiding this paradox and preserving a therapeutic outlook is to see the forms of our language as being intimately bound up with our form of life in a conceptual feedback loop, to the effect that we reach a point at which explanations for why our words mean what they do come to an end. We simply do what we do, and observe that "this language-game is played." This implies that the fundamental level of our language-games is normative rather than being reducible to descriptive accounts of our sub-rational interactions with the world. Moreover, experience of "the world" emerges only for one who has been initiated into a language. Hence, what we say is directly constrained by the way things are in the world, and common-sense objectivity can be comfortably accepted.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted first and foremost to the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Barry Allen. I would also like to recognize the helpful comments made by my second reader, Dr. Phillip Kremer.

The seeds for this project were planted while taking a graduate course on Wittgenstein taught by Dr. Rocky Jacobsen. I owe much of my interest in Wittgenstein's philosophy to the engaging seminars led by Dr. Jacobsen.

Thank you is also in order to my fellow graduate students at McMaster from whom I have learned much.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the love and support of my sister Jill and my parents, Joyce and Brian Barber. They were there throughout to ease my worries and offer the moral support necessary to get the job done.

## CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<b>Chapter One. Meaning</b>	8
i)Preliminary Remarks	10
ii)Wright on Intention	12
iii)Wright on Basic Judgments and the Objectivity of Meaning	18
iv)McDowell on “Recognizing the Ground as the Ground”	22
v)McDowell on Grasping a Pattern of Application	30
vi)Seeing and Hearing Meanings	34
vii)The Adequacy of Language and the Sublimity of Art	43
<b>Chapter Two. Language, Forms of Life and the End of Explanations</b>	46
i)Statement of the Sign-Post Paradox	47
ii)Going on in the Same Way	48
iii)Allen on the Concept of Sameness	52
iv)Cavell on Sameness and Forms of Life	55
v)Wittgenstein’s Conception of Rules	61
vi)Language and Forms of Life	63
vii)Language as a Technique	66
viii)The End of Explanations: Avoiding the Sign-Post Paradox	72
ix)A Comment on the Nature of Philosophy	79
<b>Chapter Three. Language and the World</b>	81
i)Thought’s Bearing on Reality	84
ii)Rorty on “The Very Idea of Answerability to the World”	92
iii)In Defence of Answerability: A Critique of Rorty	96
iv)Illegitimate Causes: A Further Critique of Rorty	105
v)Conclusion: Reasons, Nature, and the End of Explanations Revisited	109
<i>Bibliography</i>	120

## INTRODUCTION

My objective in this thesis is to make a contribution to the 20th century tradition of anti-sceptical philosophy. The work of the philosophers in this tradition is largely characterized by a desire to overcome the driving force behind much of analytic philosophy: the need to invoke constructive philosophical arguments in order to fill perceived explanatory gaps with respect to how language works, and how it relates to the world.

One of the most important figures in this tradition is Ludwig Wittgenstein. Accordingly, it is to his mature philosophy that I shall repeatedly turn in order to situate my views in an historical context. Since its publication in 1953, readings of his seminal work, *Philosophical Investigations*, have been as diverse as they have been numerous. In 1982, Saul Kripke published an influential reading of the *Investigations* in which he claims that Wittgenstein thought we faced a genuine sceptical problem with respect to meanings, and that his remarks on rule-following embody a powerful argument against the idea that meanings entail normative constraints in the way we intuitively think they do. Kripke goes on to attribute to Wittgenstein a “sceptical solution” to the problem of meanings.

Subsequently, John McDowell has developed a reading that is largely a reaction to Kripke’s interpretation. McDowell’s central idea is that to interpret Wittgenstein as presenting a sceptical argument that requires a solution is surely to miss his point, in light of Wittgenstein’s claims that philosophical problems are illusory and merely the result of grammatical misunderstandings. The sort of reading of Wittgenstein that emerges from

this reaction to Kripke is one that champions Wittgenstein as a “therapeutic” philosopher; one who advocates seeing ordinary language as being perfectly in order, without needing to posit either an *a priori* logical structure or the idea of reconstructive social interactions to do the work of sustaining meaning, and truth.

The present work is greatly influenced by McDowell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein. The first chapter is devoted to explicating this interpretation in contrast to one put forth by Crispin Wright. Wright’s reading is also in reaction to Kripke, but, I shall argue, he opts to account for Kripke’s claims by offering another constructive account of meaning, thereby attempting to solve a real philosophical problem that Wittgenstein thinks is merely illusory.

The major theme of the first chapter is thus linguistic meaning. In this chapter, I attempt to lay the groundwork for the Wittgensteinian vision of language (reinforced by McDowell) that will pervade the remainder of the thesis. The central idea is that meaning is manifested solely in the actual use of linguistic signs, and that these signs possess normative significance in virtue of the role they play in the customary practices of a linguistic community. If we respect the insight that the question “how do words possess meaning?” cannot be addressed by examining linguistic signs outside of the practices in which they are embedded, we can avoid being gripped by sceptical problems concerning the normative foundations of meaning. By stripping these sceptical problems of their urgency, we can begin to comfortably accept that we directly hear and see meanings in each other’s words, and that this implies nothing more than that we have mastered the technique of reacting appropriately to various sounds or ink-marks according to the



dictates of a custom. For this reason, the most fundamental level at which we can discuss why we understand one another - why our meanings converge - is normative.

Thus, we are always bound by rules, but these rules are not fixed according to some timeless order (Platonic, *a priori*) that transcends our contingent activities as human beings. Rather, they emerge as a bi-product of these activities. This is potentially misleading, however, because what I am calling our 'human activities' are to some extent reciprocally structured by the contingent rules that sustain our language. Clarifying this idea is the chief objective of the second chapter.

Chapter Two is centred around articulating a way in which we can avoid having to face what I call the "sign-post paradox." If the first chapter deals primarily with how we can avoid the pitfalls of Kripke's sceptical paradox without turning to constructive philosophy, the second chapter can be understood as dealing primarily with avoiding the potential complications that go along with the anti-sceptical viewpoint put forth in chapter one. In brief, the sign-post paradox concerns the fact that for one to follow a sign there must be signs to follow; but for there to be signs to follow there must be people who follow signs *as signs* - otherwise the "would-be" signs are merely sounds or marks, not recognizable signs at all. Underlying this idea is a general claim that is articulated in different but complimentary ways by Barry Allen and Stanley Cavell, respectively. The claim is that the forms of sameness and difference and hence, the very identity of things (including signs), stand or fall together with the contingent language-games whose practices embody the standards by which sameness and difference are measured, and identity is determined. If we take this claim seriously, the aforementioned sign-post

paradox threatens to present us with another reason to be sceptical about meanings. For how can a sign be followed if its very identity as a sign requires that it be followed as a sign?

As in the first chapter, the key to avoiding sceptical conclusions will be to focus on language as an activity. Specifically, we shall need to examine the relationship between language and what Wittgenstein famously refers to as our “form of life.” In doing this, we shall see that what we call the “structure of our language” on one hand, and our “form of life” on the other together make up a mutually-sustaining feedback cycle. The upshot is that our linguistic rules - our meanings - are sustained by the phenomenon of human agreement. The extent to which we agree is the extent to which we participate in common forms of life, and the extent to which we participate in common forms of life is the extent to which we can understand one another by sharing concepts.

Speaking a language involves mastery of the technique of performing a certain human activity. Techniques are rooted in brute action (as opposed to explicit rule-following). These actions garner either agreement or disagreement from other participants in the technique. In the case of language, acting in such a way that garners agreement amounts to what we call following a rule.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the fundamental level of our language-games is normative, and looking at language in this way signals the need to accept a point at which explanations concerning how words have determinate meanings must come to an

---

<sup>1</sup> Here “agreement” must be understood broadly as agreement throughout a linguistic community. There may be cases in which two people simultaneously err and agree, for instance, that  $35+16$  is 41. In this case we would not want to say that they are following the rule for addition. I was made aware of this point by Phillip Kremer.

end. There is no intelligibility to the idea of a standpoint from which we can see how the feedback cycle of forms of life and language is 'set in motion.' This is why Wittgenstein urges us to give up the futile quest for ultimate explanations, and instead encourages us to observe and describe how language is actually used.

The third chapter departs somewhat from the first two, in that it shifts the focus away from the specific workings of language to questions about the things which statements in our language purport to be about. In other words, the third chapter deals more directly with language's relation to the world. Using the vision of language that is established in the first two chapters, I endeavour to defend McDowell's claim that our thoughts and beliefs about things in the world are "answerable" to the way the world is. That is to say, our statements are normatively constrained by their subject matter. This subject matter consists of the aspects of the world that our statements purport to be about, and these aspects of the world are unintelligible outside of the language-games that provide the means by which we can identify them. I defend this idea against the criticisms of Richard Rorty. Rorty advocates a coherentist view that states that only beliefs can justify beliefs, and the world itself is merely causally (non-normatively) connected to our statements about it. I argue that Rorty's distinction between causation and justification leads to intolerable conclusions that undermine his claim to be a therapeutic philosopher who has earned the right to shrug his shoulders at questions concerning the relationship between language and the world.

I also address a potential tension that exists between the following two ideas: (a) that the identity of things, and hence, *the world* emerges only to those who have mastered

the technique of participating in language-games; and (b) that humans constitute a mere evolutionary blip in the natural history of the universe. This is not unrelated to the debate between McDowell and Rorty. McDowell can be read as one who, in the tradition of Gadamer and Heidegger, thinks the world is revealed to us through language. Rorty on the other hand, is well known for the influence of evolution on his work. I draw the conclusion that detailed talk of the universe as it existed before human beings is perfectly intelligible when it is understood as a manifestation of the language-games of human scientific inquiry. Provided that causal-descriptive stories of the sort that scientific narratives consist of are seen as being bounded by the normative dimensions of our contingent language-games, no problems arise. I then go on to posit cautiously that an undifferentiated, indeterminate material substratum *must* underlie our human forms of life and the corresponding world in which our lives are lived, and that it should be understood on the model of Wittgenstein's notion of a something about which nothing can be said.

The unifying theme running through all three chapters is that anything we can intelligibly say about how our language works and relates to the world must respect a fundamental level of explanation which is normative, and which is encapsulated in the statement that "*this language-game is played*" (PI 654). In saying that this fundamental level is normative, I am drawing attention to the fact that every significant move in a language-game is one that is accompanied by agreement in methodological practices and is thus rule-bounded. This normative force does not come from rules whose authority is autonomous and to which our practices must conform. Rather, the rules in question are both reflective and constitutive of the human form of life in which they are embedded and

through which they are sustained. To attempt to unearth a foundational explanation for why we are bound by one rule and not another is to venture into the philosophical void that lies beyond the point at which explanations must come to an end.

## CHAPTER ONE: MEANING

Much has been made of the so-called ‘rule-following considerations’ in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. This is not surprising, considering one of his more explicitly-stated objectives is to displace the picture of language as something that functions according to an idealized set of autonomous rules.<sup>2</sup> Such an objective, however, brings into question some tempting views concerning the concepts of meaning and understanding; namely, that my understanding the meaning of a word amounts to my grasping a rule which dictates the future employment of the word. If one accepts Wittgenstein’s rejection of the notion that a person must be operating a calculus according to definite rules in order to mean or understand the sentences she utters or hears (or reads or writes), one *might* also be inclined to advocate the need to re-think what could be considered a common-sense notion of meaning and understanding: that meanings prescribe ratification-independent patterns of usage, and that meanings are autonomous in the sense that a seemingly common-sense conception of the objectivity of the world would require. In his work on rule-following, Crispin Wright argues that the need for such a re-thinking is an important component of Wittgenstein’s message. On Wright’s view, the normative aspect of “grasping the meaning of a word” *cannot* rest on the acquisition of an

---

<sup>2</sup> See Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953) remark 81. All future references to Wittgenstein’s work will employ the following abbreviations: *PI* (*Philosophical Investigations*); *RFM* [*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. by G.H von Wright, R.Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967)]; and *BB* [*Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972)].

understanding of the word that obliges us to follow certain patterns of linguistic usage dictated by its meaning.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he writes, “the proper interpretation of these notions has to be compatible with the capacity of ongoing use to determine meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Drawing heavily on the work of John McDowell, I intend to show in this first chapter that Wright’s approach is not only inhospitable to meaning’s intuitively normative component, but that it fails to appreciate the therapeutic message of Wittgenstein’s later work, which is perhaps summed up best in the statement that “the real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to”(PI 133). In the spirit of McDowell’s claim that we hear meanings in each other’s words, I will attempt to shed light on some important connections between Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect-seeing, and the idea that there is nothing more to the meanings of our words than what is embodied in the act of following sign-posts in accordance with a custom. I will conclude the chapter by attempting to make sense of what struck me at first as a quite obscure remark; specifically, PI 524. Against the backdrop of what I have to say in the following sections, I think that this remark can be particularly instructive with respect to Wittgenstein’s vision of language, and its relationship to one aspect of our form of life in particular: artistic experience.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Wright, Crispin. “Rule Following, Meaning and Constructivism” in *Meaning and Interpretation*, ed. Charles Travis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 272–4. See also McDowell, John. “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule” in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 221–2.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, “Rule-Following, Meaning and Constructivism,” 274.

## 1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

What is fundamentally at stake for the purposes of this chapter is the relationship between the concept of meaning and the employment of linguistic signs (words and the expressions we form with them).<sup>5</sup> Before we proceed, however, two general points of clarification regarding the methodology of this project are warranted. Firstly, I do not want to restrict my remarks to the study of the meanings of either words or expressions *exclusively*. Wittgenstein comments on both, and it is not obvious that the distinction is even relevant to what he has to say about the concept of meaning in general. What *are* important are ‘moves in a language game,’ and these can sometimes be individual words, like “Slab!”, or familiar groupings of words like “I am in pain.”<sup>6</sup> Granted, in cases such as “there is a chair,” it might be that the meaning of the word “chair,” rather than the meaning of the whole sentence, is what is specifically of interest (see *PI* 80); but this is primarily a reflection of Wittgenstein’s determination to dislodge the picture that “every word has a meaning,” and further, that “the object is correlated with the word,” and “it is the object for which the word stands”(PI 1). His comments on meaning, in my view, are intended to convey the idea that the concept of meaning has no fixed parameters, but is informed by

---

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein himself does not draw any sharp distinctions between how meaning and understanding are manifested with respect to verbal linguistic signs (sounds) on one hand, and written ones on the other. Hence, it can be assumed that what I have to say about Wittgenstein’s views on these matters apply to language in general, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein implies this point in *PI* 19: “-But why should I not on the contrary have called the sentence “Bring me a slab” a *lengthening* of the sentence “Slab!”? - Because if you shout “Slab!” you really mean: “Bring me a slab.” - But how do you *mean that* while you *say* “Slab!”? Do you say the unshortened sentence to yourself? And why should I translate the call “Slab!” into a different expression in order to say what someone means by it? And if they mean the same thing - why should I not say” “When he says ‘Slab!’ he means ‘Slab!’”?”



the multitude of ways in which the word “meaning” is used. Hence, drawing any sort of methodological distinction between the meanings of *words* and the meanings of *particular groupings of words* will not serve any useful exegetical purpose.

Secondly, I will be treating the concept of understanding as roughly correlative to meaning, in the sense that what can be understood (e.g. sentences, orders) can, from another point of view, be said to have a meaning. It is true that Wittgenstein does for the most part deal with the concepts of meaning and understanding separately, but this is merely symptomatic of his more general philosophical method, which is to examine the use of particular words individually in order to get clearer about their role in the language-game. I don't see anything problematic about asserting that the ways in which we ordinarily *use* the words “meaning” and “understanding” can be seen to overlap significantly.

Having established these preliminary remarks, we are now in a position to look more directly at the views of Wright and McDowell. The root of their disagreement, I shall argue, lies in the difference between what could be described as Wright's “constructivist” interpretation of Wittgenstein and McDowell's “therapeutic” one. Both Wright and McDowell acknowledge this point of difference (although perhaps not explicitly in these terms), and accept it. In the next few sections, I will attempt to elaborate upon what I mean by the above characterizations of their respective interpretations, and suggest why I think the textual evidence in Wittgenstein points to McDowell's being the truer reading.

## 2. WRIGHT ON INTENTION

On Wright's view, the central question with respect to the philosophy of mind in the *Philosophical Investigations* is this: how can there be a state of one's mind with the characteristic features of our intuitive notion of intention?<sup>7</sup> He characterizes this 'intuitive notion of intention' as being

a state of mind, alongside mood, thought, desire, sensations, etc., for which, in at least a very large class of cases, subjects have a special authority, and whose epistemology is first/third person asymmetric. I can be presumed to know, at least in a very large class of cases, what my intentions are, and this knowledge does not proceed, or does not have to proceed, by reflection on what I say and do,- the only basis that you can have for an opinion about what my intentions may be.<sup>8</sup>

Wright frames the rule-following considerations this way because he feels that reflecting on this intuitive notion of intention brings to the fore a certain picture of the objectivity of meaning which Wittgenstein, on Wright's view, is determined to undermine.

To understand Wright's project, we must recognize that its origins lie in an attempt to develop a satisfactory response to the sceptical argument put forth by Saul Kripke in his book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.<sup>9</sup> This sceptical argument is intended to cast doubt on how our conception of the normative features of meaning (the way in which the sensible employment of a concept is constrained by what is

---

<sup>7</sup> Wright, Crispin. "On Making Up One's Mind: Wittgenstein on Intention" in *Logic, Philosophy of Science and epistemology: Proceedings of the 11th Annual Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. Paul Weingartner and Gerhard Schurz (Vienna: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1987) 396.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, "On Making Up One's Mind." 395.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that while Wright does reject Kripke's view that Wittgenstein accepts the sceptical paradox, he nevertheless feels that Kripke's sceptical argument is one that needs to be taken seriously and not merely avoided as if it were purely the result of a misconception.

thought of as its ‘meaning’) could rest on any sort of appeal to facts about the mental state of a person to whom we might attribute the achievement of ‘understanding the meaning of a linguistic sign and correctly employing it accordingly.’<sup>10</sup> With respect to intentions, then, we can see how the problem could be formulated in the following way: if I have given you the order to extend a series according to the rule “add 2,” and in the course of doing so you write “...996, 998, 1000, 1004,” what are we to make of my claim that “when I gave you the instructions, I *intended* for you to write 1002 after 1000”? Kripke’s point is that there is no discernible fact associated with my mental act of ‘meaning’ “add 2” that precludes that rule from being *interpreted* as meaning “add 2 up to 1000, and then add 4,” or anything else, for that matter. Kripke is led to this conclusion by Wittgenstein’s remarks concerning the pitfalls of treating our understanding the meanings of words on the model of interpreting a sign-post. If we think of words as standing on their own like sign-posts, pointing us in the right direction regarding their future employment provided we give them the right interpretation, we run into the realization that the meaning of any word (like the directions given by any sign-post) could be interpreted in an infinite number of ways, and that every interpretation stands in need of another interpretation. Hence, “no

---

<sup>10</sup> Kripke’s sceptical argument can be roughly summarized in the following way: the sceptic inquires as to whether I can be sure that I have been using the term “plus” to mean plus in my addition calculations, rather than to mean “quus,” the definition of “quus” being:  $x \text{ quus } y = x + y$ , if  $x, y < 57$ ; otherwise,  $x \text{ quus } y = 5$ . So far all of my calculations have been involving values of  $x$  and  $y$  that have been less than 57. Now, Kripke says “if the sceptic is right, the concepts of meaning and of intending one function rather than another will make no sense. For the sceptic holds that no fact about my past history - nothing that was ever in my mind, or in my external behaviour - establishes that I meant plus rather than quus.” He goes on to say, “if this is correct, there can of course be no fact about which particular function I meant in the past, there can be none in the present either.” Kripke, Saul. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1982. 13.

course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule”(PI 201). Such a paradox points to there being a philosophical problem with respect to how we manage to use words ‘with meaning,’ and how we manage to understand the meanings of the words used by others.

Famously, however, Wittgenstein goes on in remark 201 to say that the paradox that arises from this conception of meaning must rest on a misunderstanding. After all, we *do* manage to understand one another (which implies that we manage to use our words meaningfully), and since the interpretation-model has been shown to be incoherent, there must be “a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases”(PI 201). In light of the problems associated with appealing to interpretations, Wright interprets Wittgenstein as granting that “a *merely rational* [interpretive] methodology can yield no determinate conclusions when it comes to disclosing what meaning is incorporated in someone’s practice with an expression hitherto.”<sup>11</sup> But since we *do* understand one another, something other than the mere exercise of “interpretive faculties” must be involved in our ability to comprehend another’s linguistic behaviour. “And the additional something,” says Wright, “is, crudely human nature:

certain sub-rational propensities towards conformity of response, towards ‘going on in the same way,’ which alone make possible the formation of the common conceptual scheme within which our rational capacities can be exercised.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Wright “On Making Up One’s Mind.” 394.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

I will return to the role that these sub-rational propensities play in Wright's reading a little later on. At this point, I simply want to stress that Wright does not read Wittgenstein as accepting the paradox about meaning that would result from the supposition that, for example, my meaning something determinate by the instruction "add 2" must consist in some fact about the meaning of the words "add 2" that in itself determines that 1002 must follow 1000, 1004 must follow, 1002, and so on. Rather, Wright suggests that we can glean an alternative account of how I could have meant what I did by the words "add 2" by looking at the concept of intention introduced above. In accusing you of failing to follow my instructions, and thus failing to grasp the meaning of "add 2" by writing 1004 after 1000, I may say in defence of my criticism of your response that I *intended* for you to write 1002 after 1000. What are we to make of this alleged state of intending that supposedly accompanied my issuing the instruction "add 2"? Before examining Wright's answer to this question, it is worth quoting the passage in which Wittgenstein deals explicitly with this issue.

"But I already knew, at the time when I gave the order, that he ought to write 1002 after 1000." - Certainly; and you can say you *meant* it then; only you should not let yourself be misled by the grammar of the words "know" and "mean." For you don't want to say that you thought of the step from 1000 to 1002 at that time - and even if you did think of this step, still you did not think of other ones. When you said "I already knew at the time....." that meant something like: "If I had then been asked what number should be written after 1000, I should have replied '1002'." (PI 187).

Wright's suggestion is that the best way to interpret this last sentence is to suppose that when a person means something by an expression and subsequently defends the way in which she meant it by saying that in uttering the expression she *intended* it to be

understood *this* way as opposed to *that*, what has to be true of her is that at the time the instruction was uttered, she had a certain disposition or complex of dispositions to react one way or another to the responses of the person to whom the instruction was given. Now it is important to note that the criteria according to which a third party can judge whether or not a person's claim to having had a particular intention is reasonable or not is comprised entirely of the person's behaviour *after* having issued the instruction in question. For example, if for some reason I disapprove of the writing of '1002' after 1000,' my claim to have intended that '1002' ought to follow '1000' cannot be reasonably accepted. The wider significance of this point with respect to Wright's position is that a person's claim to have intended or meant something by a specific utterance can be seen to have only a *constitutive* as opposed to a *descriptive* role.<sup>13</sup> In other words, when I say that in giving the instruction "add 2" I intended that '1002' should follow '1000,' I am not retroactively *describing* any actual mental state of affairs accompanying the instruction "add 2;" rather, I am expressing my disposition to act one way or another in connection with the instruction "add 2," and this dispositional story is *constituted* by how I actually do act.<sup>14</sup>

Wright puts the point another way. He says we can expect the following bi-conditional to hold:

---

<sup>13</sup> Wright "On Making Up One's Mind." 401.

<sup>14</sup> The sense of the word "disposition" that Wright employs is not equivalent to the sense of disposition that Kripke argues against in his book. As Wright uses the word in this context, a person's disposition to mean one thing or another is only provisionally attributed to him, pending subsequent ratification by other members of the linguistic community.

*X* intends that P if and only if *X* is disposed to avow the intention that P, and would be sincere in so doing, and fully grasps the content of that intention, and is prey to no material self-deception, and... and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Now, on what Wright calls the “detectivist” reading of this bi-conditional, the left hand side would serve to describe a “determinate state of affairs which, if all the provisos on the right hand side are met, the subject is able to *apprehend*.”<sup>16</sup> This, of course, is the picture that Wittgenstein wants to dispel, and that Kripke exposes as empty. On Wright’s favoured “non-detectivist” reading, however, the right side of the bi-conditional *constitutes* the state of affairs reported by the left side. *X* is not aware of any independent, *sui generis* mental state of intending or meaning; rather, she is moved to express what her intention was or what she meant, and if her subsequent behaviour fits this expression of her former intention, then her authority to claim to have intended such and such can be reasonably conceded.

We are now in a position to make sense of two important features of Wright’s interpretation that until now, I have merely hinted at. The first has to do with the fate of ‘objectivity of meaning’ as Wright conceives of it, and the second has to do with the aforementioned appeal to sub-rational propensities on the part of human beings to conform in their linguistic responses to certain stimuli. In the next section, I will address how these two features are intertwined in Wright’s work, setting the stage for a contrast with McDowell’s interpretation of the very same issues.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wright “On Making Up One’s Mind,” 401.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. WRIGHT ON BASIC JUDGMENTS AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF MEANING

Wright's working characterization of the objectivity of meaning is

the idea that meanings can somehow be constituted, once and for all, either within a community or by a single subject, by finitely many events - explanations, uses, episodes in consciousness - so that thereafter there is only the objective question of *fit* between new uses of the relevant expression and the meanings thereby laid down.<sup>17</sup>

Now, it should be easy to see why Wright's constitutive account of intention is not hospitable to such a notion of meaning. This is for the reason that "taking a non-detectivist view of a subject's avowal of a former intention involves taking the same view of his judgment about what, if anything, now implements or frustrates that intention"<sup>18</sup> In other words, all that can ever be said about what a person meant or intended by a prior expression is determined by how her *subsequent behaviour* fits or fails to fit the stated intention. Thus, on Wright's view, any notion of meaning that is not compatible with the perpetual need to look at ongoing linguistic behaviour in order to *constitute* or *determine* meaning is untenable.

In his paper entitled, "Rule Following, Meaning and Constructivism," Wright elaborates on his (and what he takes to be Wittgenstein's) polemic against objectivity of meaning. In this paper, his argument rests on an interpretation of a well-known line of thinking in Wittgenstein's later philosophy which is encapsulated in remark 242 of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Wright "On Making Up One's Mind," 403.

<sup>18</sup> Wright "On Making Up One's Mind," 402.



*Investigations*: “if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments.” There is, according to Wittgenstein, a fundamental level at which widespread agreement among language-users is a necessary precondition for the expression of opinions, and for the people expressing them to be considered language-users at all. In the course of communication, we, roughly speaking, convey information to one another by describing various states of affairs. In so doing, we unconsciously operate according to a shared framework of *standards* of description that make up the basic level of agreement upon which we can construct higher-level descriptions of the world. This idea is captured nicely in an illuminating passage from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*:

Someone asks me: What is the colour of this flower? I answer: “red.” - Are you absolutely sure? Yes, absolutely sure! But may I have not have been deceived and called the wrong colour “red”? No. The certainty with which I call the colour “red” is the rigidity of my measuring-rod, it is the rigidity from which I start. When I give descriptions, *that* is not to be brought into doubt. This simply characterizes what we call describing. (*RFM*, vi-28).

This aspect of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is crucial with respect to his views on meaning and truth. I will have more to say about the concept of agreement in the next chapter. With respect to the present discussion, however, it will soon become clear that the differing conclusions of Wright and McDowell stem largely from their contrasting interpretation of this talk of agreement in judgments. Having said this, let us turn to what Wright makes of these so-called “basic judgments,” in the hopes of seeing how his view of them influences his stance on the objectivity of meaning.

Wright is of the opinion that when Wittgenstein speaks of agreement in judgments,

he is implying that there is a special class of judgments, “those which we make responsively, without articulated reasons, under the causal impact of those aspects of our environment which we can most directly perceive.”<sup>19</sup> These judgments are manifested in what Wright calls “recognition statements” - statements “composed purely of demonstratives, predicates, and relations of arbitrary degree, of which a competent use standardly presupposes no more than normal sensory capacities and ostensive teaching.”<sup>20</sup> Examples include “that is red,” “that is salty,” etc. Now, Wright is concerned with preserving an account of how such statements can be determined to be correct or incorrect in virtue of the states of affairs that make up their subject matter. His general thesis is that if we conceive of meanings as being objective in the sense outlined at the beginning of this section, we will be unable to make sense of our intuitive notion of how someone could be correct or incorrect about the truth of a basic recognitional statement. His argument goes roughly like this.

If we are to suppose that there is a genuine factual subject matter about which basic judgments could be right or wrong, it is a necessary condition that our sensitivity to the states of affairs we are talking about be fallible. Wright puts it this way: “if a class of statements are to be credited with objectivity of judgment<sup>21</sup>, then, for arbitrarily chosen P in that class, there has to be an appropriate contrast between

(a) *X* believes that P is true; and

---

<sup>19</sup> Wright, “Rule Following, Meaning and Constructivism,” 276.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, “Rule Following, Meaning and Constructivism,” 277.

<sup>21</sup> Not to be confused with ‘objectivity of meaning.’

(b) P is true.”<sup>22</sup>

Were there no possibility of such a distinction, it would be logically impossible for anyone to be in error with regards to the truth-status of a basic judgment, for the reason that whatever seemed right to someone would be right, “and that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’”(PI 258). Now, if we claim that our meanings are objective, Wright thinks we face the unfortunate conclusion that the truth or falsity of basic statements “comes to transcend our strongest standard grounds for affirming them to be one or the other.” This is because a correct employment of a basic concept - one that involves a true recognitional statement - will, on the view that meanings are objective, be true *in virtue of* its being in accord with the pattern of application dictated by the antecedently-set objective meaning. It should be evident, then, that the requirement that there must be an appropriate contrast between *X* believing that P is true and P actually being true cannot be met on this model of objective meanings. This is because the matter of whether or not the use of the concept involved in the recognitional statement “P” is in accord with its meaning (a necessary condition for us to suppose that P is true) is *independent of any potential ratification*. That is to say, it depends solely on whether *X*’s current use of the concept is in line with what *X* takes to be the meaning of the concept; and this, for the reason that whatever the meaning *seems* to be for *X* will effectively *be* the meaning, fails to provide the resources for the necessary contrast. The upshot of this picture of the objectivity of meaning is that it makes the fact that there most certainly *is*

---

<sup>22</sup> Wright, “Rule-Following, Meaning and Constructivism,” 282.

widespread agreement with respect to basic judgments seem mysterious. As Wright puts it, “it reduces our belief in our competence to use our own language correctly to a matter of faith.”<sup>23</sup> Wright concludes that we should reject objectivity of meaning, and instead see the meanings of basic concepts as perpetually being constituted by agreements with respect to the ongoing employment of these concepts. The following passage sums up Wright’s line of thinking on these matters:

To reject objectivity of meaning for basic statements is to come to regard their content, and so their truth status, as ever open to ongoing determination by our linguistic behaviour... [W]e should view [the competent use of basic vocabulary] as an expression of certain basic reactive propensities, primitive classificatory dispositions - a common human (or at least cultural) heritage without which our language would fail.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. McDOWELL ON “RECOGNIZING THE GROUND AS THE GROUND” (OR, WHAT’S WRONG WITH WRIGHT)

McDowell’s chief concern with Wright’s approach to the matter of *meaning and intention* is that it seems to sacrifice what he takes to be our intuitive notions of how meanings exert normative constraints. You will recall that Wright develops arguments to the effect that when we understand the meaning of a concept, we have not thereby entered into a “conceptual contract” according to which future applications of the concept are to be judged as correct or incorrect. Rather, the ongoing linguistic behaviour of language users has to be seen as relevant with respect to making sense of any claims to

---

<sup>23</sup> Wright, “Rule-Following, Meaning and Constructivism,” 289.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, “Rule-Following, Meaning and Constructivism,” 289.

have meant or intended one thing or another by an expression. Put simply, for Wright, the interpretation of the notions of meaning and intention “has to be compatible with the capacity of ongoing use to determine meaning.”<sup>25</sup> But what does this involve? Well, presumably Wright would say something like this: when I employ the word “red,” say, in the phrase “Bring me a red flower,” and you bring me a yellow flower, I may respond by saying “no, I meant a *red* one, like *this*,” pointing to the poppy on my lapel (it’s Remembrance Day). Provided the lighting conditions are suitable, etc., Wright’s point is that any reasonable member of my linguistic community would concede, on the basis of my pointing to the poppy, that what I indeed *meant* or *intended* by my initial request was for you to bring me a flower the colour of my poppy (a *red* one!), and that a yellow flower does not meet this criterion. In this way, the meaning of the concept red is *open*; and my claim to have meant one thing or another is subject to and constituted by my ongoing use of the word.

But what has to be going on for other members of my linguistic community to ratify my basic judgments as to what is or is not red? For Wright, the answer lies in our “basic reactive propensities” to agree in judgments, and these depend on nothing more than primitive recognitional capacities. And it is this view of what is ‘going on’ at the most basic linguistic level - the level at which agreement in judgments allows for the very possibility of language, that McDowell thinks is misleading. Here is why.

There is no doubt about there being a level of description at which human beings

---

<sup>25</sup> Wright, “Rule-Following, Meaning and Constructivism.” 274.

can be seen as vocalizing in certain ways in response to certain stimuli. Furthermore, there are presumably correspondences in these propensities of fellow members of a linguistic community to vocalize, and to feel comfortable in doing so, “that are unsurprising in the light of their belonging to a single species, together with similarities in the training that gave them the propensities.”<sup>26</sup> The problem, however, with invoking this picture of the most basic level of linguistic behaviour as a means to construct a story about how a person could have meant something determinate by a past utterance, is that it makes no room for norms. Wright is essentially saying that the fact that reasonable speakers of a language, due to similarities in their recognitional capacities, simply agree that “this is red” under certain conditions is both necessary and sufficient to give content to the claim that “when I said bring me a red flower, I intended for you to bring me one coloured like *this*.” This is his point about the need to see the meanings of basic concepts as open to determination by ongoing linguistic behaviour. Wright’s motivation for this approach is, of course, the perceived need to preserve an account of the sense of statements like the above one in the wake of Kripke’s assault on the notion that a fact could be appealed to as in itself determining whether I meant one thing or another by an utterance. The problem with Wright’s view, though, is that the very idea of any sort of normative aspect to meaning is in danger of dropping out of the picture altogether. It could be said in the spirit of Wright’s interpretation of Wittgenstein that “when we follow rules, we don’t perceive

---

<sup>26</sup> McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 235.

their requirements; we *decide* them.”<sup>27</sup>

As a reading of Wittgenstein, Wright’s approach is difficult to square with remarks such as the following:

Following according to the rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game. It characterizes what we call description. (*RFM vi-28*).

Following a rule is a human activity. (*RFM vi-29*).

These remarks suggest that at the basic level of our agreement in what Wright calls basic judgments, we are not just “vocalizing in step” (to borrow a phrase from McDowell); we are in fact *following rules*.

Wright thinks that our only options with respect to making sense of the meaning of basic concepts are to either (a) accept the objectivity of meaning as he describes it (and the mystery surrounding how we understand one another that goes with it); or (b) treat the content of basic statements “and so their truth status, as ever open to ongoing determination by our linguistic behaviour.” But to take this position is to miss Wittgenstein’s crucial point about our agreement in judgments about, say, what is red: “The *certainty* with which I call the colour “red” is the rigidity of my measuring-rod, it is the rigidity from which I start.” What, then, could it mean for the truth status of statements like “this is red” to be open to future re-appraisal? In *PI* 429, Wittgenstein writes

The agreement, the harmony, of thought and reality consists in this: if I say

---

<sup>27</sup> Finkelstein, David. “Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism” in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000) 58.

falsely that something is *red*, then, for all that, it isn't *red*. And when I want to explain the word "red" to someone, in the sentence "that is not red," I do it by pointing to something red.

So when I say falsely that something is red, it is because *the thing is not red* that my statement is false; not because any judgment about what I meant by the word "red" was subsequently cast into doubt by the judgments of my peers. And the certainty with which I call the thing red is the rigidity from which I start. In suggesting that the truth status of basic statements involving concepts like red must be seen as open to ongoing determination, Wright is implying that there might be a 'fluidity' to what we call red. That is to say, he is implying that what we call "red" today might not be what we called "red" at some point in the past, or, for that matter, might not be what we call "red" at some point in the future. Of course, we have no way of knowing, since the only normative measure we have is the agreement of the linguistic community. Hence, on this way of thinking, it is to that agreement that we must ultimately appeal in attributing normativity to statements like "no, I meant a *red* flower." In taking this approach, however, (and this is a crucial point), Wright implies the intelligibility of the thought that there is something at a sub-linguistic level to which our calling something red is reducible - something in our primitive reactive propensities. But, his argument continues, since it is logically impossible for us to manifest to our understanding what this might be apart from what *seems* red, the meaning of "red" cannot be objective in *any* sense (it can't be based on our propensity to 'get it right' at this sub-linguistic level); it must be perpetually determined by ongoing use. It is precisely this manoeuvre that leads McDowell to accuse Wright of misconstruing what Wittgenstein means by agreement in judgments, and the basic level of linguistic behaviour



in general.

On this matter, Wittgenstein offers us the following illuminating metaphor:

To what extent can the function of a rule be described? Someone who is master of none, I can only train. But how can I explain the nature of a rule to myself?

The difficult thing here is not, to dig down to the ground; no, it is to recognize the ground that lies before us as the ground. (*RFM vi-31*).

Simply put, McDowell's diagnosis of Wright's mistake is that Wright does not recognize the ground *as the ground*. The ground is what is fundamental to the language-game, and Wittgenstein clearly thinks it involves the idea of following a rule (see *RFM vi-28*). The ground for Wright, on the other hand, is further down: it is the basic propensity of humans to respond in the same way to the same recognitional stimuli. From this agreement, on Wright's view, rules are retroactively constructed. For McDowell (and in light of remarks such as "the phenomena of agreement and of acting according to a rule hang together" (*RFM vi-41*), for Wittgenstein as well) agreement and rule-following give rise to and mutually sustain one another. I will be elaborating on this point in the next chapter. For now, the following question must be asked: if (as Kripke, following Wittgenstein has shown) a rule can be *interpreted* in an infinite number of ways and thus cannot *in and of itself* determine any future action, in what sense can the widespread agreement regarding, say, what is red, be a manifestation of rule-following? Wittgenstein's answer, on McDowell's view, is that *following a rule is a matter of acting in accordance with a custom, practice or institution*.<sup>28</sup> ("A person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there

---

<sup>28</sup> McDowell, "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule." 242.

exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom”[PI 198]).

In light of what has been said so far, it might be tempting to think that the notion of a custom has to do a lot of work. After all, it must make it conceivable that a linguistic community’s collective agreement that a thing is red is not a matter of (a) the coinciding of their respective interpretive faculties, *or* (b) the coinciding of their blind reactions to the same stimuli. We can relieve the notion of a custom of this apparent philosophical burden, however, if we come to see these other options as being compelling only as the result of a misconception. This is essentially McDowell’s point when he says that Wittgenstein’s target is not “the very idea that a present state of understanding embodies commitments with respect to the future, but rather a certain seductive misconception of that idea.”<sup>29</sup> The misconception is that my present understanding of the meaning of a concept could only embody future commitments if the meaning was objective in the rampantly platonistic sense with which Wright is concerned. McDowell’s strategy is to join Wright in rejecting the idea that “assigning a meaning to an utterance by a speaker of one’s own language is forming a hypothesis about something concealed behind the surface of his linguistic behaviour.”<sup>30</sup> McDowell diverges from Wright, however, in wanting to reject the conception of the surface of linguistic behaviour that he thinks Wright shares with the position from which he is recoiling, and which is embodied in the view that

people’s sharing a language is constituted by appropriate correspondences in their dispositions to linguistic behaviour, as characterized without

---

<sup>29</sup> McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 223.

<sup>30</sup> McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 249.

drawing on command of the language, and hence not in terms of the contents of their utterance.<sup>31</sup>

As an alternative, McDowell proposes that “the outward aspect of linguistic behaviour - what a speaker makes available to others - *must be characterized in terms of the contents of the utterances* (the thoughts they express)”(my italics).<sup>32</sup> On this idea, Wittgenstein himself writes: “If it is asked: ‘How do sentences manage to represent,’ - the answer might be: ‘Don’t you know? You certainly see it when you use them. For nothing is concealed’”(PI 435). We are now in a position to understand the claim that the notion of custom need not bear a philosophical load. There is widespread communal agreement concerning judgments about what is red not because we all either blindly apply that concept in response to the same stimuli or have all succeeded in grasping the right interpretation of the rule for how to use the word “red.” Rather, we have all been trained in the technique and initiated into the custom of saying things such as “this is red,” “this is not red,” and “Red!” appropriately according to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The thought, meaning or intention of any utterance, on this view, is wholly embodied and exhausted by the utterance itself as a significant move in a language-game that competent speakers have mastered the technique of playing. It does not need to be constituted by appeal to subsequent linguistic behaviour.

I will have more to say about the concept of language as a technique in chapter two. For now, we have established that a rule can be followed without being interpreted

---

<sup>31</sup> McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 249.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

and that the content or meaning of an utterance need not be thought of as something that either “lies behind” the utterance in the speaker’s mind, or as something that requires philosophical construction by appeal to subsequent linguistic behaviour. McDowell claims that looking at rule-following and meaning in this way makes it unproblematic to think of understanding a meaning as grasping a pattern of future application. It is to this matter that I shall now turn.

#### 5. McDOWELL ON GRASPING A PATTERN OF APPLICATION

Wright’s polemic against objectivity of meaning was intended to undermine any sort of “contractual” view of meaning, according to which grasping the meaning of a word implies a grasp of the rules for future application. McDowell’s response was to question whether any normative aspect to meaning could be salvaged from a view like Wright’s in which rules are not so much followed as they are retroactively decided. The task for McDowell, then, is to give an account of how a rule can be grasped in such a way that it embodies a pattern of application for a linguistic sign, yet avoids the pitfalls of the sort of objectivity of meaning that Wright attacks.

The inspiration for McDowell’s approach to this task is epitomized in the following passage from *PI* 195:

“But I don’t mean that what I do now (in grasping a sense) determines the future use *causally* and as a matter of experience, but that in a *queer* way, the use itself is in some sense present.” - But of course it is, ‘in *some* sense’! Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression “in a queer way.” The rest is all right.

Wittgenstein clearly does not want to discredit the phenomenological experience of

“grasping” a sense or meaning, and the idea that this grasping involves the employment of a certain relevant “know-how” with respect to the pattern of application of a concept.

The important distinction that needs to be made, then, is between the benign sense of grasping a meaning which Wittgenstein does not deny, and the philosophically-challenging sense of grasping a meaning that seems to determine future use “in a queer way.”

McDowell’s view is that Wright, in rejecting the notion of ratification-independent patterns of meaning altogether is overlooking Wittgenstein’s stipulation that following rules - following sign-posts in the ways we have been trained to follow them - lies at the fundamental level of our language-games. Since, for Wright, initiation into a common language first and foremost involves the propensity of the members of a linguistic community to respond in the same way to the same stimuli (call the same things “red,” for example), the idea that the meaning of a word like “red” could be objectively fixed is untenable. This, as we saw in section three, is because such a notion of objective meaning would require that the word “red,” in order to be used correctly in accordance with its meaning, would have to be used in accordance with a pattern dictated by the connection between past utterances of the word and the states of affairs that, independent of human contributions, make the utterances true or false. In this way, the meaning of the word “red” would be fixed independently of how people might actually go on to use it. Now Wright, McDowell and Wittgenstein would all agree that objectivity of meaning in this sense is an unacceptable philosophical position. But Wittgenstein, on McDowell’s reading, thinks that this unacceptable conclusion is tempting only if one fails to respect the idea that the most basic level of linguistic behaviour is describable in normative terms; that

the reason we all call the same things red is because we have been trained into the custom of calling these things red. And the *certainty* with which we call things red (see *RFM* vi-28) is not jeopardized by the possibility that we are not calling the same things red that we used to. We may not be able to *justify* our calling something red; that is, we may not be able to assume an external or “sideways-on” point of view from which to evaluate our judgments of what is and is not red according to the standard of how past judgments have been related to the states of affairs they are describing. But this is not due to any shortcoming on our part with respect to understanding how our language functions. Wittgenstein writes, “to use a word without justification does not mean to use it without right” (*PI* 289). Having a right to use a word implies a normative dimension. Hence, by saying this he means that our use of basic vocabulary in making the judgments upon which we all agree is normatively governed by our collective initiation into the custom of following certain sign-posts in certain ways.

On this view, then, grasping a meaning can embody grasping a future pattern of application simply in virtue of the fact that in doing so, one acquires a new skill with respect to the manipulation of a linguistic sign in a language-game. After I have been trained sufficiently as to when and where and how it is appropriate to employ a particular expression, I am equipped to both hear meaning in the utterance of the expression by someone else, as well as to apply the expression myself in the relevant situations. Not because of an interpretation of a rule for the expression’s application, or because of a blind reaction on my part; but rather because, as McDowell says

hearing a word in one sense rather than another is hearing it in some

position rather than another in the network of possible patterns of making sense that we learn to find ourselves in when we acquire mastery of a language.<sup>33</sup>

In *PI* 191, Wittgenstein responds again to his exasperated interlocutor who remarks “it is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash.” Wittgenstein says,

Like *what* e.g.? - Can't the use - in a certain sense - be grasped in a flash? And in *what* sense can it not? - The point is, that it is as if we could ‘grasp it in a flash’ in yet another and much more direct sense than that. - But do you have a model for this? No. It is just that this expression suggests itself to us. (*PI* 191).

The “much more direct sense” to which Wittgenstein is referring has to do with the idea of a set of fixed rules that accompany the grasping of the sense. It would indeed be queer to think that in grasping the meaning of a word, we grasp the associated catalogue of the totality of potential ways in which it can be used. If we do away with this picture, however, and concentrate on seeing the grasping of a meaning as a manifestation of mastering a technique of following signs in customary ways, then the idea that we grasp the use of a word in a flash becomes innocuous. For the ability to use the word as a component of the technique is all that our understanding the meaning of the word amounts to. Again, I will have more to say about this theme in chapter two.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I would like to say a bit more about some of the implications that can be drawn from the idea, fundamental to a “therapeutic” reading of Wittgenstein, that our utterances themselves exhaust everything that could

---

<sup>33</sup> McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 260.

possibly count as their content or meaning. I want to expand on the idea that what we present to others in the various forms of outward linguistic behaviour are not merely surface symptoms of our *actual* meanings which require philosophical work to pinpoint, but are in fact the vehicles of meaning themselves.

## 6. SEEING AND HEARING MEANINGS

Wittgenstein writes,

If I give anyone an order I feel it to be *quite enough* to give him signs. And I should never say: this is only words, and I have got to get behind the words. Equally, when I have asked someone something and he gives me an answer (i.e. a sign) I am content - that was what I expected - and I don't raise the objection: but that's a mere answer. (*PI* 503).

This passage is but one of many littered throughout the *Investigations* in which Wittgenstein stresses the point that linguistic signs are not mere “middle men” when it comes to the meaningful transmission of linguistic content; the signs, in their use, *are* the meaning. In this section, I would like to focus on Wittgenstein's analogy between words or expressions and sign-posts, in the hopes of enriching what has been said so far on the topics of meaning and rule-following.

The idea that the meaning of a word is tantamount to its use in a language is arguably the predominant theme running through the *Investigations*. But what are we to make of this claim? The protean approach that Wittgenstein takes to discussing this idea should suggest that it is not being put forth as a theory to be explored along side other so-called ‘theories of meaning.’ Nevertheless, the importance of the remarks related to this issue must not be underestimated with respect to Wittgenstein's general aims.



As we saw earlier, Wittgenstein wants to “cure” us of the notion that it is puzzling how “sentences manage to represent” - how sentences, mere sounds or ink-marks, manage to convey the meanings that we are tempted to think must lie behind them. To think it is a mystery, Wittgenstein says, can only be the result of a confusion, for “nothing is concealed.”

Consider the interlocutor’s reply to this claim, which is to say “yes, but it all goes by so quick, and I should like to see it as it were laid open to view”(PI 435).

Wittgenstein’s response to this is especially illuminating:

Here it is easy to get into that dead-end in philosophy, where one believes that the difficulty of the task consists in our having to describe phenomena that are hard to get a hold of, the present experience that slips quickly by, or something of the kind. Where we find ordinary language too crude, and it looks as if we were having to do, not with the phenomena of every day, but with ones that “easily elude us, and, in their coming to be and passing away, produce those others as an average effect.”(PI 436).

What Wittgenstein is saying is that an important source of our misdirection in philosophy stems from the desire to “lay things open to view” by “removing” sentences from the context of the ordinary practice of language so that they may be philosophically-dissected in the hopes of constructing an explanation of how they “do what they do.” The problem with this approach is that when we study fragments of language in isolation, having lifted them from their role in the language-game, all we have are dead signs. “Every sign *by itself* seems dead. What gives it life? - In use it is *alive*”(PI 432).

So when we look for an explanation of meaning in this way, it is easy to see how we could succumb to the idea that for a sign to have any sort of significance, it must be *interpreted* one way or another. We then, of course, face the fact that “any interpretation

still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support”(PI 198); and so we turn, as Wright does, to constructive philosophy in an effort to make sense of our intuitive feeling that *words have meanings*. Yet the major point that was to be garnered from the previous section was that the rules dictated by linguistic signs (and hence, for all intents and purposes, the meanings) can be grasped in a way that does not require the picture of a sign-post being interpreted as meaning one thing or another. Importantly, this way of grasping rules cannot be made apparent if we are intent on examining sentences outside of the network of signs that make up the language-game within which they have significance (“Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it”[PI 144]). This is because the signs only have meaning when they are “alive,” when they play a role in a language game. Wittgenstein writes, “a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom”(PI 198). This is why meanings appear fleeting. Meaning is manifested in the course of communication, in the recognition of signs according to which we have been trained into the custom of responding in certain ways. (“Only in the practice of a language can a word have meaning”[RFM vi-41]).

It is important to note that only one who is a master of a language (or at least master of a particular language-game) can hear or see meanings in utterances and ink-marks. This distinction between the level of master and that of the language-user in training is an important one for Wittgenstein, and he frequently exploits examples that focus on the learning of a language as a means of elucidating his ideas about meaning. “If a person has not yet got the concepts,” Wittgenstein writes, “I shall teach him to use the

words by means of *examples* and by *practice*. - And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself”(PI 208). The point here is that all there is to my understanding of certain concepts is that I know how to use them; I know the posts where they are stationed in the network of signs that make up the language-game. In teaching someone how to use the concepts I am not trying to get the person to “*guess* the essential thing”(PI 210), but rather I am training her to follow sign-posts in the same way I and the other participants in my custom do.

Now, I introduced the matter of training in the hopes that it might help to clarify the more general theme I have been discussing: that of how we can be persuaded to comfortably accept that we simply see and hear meanings in each other’s words.

McDowell writes,

shared membership in a linguistic community is not just a matter of matching in aspects of an exterior that we present to anyone whatever, but equips us to make our minds available to one another, by confronting one another with a different exterior from that which we present to outsiders.<sup>34</sup>

Until one has been initiated into the custom of following signs in a particular way, one is effectively an outsider. She will not see the “life” or the meaning in the signs. Another way of putting this point (glossed in the above passage from McDowell) is to say that she will not see or hear the *aspect* of the sign that one who is master of the language will see. Without going into great detail regarding Wittgenstein’s discussion of “aspect-seeing” in Part II of the *Investigations*, it is worth noting that fairly explicit connections can be

---

<sup>34</sup> McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 251.

drawn between the notion of seeing an aspect in a picture (e.g. the duck-rabbit [see *PI* Pt.II, p. 194]) and seeing or hearing a meaning in a linguistic sign. I will turn now to a brief discussion of the relationship between aspect-seeing and the grasping of meaning, which will lead us, as promised, into my remarks regarding *PI* 524.

Roughly half-way into his discussion of aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein writes “the importance of this concept lies in the connection between the concepts of ‘seeing an aspect’ and ‘experiencing the meaning of a word’” (*PI* Pt.II, p.213). We can think of pictures like the duck-rabbit as being akin to linguistic sign-posts - written words and sounds. Examined in isolation, the duck-rabbit can be *interpreted* as representing a duck, or a rabbit (or an infinite number of other things). But to one for whom the picture has a special significance with respect to a certain practice, it is not difficult to see that such a person will automatically *see* the picture in a particular way and react to it accordingly. For one whose job it is, say, to tally the number of ducks in a particular marsh and indicate the results under a column designated by what we have been calling the duck-rabbit picture, it will be taken for granted that the picture *is of a duck*. And that is because she has mastered a technique of customarily following, reacting to, and generally having an attitude towards the sign in a particular way.<sup>35</sup> “It is only if someone *can do*, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say he has had *this* experience” (*PI* Pt.II,

---

<sup>35</sup> It is possible, I suppose, that she could see the picture as a rabbit, and it would not impede her practice. This would be an example of a “systematic” mistake as opposed to a “random” one, in which case we might be tempted to say she “has understood *wrong*” (*PI* 143). The point is, she is continuously seeing the same aspect, it has significance for her, and it works. Compare *PI* 144, in which Wittgenstein discusses the case of a pupil who has “understood wrong”: “I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his how being able to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*.”

p.209). With respect to linguistic signs, they ‘take on meanings’ for those who have mastered the technique of following and employing them in the customary ways that make up a language. Stephen Mulhall writes, “the sound aspect of words can dawn on someone precisely because she directly perceives the written and spoken elements of language as meaningful words and sentences, not as sounds or marks in need of interpretation.”<sup>36</sup>

To leave it at this, however, would be to ignore a central feature of what Wittgenstein’s talk of aspect-seeing is all about. The hallmark of aspect-seeing is that we can see pictures like the duck-rabbit sometimes *as* a duck and sometimes *as* a rabbit, while the picture itself never changes. Again, looking at the picture in isolation, it seems appropriate to say that we are interpreting it at once as a duck, then as a rabbit, etc. But when the sign is part of a practice (this time, say, the practice of tallying the number of rabbits in a field), we do not want to say that the sign is being interpreted. This idea has clear ramifications for the multifarious shades of meaning (and sometimes outright different meanings) that individual words can have in a language. There is no question as to what my friend means by the utterance “I’ll meet you down by the bank” when we are sitting on a hill that slopes down to a river; likewise, there is no question what she means by uttering the very same words on a busy urban street corner.<sup>37</sup> As a master of English, I hear the appropriate aspects of the word “bank” in their respective contexts, and this is

---

<sup>36</sup> Mulhall, Stephen. “Seeing Aspects” in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 256.

<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that interpretations or explanations are *never* required. They are required and useful. Wittgenstein says, when it comes to averting misunderstandings. The point is that in normal circumstances interpretations are not necessary. “The sign-post is in order - if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose” (*PI* 87).

due to my training in the use of this sign in different contexts. Of a picture that can have more than one aspect, Wittgenstein writes

the colour of the visual impression corresponds to the colour of the object (the blotting paper looks pink to me, and is pink) - the shape of the visual impression to the shape of the object (it looks rectangular to me, and is rectangular) - but what I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects. (*PI* Pt.II, p.212).

In this way, the word “bank,” as a sound or marks on paper, never changes; but the way I perceive it - the meaning that it embodies - is contingent on the circumstances in which it is being used, and how these circumstances relate to those in which I was trained to follow the sign this way or that. I will have more to say on the “multiple meanings” of certain words in chapter two.

We can exploit the comparison between experiencing the meaning of a word<sup>38</sup> and seeing an aspect to make more sense of some important differences between the views of Wright and McDowell. In *PI* 139, Wittgenstein writes “when someone says the word “cube” to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it in this way?” Wright wants to say that I can grasp the meaning of the word, but that this fact must be conceived as being constituted by my subsequent linguistic behaviour; by my ongoing use of the word in such a way as to

---

<sup>38</sup> Here I must stress that meanings *as things-in-themselves* are not experienced. Wittgenstein writes, “meaning is as little an experience as intending. But what distinguishes them from experience? - They have no experience-content. For the contents (images for instance) which accompany and illustrate them are not the meaning or intending” (*PI* Pt.II, p.217). Thus, it is linguistic signs that are perceived and thus, in a sense “experienced,” and their meanings are manifested in the fact that language-users recognize and follow them in customary ways.

ratify my claim to have understood it “in this way.”<sup>39</sup> On the view which I am advocating, however, I believe we can make sense of McDowell’s reading of *PI* 139, which suggests that Wittgenstein sees nothing problematic about a sense in which the “whole use of the word” is grasped in one’s understanding of the word “cube.”<sup>40</sup>

In *PI* 139, Wittgenstein deliberately chooses the example of a cube so as to show the pitfalls of trying to explain meaning on the basis of interpretation. In the process of learning the word “cube,” we are likely taught to use the word in the presence of objects that we would call cubes. Now, if I hear the word “cube” and the picture of a cube comes before my mind (which is certainly possible), Wittgenstein wants to stress that on the interpretation model, the mere picture of a cube cannot be relied upon to determine the meaning of the word; there is, he points out, an obvious method of projection according to which the picture could be interpreted as a triangular prism. But this worry can be averted if we think of the training involved in teaching one the word “cube” - which will involve various examples of ways in which the word is used. For one who has learned the word (i.e. mastered the technique of using it), then, a picture may very well come before her mind. We need not worry about it being indeterminate, however, because the *aspect* seen will be that of a cube. And so the whole use of the word, as it pertains to this particular aspect (either the sound aspect of the word “cube” or the aspect of the mental picture that may, but need not, accompany it) *can* come before my mind, but this use does not involve

---

<sup>39</sup> See Wright, “On Making Up One’s Mind,” 398.

<sup>40</sup> See McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 258.

anything more than my recognition of a sign-post that is a component part of a game that I know how to play; a sign-post embodying rules that constrain my next move. (“A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction”[*PI* 525]).

Here, the objection might be made that upon hearing the word “cube,” I may think I know what is meant by it, when in fact the speaker is referring to, say, a mathematical function that I have yet to encounter. If I go on to apply the word incorrectly as a result of my mistake, it might appear to lend strength to Wright’s insistence upon making the truth of my claim to have understood a meaning contingent on my subsequent behaviour. In response to this objection, two things need to be said. First, we would need to conceive of a set of circumstances under which such a miscommunication might occur (if I am in a classroom and my teacher asks me to “cube the number on the blackboard,” I am not likely to hear the same aspect in the word “cube” that I would if someone asked me to “pass the sugar-cubes.” More likely, I will be dumbfounded, not knowing what to do). And second, the fact that such breakdowns may occur in certain cases should not lead us to doubt that meanings can be grasped directly in the vast number of cases in which “the use of a word is clearly prescribed”(PI 142).<sup>41</sup> David Finkelstein illustrates this point in the following passage:

A child might misunderstand the instruction, “Beat six egg whites until stiff

---

<sup>41</sup> “It is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly prescribed; we know, are in no doubt, what to say in this or that case. The more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say. And if things were quite different from what they actually are - if there were for instance no characteristic expression of pain, of fear, of joy; if rule became exception and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of equal frequency - this would make our normal language-games lose their point”(PI 142). Also: “The sign-post is in order - if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose”(PI 87).



peaks form.” (She might have no idea that eggs can be separated. She might think “stiff” means *stiff as a board*.) It doesn’t follow that *I* need an interpretation in order to understand these words when I encounter them in a cookbook. For me, there is no gulf between such an instruction and what it requires; I see what it calls for - without the need for interpretation or explanation.<sup>42</sup>

## 7. THE ADEQUACY OF LANGUAGE AND THE SUBLIMITY OF ART

The overarching theme of this chapter has been that our words and sentences, as we hear and read them, disclose all there is to their meanings simply in virtue of being signs that are followed and employed in customary ways. Against the perceived need to use constructive philosophy to explain how we manage to understand the meanings of a speaker’s words (“which after all are just sounds”), Wittgenstein could not be more to the point in saying “and how can the process of understanding have been hidden, when I said “Now I understand” *because* I understood?! And if I say it is hidden - then how do I know what I have to look for? I am in a muddle”(PI 153). Armed with this new-found confidence in our debunked ability to meaningfully engage in linguistic behaviour, we are in a position to offer a reading of one of the more obscure passages in Part I of the *Investigations*:

Don’t take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds.

(“Don’t take it as a matter of course” means: find it surprising, as you do some things which disturb you. Then the puzzling aspect of the latter will disappear, by your accepting this fact as you do the other.)

((The transition from patent nonsense to something which is disguised nonsense)).(PI 524).

---

<sup>42</sup> Finkelstein, 65.

I take it that Wittgenstein is addressing this to us, the philosophers who are tempted to find it surprising that words manage to carry meanings at all. If we find it a remarkable fact that fictional narratives seem to carry some sort of “deep meaning” by striking emotional chords in us, Wittgenstein says it will make the puzzling aspect of how simple signs manage to bear linguistic significance disappear. What is he on about? I think Wittgenstein is saying that in contemplating the artistic or aesthetic significance of certain examples of language (poems, novels, etc.), we take for granted that the individual words and sentences have sense in the way that troubles philosophers. I do not ponder the *meaning* of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s prose because I am troubled by how I manage to understand the English words he uses. The fact that certain arrangements of signs, which we have been trained to follow in ways that are simply “part of our natural history”(see *PI* 25), *do* manage to have deep, affective significance for us *is* a remarkable fact.

We must be careful not to draw the wrong conclusions from this, however. That is, we must not think that art, in any form, embodies meanings that our language is somehow too crude or ill-equipped to capture in description.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, Wittgenstein’s remarks are liberating. Our stumbling and stammering through an attempt to describe how a piece of music makes us feel is not a case of lacking the resources with which to say what we want to say. Our language is o.k., and the remarkable nature of art

---

<sup>43</sup> Compare *PI* 610: “I should like to say: “These notes say something glorious, but I do not know what.” These notes are a powerful gesture, but I cannot put anything side by side with it that will serve as an explanation. A grave nod. James: “Our vocabulary is inadequate.” Then why don’t we introduce a new one? What would have to be the case for us to be able to?”

that we try to describe is a feature of this language. “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life”(PI 19), and our form of life includes being, from time to time, awestruck and speechless in response to art. Wittgenstein’s point is that our language reflects this accordingly, and is perfectly in order in doing so.

## CHAPTER 2: LANGUAGE, FORMS OF LIFE AND THE END OF EXPLANATIONS

The goal of the second chapter will be to explore a potential complication facing the Wittgensteinian view of meaning and language that was expounded in chapter one. I shall call this potential complication the “sign-post paradox.” I am not suggesting that Wittgenstein himself thinks that this paradox exists - he is of course famous for eschewing philosophical perplexity about how we manage to carry out basic human activities such as communicating meaningfully with one another using language. On the contrary, I am suggesting that if we do not completely follow through with him on his program of exposing the futility of trying to understand how we grasp meaning on the model of interpretation, we encounter the risk of another paradox.<sup>44</sup>

Now, “following through” with Wittgenstein’s program is tricky to do, if for no other reason than that the conclusions it entails are far from clear, and have been interpreted numerous ways by a wide variety of scholars. Thus, the aim of this chapter is perhaps better understood as an attempt to give more shape to the rationale for Wittgenstein’s invocation of vague concepts like “forms of life,” and the point at which

---

<sup>44</sup> The first paradox is the one famously depicted by Wittgenstein in PI 201: “This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.” Wittgenstein of course goes on to imply that this paradox need not be taken as a serious philosophical hurdle to overcome, because there is a way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation. The purpose of this chapter is to understand the sense in which this alternate account of grasping a rule manages to avoid being crippled by a paradox of its own.

“explanations come to an end.” Because I shall endeavour to speak more explicitly about concepts that he may have intentionally remained vague about, I cannot be sure that Wittgenstein himself would advocate my conclusions. I shall thus present them as my own, though undeniably influenced by Wittgenstein as well as by his commentators whose work I address.

### 1. STATEMENT OF THE SIGN-POST PARADOX

In the last chapter we saw how, in normal cases, meaning is manifested in the act of speakers and hearers employing and reacting to linguistic signs in the customary manner in which they have been trained - nothing more, nothing less. In its use, a sign (a verbal sound or written ink-mark) has meaning in virtue of playing a significant role in a language-game. That is, the posts at which various words are stationed within a network of signs that make up a language-game are recognized as familiar by masters of the language-game in question, and the consistency with which speakers react to these word-posts (or sign-posts) in more or less the same way is what in turn constitutes the normative aspect of what, taken alone, are inert, arbitrary marks and sounds.

This way of putting it is potentially misleading, however, for it raises the issue of what I have been calling the sign-post paradox. An explanation of the paradox begins with the fact that one can only *follow* a linguistic sign if it is in fact operating *as a sign*. This may sound trivial, but it poses a problem when we consider (as Wittgenstein and Kripke point out) that a sound, mark or thing cannot be considered a sign with normative status solely in virtue of its being *interpreted* by someone in one way or another, without

regard for the context within which the sign is situated. This is simply a reformulation of the dictum that each interpretation stands in need of a further interpretation, and so on, and suggests that more stage-setting is required for a sign to have normative weight. Now, Wittgenstein gives us an idea of what sort of stage-setting is required when he claims that “a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom”(PI 198). I take this to mean that the act of “going by a sign-post,” and hence the very concept of a sign-post (for what would a sign-post be if no one *ever* followed one?) is dependent on there being a custom of people “going by” sign-posts. That is, it is dependent on people reacting in regularly-patterned ways to whatever it is that constitutes a sign in the relevant sense - verbal sounds and marks on paper for our purposes.

This brings us face-to-face with the paradox, which is that *in order to go by a sign there must be such things as signs to go by, but in order for there to be such things as signs there must be people who participate in a custom of going by them*. It seems as though we are right back to the problem of how meaning can ever get a foothold. We have seen how meaning cannot be a matter of simply interpreting signs. Now it seems as though the idea that meaning is manifested in the act of following linguistic signs in customary ways is in jeopardy as well, if the identification of the very signs themselves *as signs* depends on their being followed as signs. To what shall we in the philosophy of meaning turn?

## 2. GOING ON IN THE “SAME WAY”

I have argued via an interpretation of Wittgenstein that the meanings we find in linguistic signs are a bi-product of speakers participating in the activity of reacting to and correspondingly employing signs in ways that can be described as customary. This, you will recall, is to be distinguished from the sort of view that would suggest that the meaning of a word embodies a definite, albeit philosophically puzzling logical character that, once grasped by the speaker of a language, is the thing to which we should refer in trying to understand how it is that language manages to function in the way that we like to suppose it does: as a means for humans to communicate to one another the way things are with them and with the shared world in which they live. On the view that I am presenting, it is pointless to attempt to explain how a word means what it does by abstracting from the actual workings of language and thereby suggesting that there is something to the meaning of words that lies behind their use in actual cases. To postulate meanings of this sort is akin to suggesting that when one grasps the meaning of a word, one grasps the associated rules that govern its meaningful use within the language, and that it is these rules that drive the meaningful and successfully communicative employment of the word. Chapter one dealt extensively with the problems surrounding this view of language. It is now time to address the potential problems facing the alternative view that I have presented.

As I see it, the chief problem facing the view that meaning is a matter of people participating in the custom of following sign-posts in regularly-patterned ways has to do with the concept of sameness. More specifically, it has to do with the notion of recognizing sameness and “going on in the same way.” Let me explain.

Drawing largely on the work of Wittgenstein and McDowell, I have attempted to

show how, under normal circumstances, words and phrases can be understood as having meanings in virtue of their employment as signs that carry significance within the parameters of a given language-game. Speakers are trained to react this way or that upon hearing certain words in certain contexts, and the result of this training is practical mastery with respect to the moves that comprise a language-game. By participating in the custom of following a sign in a particular way, we are effectively following the rules that relate to the employment of the sign within a particular language-game. Now a key concept in Wittgenstein's discussion of how it is that one can follow a rule without an interpretation is that of regularity. Without regularity, there could be no *custom* of following a sign one way or another. For a sign to be able to function as a meaningful tool within a language-game, then, it must be employed and reacted to in a similar enough way in relevantly similar contexts over and over again to warrant the attribution of adjectives like "regular" and "customary" in describing how it functions within a language-game. This presents us with a problem which not only underlies the sign-post paradox, but also, on my view, provides much of the impetus for Wittgenstein's puzzling statements about rules.

Every time I use a word, I am using it in a context that is at least somewhat different from every other context in which I have ever heard that word used before. This is simply due to the fact that in the stream of life, no two situations are exactly the same. Moreover, as languages evolve, words get used in a variety of new ways all the time. The resulting variety of uses that a word may potentially be put to does not necessarily require that we understand that word as having a different meaning that corresponds to each use in the way that the word "chair" at times means the thing that I am sitting on and at other



times means the person who is responsible for the administration of an academic department. To borrow an example from Stanley Cavell (whose work I shall touch on shortly), words like the verb “to feed” can be used in the sense of “feeding a monkey,” “feeding a parking meter,” and “feeding an ego.” These are all clearly different uses of the verb “to feed,” but its meaning is not sharply different in each case. Wittgenstein would consider the use of “to feed” in the sense of “feeding a monkey” to be the “primary” sense of the verb, making all the other senses of feeding “secondary.” We first encounter this terminology in the context of Wittgenstein’s claims about the sorts of things to which we attribute things like sensations, sight, and hearing. In *PI* 281, he writes, “it comes to this: only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious.”

The important point is that we attribute these qualities to things we take to *resemble* human beings, things that we take to be *the same* in some respect. He goes on to say “we do indeed say of an inanimate thing that it is in pain: when playing with dolls for example. But this use of the concept of pain is a secondary one” (*PI* 282). Revisiting this distinction between primary and secondary senses in Part II of the *Investigations*, he writes “here we might speak of a ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sense of a word. It is only if the word has the primary sense for you that you use it in the secondary one” (*PI* p.216). He then adds that “the secondary sense is not a ‘metaphorical’ sense.” This is for the reason that what is expressed by employing a word like “feeding” in its secondary sense (e.g. “feeding an ego”) could not be expressed any other way. The verb “to feed” has simply taken on that sense for advanced speakers of English who are familiar with the verb’s primary sense and

who have imported it to the language-game of talking about egos.

Now, I do not want to get into a discussion concerning how Wittgenstein's concept of secondary sense may or may not be related to the concept of metaphor. The latter concept is one with a vast body of literature dedicated to it that I simply do not have room to touch on. Rather, I have introduced the concept of secondary sense to set the stage for the questions I wish to probe concerning the concept of sameness.

Consider again the example of the secondary senses of the verb "to feed." Uncritically, we are likely to say that the reason the verb is used in the extended senses of "feeding a meter" and "feeding an ego" is because there is some aspect of these actions that is relevantly similar to the primary sense of feeding to warrant the use of the verb "to feed" in all three cases. It appears unproblematic to say this, because these uses of "to feed" are so ingrained in our language that we cannot separate the phenomena themselves from the words we use to describe them. But can we attribute the processes by which words take on secondary senses in general to a linguistic community's *perception* of similarities between linguistically mediated "primary phenomena" and yet-to-be-described "secondary phenomena?" There is reason to believe that the answer is no, due to the fact that the sort of pre-linguistic detection of sameness that this would require is incomprehensible.

### 3.ALLEN ON THE CONCEPT OF SAMENESS

In his book entitled *Truth in Philosophy*, Barry Allen constructs an argument against the possibility of the forms of sameness and difference existing independently of a

linguistic practice that refers to them. Allen's argument rests on the concept of commensurability, and its connection to sameness and difference. For two things to be compared in respect of sameness or difference they must admit of comparison; that is to say, they must be commensurable. Now, the commensurability of two things presupposes a practice that sustains normative standards of comparison. As Allen writes,

commensurability is not a disposition or potency naturally present in things. This is because what "can be" measured or what "admits" of evaluation in a respect of possible difference has no determination save what it derives from mensural practice.<sup>45</sup>

This amounts to the claim that there is nothing original about sameness and difference. The concepts have sense only against the backdrop of an actual practice of qualitative or quantitative measuring. Thus language, in treating certain things as being alike (such as human beings and dolls) must not be seen as *following* the dictates of "natural," pre-linguistic similarities and differences between the elements of its subject matter. Such a concept of original sameness and difference would require a means by which we could evaluate these dimensions; yet the only means conceivable would be bound up with a symbolizing practice incorporating signs credited with evaluating these dimensions authoritatively.<sup>46</sup> The upshot is that "the forms of sameness and difference do not pre-exist the practice that refers to them; instead these stand or fall together."<sup>47</sup>

Applying Allen's view to Wittgenstein's remarks in *PI* 281, we must conclude that

---

<sup>45</sup> Allen, Barry. *Truth In Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) p.127.

<sup>46</sup> Allen, p.128.

<sup>47</sup> Allen, p.125.

the similarity that exists between human beings and whatever we attribute things like sensations, sight and consciousness to emerges *concurrently* with the various language-games of which these attributions are a part, and hence cannot be seen as playing any sort of justificatory role for these attributions. Consider the statement: “dogs are the same as humans in respect of the fact that they are both creatures that feel pain.” It is not based on any sort of prior determination in nature to which our language must correspond in order for it to be truthful or meaningful. In light of what has just been said, it rests on nothing more than the existence of a language-game; a language game which both Allen and Wittgenstein maintain is utterly contingent.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the very *identity* - and hence, determinate existence of things stands or falls with linguistic practice in the same way as the forms of sameness and difference. These claims entail one another, for the ability to identify something implies the corresponding ability to determine whether it is the same as or different from something else in the relevant respects, and vice-versa.

I wish to turn now to some aspects of the work of Stanley Cavell who, in my opinion, has reached similar conclusions to Allen with respect to Wittgenstein and the concepts of sameness and difference.

---

<sup>48</sup> Citing *PI 23*, Allen takes Wittgenstein to have underlined the “thoroughgoing contingency” of the habits and practice that sustain a language-game (Allen, 125). The relevant passage from *PI 23* reads: “But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command? - There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols,” “words,” “sentences.” And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and are forgotten.” I shall have more to say about the contingency of language-games in the next chapter.

#### 4. CAVELL ON SAMENESS AND FORMS OF LIFE

In his “Excurses on Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language,” Cavell examines what is involved in learning the meanings of words (what words stand for, how to use words) in what could be considered their “primary” contexts, as well as what is involved in “projecting” words into new or “secondary” contexts. In both cases, he is interested in what makes it so that objects or processes are treated as “the same” by the forms of our language. He addresses questions concerning how it is that our word “shoe,” for example, has both the generality required for us to be able to apply it in new contexts - that is, credit new objects that we have never seen before as being the same in respect of “shoeness” as the objects we have called shoes in the past - and the stability required for us to delineate unproblematically in actual cases between what is and what is not a shoe. Or, how it is that we use the same verb when talking about feeding a monkey, feeding a meter and feeding an ego, while yet having quite specific standards for what counts as an instance of each (to borrow Cavell’s example, “you cannot feed a monkey by stuffing pennies in its mouth, and if you mash peanuts into a coin slot you won’t *be* feeding a meter”).<sup>49</sup> For Cavell, the key to avoid seeing these as *problematic* aspects of our language that require postulations about the essence of universals for their “solution” is to simply accept the natural integration of the forms of our language and our forms of life. He puts it like this:

---

<sup>49</sup> Cavell, Stanley. “Excurses on Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language” in *The New Wittgenstein*, eds. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 32.

In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the “forms of life” which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do - e.g. name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc.<sup>50</sup>

Following Wittgenstein, Cavell argues that we should not be misled by the model of language acquisition that naively supposes that teaching the meaning of words like “kitty,” for example, is simply a matter of ostensive training (e.g. “that is a kitty,” pointing to a kitty). To demonstrate that it cannot be that simple, Wittgenstein cites the example of one who intends to teach another the meaning of the word “two,” pointing to two nuts. “But how can two be defined like that?” he writes.

The person one gives the definition to doesn't know what one wants to call “two.” He will suppose that “two” is the name given to *this* group of nuts!...And he might equally take the name of a person, of which I give an ostensive definition as that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point on the compass. That is to say: an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every case*. (PI 28).

We can thus see how it will remain philosophically puzzling how we manage to identify a multiplicity of objects as “shoes” if we think of meaning simply in terms of object and designation, learned through ostensive training.<sup>51</sup> This is because we would need to postulate that each object that we are prepared to call a shoe must “participate in the form of shoeness” or something like that. Cavell's point is that we learn what words like “shoe” mean not by perceiving and subsequently re-identifying the essential qualities

---

<sup>50</sup> Cavell, p.28.

<sup>51</sup> Not to mention the fact that we will run into many other problems if we look at language on the model of object and designation, not the least of which is that we use words to serve a wide variety of functions. To make this point Wittgenstein asks us to think just of exclamations like “Water!” “Away !” and “Help!” etc. and then asks “are you still inclined to call these words “names of objects?”

inherent in the objects to which our trainers point,<sup>52</sup> but rather we become “initiate into the forms of life which give those words the point and shape they have in our lives.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, there is no notion of a common essence that justifies my various utterances of “shoe” in the presence of shoes. Instead, as I learn how to use the word “shoe,” I am simultaneously being initiated into the forms of life that both sustain and result from the forms of the language-game of talking about shoes. I say that these forms of life both sustain and result from the language-game because at the root of both is acting; acting in a way that is customary, that generates peaceful agreement, and that amounts, for all intents and purposes, to my having followed the rules that apply to calling things shoes.

Looking at language acquisition this way, we can see how pointing to two nuts could serve the purpose of contributing to the teaching of what “two” means (distinguishing it from a group of three nuts, for example) *provided only* that the learner understands the role that the concept of a number plays in our language game; provided that he or she can appropriately be said to participate in the forms of life that involve the concept of a number. In this way, pointing to a group of two nuts is not equivalent to “pointing to the number two,” but rather it is a contribution to the processes by which we initiate one into the aspect of our form of life that involves distinguishing between different quantities and using numbers as a means to do so.

Another way of putting this general point is to say that we do not *know* what the

---

<sup>52</sup> See *PI* 33.

<sup>53</sup> Cavell, p.33.

number two *is*, or what a shoe *is*, until we are accepted into the ranks of those who are masters of a technique; those who can use the words properly in numerous contexts - contexts that correspond to the aspects of our form of life that involve these concepts. Cavell illustrates this point well with an example involving his daughter, whom he is teaching the meaning of the word "kitty." He is delighted one day to see her point and exclaim "kitty!" in the presence of the family feline, thinking that his training has paid off. This delight is short-lived, however, for the next day she exhibits the same reaction to a simple piece of fur. Cavell's point with respect to this example is to get us to see that in these early stages of learning, it is futile for us to guess at what she might be meaning - which is clearly not what we are meaning - with her utterance of "kitty." Does she mean what we mean by "soft," or "nice to stroke," or "this is like a kitty?"<sup>54</sup> Supposing that it is a choice between these or a set of other alternatives is like supposing that there is a definite point in time at which she has "grasped the essential thing" and learned what the word "kitty" means. But saying that she has learned what "kitty" means, and thus, what kittens are, amounts to nothing more than saying that she has eventually come around to using the word "kitty" (or kitten) like we do, that is, without misunderstanding, in a variety of contexts. She knows that kitties are animals, that they make angry noises when you accidentally step on their tails, that they eat food, etc. When she knows these things, we can say, in a way that we could not when she was saying "kitty" in the presence of fur

---

<sup>54</sup> Cavell, p.24.



pieces, that kittens exist in her world in the same way that they exist in ours.<sup>55</sup>

Before leaving my discussion of Cavell, I must address his notion of projecting words like “feeding” into the various sorts of secondary senses that have been mentioned.<sup>56</sup> Cavell writes, “we learn the use of ‘feed the kitty,’ ‘feed the lion,’ ‘feed the swans,’ and one day one of us says ‘feed the meter,’ or ‘feed the machine,’ or ‘feed his pride,’ or ‘feed wire,’ and we understand, we are not troubled.”<sup>57</sup> On the face of it, these are quite different phenomena, and one might be surprised to reflect upon the fact that we use the same verb in the articulation of each. This fact, however, only serves to shed further light on Cavell’s (and Wittgenstein’s) vision of language which can be summed up in the claim that “being willing to call other ideas (or objects) ‘the same sort’ and being willing to use ‘the same word’ for them is one and the same thing. The former does not explain the latter.”<sup>58</sup> The key here is that the former does not *explain* the latter. Like Allen, Cavell wants us to see that the “ambiguity” (or perhaps “versatility”) of words like “feeding” is not a result of the pre-linguistic detection of sameness between a variety of phenomena that all fall under the essence of the concept of “feeding.” Rather, the

---

<sup>55</sup> See Cavell, p.24. It is worth noting that for someone who has already been initiated into the forms of life that relate to small domesticated animals but who, for whatever reason, does not know what a kitten is, simple ostensive teaching may be all that is required for mastery of the technique of using the word “kitten.” This is what Wittgenstein is getting at when he says that “one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use - the meaning - of the word when the overall role of the word in the language is clear” (*PI* 30). Similarly, how one “takes” a definition “is seen in the use that he makes of the word defined” (*PI* 29).

<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that this talk of using words in secondary senses is not an esoteric aspect of language. While Wittgenstein’s point is taken that in order to grasp one of the secondary senses of, say, “feeding” one will have to know the primary sense, I do not believe that we should see a sharp distinction between primary and secondary senses. The evolution of our language is not as regimented as this terminology suggests.

<sup>57</sup> Cavell, p.30.

<sup>58</sup> Cavell, p.36.

activities and events relevant to the forms of life into which we are initiated when we master the use of the verb “to feed” in its primary sense are such that the activities and events into which the concept is projected coincide in certain respects.

Because those who are masters of the language-game of talking about “feeding” in the primary sense share not only the practical mastery of manipulating certain signs, but also certain forms of life that have been augmented by conceptual articulation,<sup>59</sup> new uses of the word “feeding” that complement these forms of life will be seen by all advanced speakers of the language as perfectly natural extensions of the concept. Cavell puts it this way: “an object or activity or event onto or into which a concept is projected, must *invite* or *allow* that projection.”<sup>60</sup> What he means by this is that in understanding the projection of a word into a new context, what is of primary importance is for us to see not *that* the event in question is, say, one of feeding; but rather *how* the event in question is one of feeding. Now it may be conceded that once we see how the event in question is one of feeding it follows that we can be said to see that the event in question is one of feeding. The distinction is important, however, because it helps us to see that understanding the projection of the word is not a matter of possessing (in virtue of grasping the meaning of the word) a mental catalogue of all the sorts of events that count as those of feeding, and accordingly recognizing that the present event is of the same sort as one of those. It is

---

<sup>59</sup> What I mean by this is that with the mastery of the technique of manipulating a linguistic sign like the word “feeding” comes a thorough understanding of what we might call the *concept* of feeding. The concept of feeding broadly encapsulates certain nuances of our form of life, the various descriptions of which employ the word “feeding.”

<sup>60</sup> Cavell, p.32.

instead a matter of understanding *how* the event in question is one of feeding; that is, how the forms of life related to this event overlap with those that are intertwined with the use of the concept in its primary sense.

## 5. WITTGENSTEIN'S CONCEPTION OF RULES

Closely related to the sign-post paradox is a further point that Wittgenstein makes (most notably in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*) concerning the nature of linguistic rules. The point is that a move in a language-game which “makes sense” is related in two distinct ways to whatever it is that we could call the “rule” associated with its employment. On one hand, the move must be seen as adhering in some respect to the historically established guidelines for its application that are mutually grasped by the participants in the conversation. We will only understand one another if we use words in ways that are consistent with the ways in which we have been taught to use these words in the past. On the other hand, however, the linguistic move itself has to be seen as *contributing* to the content of the rule that purports to govern its employment. This second claim, far from seeming straightforward, actually appears to be incompatible with the first and, for that matter, with any sort of notion of normativity or rule-governedness with respect to the structure of language in general. For if each actual employment of a word or phrase effects a contribution to the content of whatever rule it is that purports to govern the use of the word or phrase in the first place, the entire concept of normative constraint becomes empty. In other words, if every time I say “boat” I contribute to the scope of meaningful employments of the word “boat,” I can never be incorrect or

nonsensical in my use of the word “boat.”

Clearly this will not do, for after all we can easily imagine situations in which one might utter the word “boat” and be met with confused stares, unsolicited laughter, consolation or corrective behaviour. Before throwing up our arms and dismissing Wittgenstein’s point out of hand, however, let us take a closer look at what he means when he says that each employment of a word contributes to the rules governing its use.

Much of what Wittgenstein says on this subject is bound up with his comments on the phenomenology of following a rule - the feeling of what *must* come out if the rule has in fact been followed. It is important to note that Wittgenstein does not want to deny that we have this sort of feeling; the sort of feeling, for example, that leads one to declare that if we apply the instruction “add one” to the number four we *must* get five. Rather, he merely wants us to get away from the tempting thought that the “must” feeling has to stem from something about the nature of the rule itself, as if the rule was an autonomous logical entity that we humans, once having grasped it, are at the mercy of. This, according to Wittgenstein, is the way of thinking that spurs on futile philosophical expeditions bent on capturing and explaining the essence of universals and the timeless, ahistorical logic within which they are embedded. Instead, he wants us to change our way of looking at things, so as to accept that the “must” feeling we get when we think we are following a hard-and-fast rule is simply due to the fact that in our action we are actually contributing to the ongoing creation of the rule. The “must” feeling is the result of the activity of participating in a custom of “going by” signs, the by-product of which is the illusion of

acting in accordance with fixed rules.<sup>61</sup> The rules emerge from the activity, which is primary; and in continuing to participate in the activity, we sustain a perpetual feedback loop of seemingly acting in accordance with rules while simultaneously developing them as we act. We compel ourselves to act, as opposed to being compelled by an uncompromising, external logical influence.

The reason, then, that we feel we *must* get five when we apply the instruction “add one” to the number four is because getting five is a criterion by which we judge whether or not we have applied the rule “add one.” This is not circular. Rather, the point is that there is nothing to the rule “add one” apart from the various actual moves within a language-game that are said to be applications and misapplications of it.<sup>62</sup>

## 6.LANGUAGE AND FORMS OF LIFE

In this chapter thus far, I have dealt extensively with two separate but related themes that are integral to Wittgenstein’s vision of language: the argument against the originality of sameness and difference, and the peculiar nature of linguistic rules. I shall now attempt to connect these themes more concretely via a discussion of the more general concept of forms of life.

I wish to begin this task by making some points in regard to the following two passages from the *Investigations*.

---

<sup>61</sup> I owe the idea that the forms of our language inevitably lead to a “user’s illusion” to conversations with Rockney Jacobsen.

<sup>62</sup> See *RFM* vi-16

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

And,

Not: “without language we could not communicate with one another” - but for sure: without language we cannot influence other people in such-and-such ways; cannot build roads and machines, etc. And also: without the use of speech and writing people could not communicate (*PI* 491).

It is my view that without explicitly stating it, these two passages embody two important points regarding the concept of “forms of life,” and how this concept relates to the themes I have been pursuing.

In the first passage, Wittgenstein reminds us that the fact that humans have language is one among the many natural facts about us. We are biological organisms - animals - and like all animals there are facts about our “natural history” that can be adduced. Some of these facts, such as the fact that we eat and drink are shared (roughly speaking) with other animals. Others, such as the fact that we command, question, recount and chat, are unique to human natural history because, for reasons the study of which is best left to evolutionary biology, language is unique to human natural history. So if we are prepared to say that all living things, in virtue of being living things, participate in their respective forms of life, there must be a sense in which human language, as a fact of natural history, is in some sense parasitic on the forms of life particular to human beings.

The matter cannot be left at that, however, which brings me to my second point: commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting are as much a part of what we are prepared to call human forms of life as the more traditionally naturalistic or biological activities such as eating and drinking. The point is, language must be seen not only as

developing *out* of human forms of life, but it must *equally* be seen as influencing, augmenting and giving shape to human forms of life. In *PI* 491, Wittgenstein cautions us against saying things like “without language we could not communicate with each other.” He discourages this way of looking at the role of language because it suggests that the forms of life that we take for granted are firmly in place in some sort of original, pre-linguistic sense, and the role of language is merely to provide us with a means of communicating to one another the thoughts and feelings that are manifest in these forms of life. This is a naive picture. Accordingly, Wittgenstein distinguishes “speech and writing” - the physical tools of communication - from language, which is a much broader concept. It is only within language - within the structures of language-games - that the activities of asking a question or giving a command are possible. Hence, these human activities, these aspects of our form of life, could not exist without the linguistic structures that make them conceptually possible.

The picture that is emerging is one of a grand feedback loop. Our forms of life are tied up with the structure of our language. The former does not explain the latter. In the same way, recalling Cavell and Allen, what we are willing to call the same sort of thing is tied up with that for which we are willing to use the same word. Again, the former does not explain the latter. Finally, each instantiation of a so-called linguistic rule serves to give shape to the rule that it purports to be an instantiation of; it serves as a criterion by which we judge whether or not the rule in question has been followed.

In light of what has been said so far, the reader may still (rightfully) be puzzled as to how a speaker could ever go wrong with what he or she says. Following Cavell and

Allen, I have been saying that the sameness and difference, and hence the very identity of things stands or falls with what we are willing to *call* same and different; and furthermore, that each linguistic move I make reaches *beyond* the normative guidelines that we naturally take to be constraining what counts as a meaningful utterance. Now we know that speakers can and do go wrong. That is, we know that people are sometimes misunderstood, or fail to make any sort of sense at all with their utterances. What then, in light of the Wittgensteinian picture of language presented herein, is the account to be given of the undisputed fact of occasional communicative breakdown? I shall attempt to provide one now.

#### 7. LANGUAGE AS A TECHNIQUE

Throughout the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein reminds us to “look on the language-game as the *primary* thing” (*PI* 656). Instead of searching for underlying explanations of linguistic phenomena, he repeatedly urges us to *describe* the way language is actually used, an activity which he says gets its purpose from the philosophical problems that persist when we search for foundational explanations.<sup>63</sup> “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language,” he writes; “it can in the end only describe it” (*PI* 124). What we describe are language-games. Language-games are functional aspects of language like “giving orders, and obeying them,” “reporting an event,” or “making a

---

<sup>63</sup> See *PI* 109.



joke.”<sup>64</sup> They don’t have sharp boundaries, but are nonetheless identifiable as being definitive enough in scope by those who are masters of the technique of playing them.

Now, early in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says “here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life”(PI 23). In reading Wittgenstein, one cannot stress enough the simple fact that the activity of actually speaking - participating in the ordinary use of language in the way that you, I and all speakers of languages do on a daily basis - is of paramount importance with respect to any claim we may make about language in general. The pervasive tone sounding through all of Wittgenstein’s later work is critical of philosophical attempts (of which his earlier *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a chief example) to distil language down to its supposed “essential logical structure.” This essential structure is posited as something that *must* exist in order for us to be able to make statements about the world, evaluate their truth and falsity, and communicate with one another according to a shared set of grammatical (logical) rules. What we actually say, however, often turns out to be quite vague and ambiguous upon analytical inspection. The required logical structure must then be hidden “beneath the surface” like a philosophical holy grail. It must be the pure crystal essence that is to remain after logical analysis has separated off the ambiguities in our actual utterances. This picture holds us captive, Wittgenstein famously says, and philosophers who operate under it are tempted (a) to see our meaningful utterances as being meaningful in virtue of falling in line with the

---

<sup>64</sup> See PI 23.

rules dictated by this posited logical “ideal,” and (b) to see our utterances that make no sense or that result in misunderstanding and confusion as doing so in virtue of a misapplication or misalignment with respect to the hidden rules of the ideal.

Wittgenstein’s goal with respect to emphasizing the fact that “the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or a form of life,” is to get us to see that the normative aspects of our language co-emerge with the activities that make up our forms of life. These activities are contingent; influenced by the countless array of external factors that have shaped our development as a species. To posit an *a priori* structure that lies behind the surface of our actual utterances and somehow sustains them as meaningful is akin to “misunderstand(ing) the role of the ideal in our language”(PI 100). Our language *is* in ideal order, as a manifestation of activities carried out by the vast majority of human beings on a daily basis. The misunderstanding lies in thinking that the order, the ideal, is in the form of a timeless, definite logical structure hidden beneath the surface. The following passage is particularly instructive in summarizing Wittgenstein’s views on the matter. In responding to his interlocutor’s claim that a game cannot be a game if there is vagueness in the rules (which by implication suggests that language can’t exist in the way we think it does if there is not an underlying ideal structure), Wittgenstein responds

But does this prevent its being a game? - “Perhaps you’ll call it a game, but at any rate it isn’t a perfect game.” This means: it has impurities, and what I am interested in is the pure article. - But I want to say: we misunderstand the role of the ideal in our language. That is to say: we too should call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word “game” clearly.(PI 100).

To see the actual use of the word “game” clearly, we must look at how the actual

language-games of talking about games are played. Now, one who talks about games “correctly” - that is, one who understands the role games play in our lives, what counts and what does not count as a game in actual cases, etc. is the master of a *technique*. Keeping this in mind is what will allow us to see how speakers can “go wrong” despite what may have struck the reader thus far as the apparent impossibility of this scenario.

To say that the performance of an activity requires a certain level of mastery of a technique implies that the activity is not one that can be carried out by simply following a set of prescribed rules. Consider the activity of playing a musical instrument like the piano. We can distinguish between one’s having the competence to perform the activity of, say, “striking middle-C,” and one’s having the competence to “*play jazz piano*.” The former activity, I shall argue, does not require mastery of what we would call a technique in order for it to be carried out. Provided the person is a competent speaker of English who knows what a piano is, everything he or she would need to know in order to perform the activity suitably could be outlined in explicit instructions as to which key on the piano is middle-C. Being able to *play jazz piano*, however, is not something that could be achieved simply through following a set of rules or instructions. It will instead require the sort of training that perhaps takes the form of listening to those who have mastered the technique of playing jazz piano and attempting to “do what they do;” or it may involve encouragement and discouragement from someone who is a master of the technique and who has taken on a training role. The point is that learning to play the piano in what could be considered a jazz style is a process that depends on repeated activity, trial-and error, and countless fine-adjustments in practice. The ability to play jazz piano is not something

that could be seen as equivalent to the fulfillment of a prescribed set of rules. Rather, it is a technique, the explanation of which lies in nothing more than actual performatory examples.

A couple of general remarks about the concept of a technique are in order. Firstly, I am making a distinction between activities that require mastery of a certain technique from those that do not. I am making this distinction on the basis that the former cannot be performed simply by following a set of rules or instructions. This is because an exhaustive set of rules the following of which would result in competence in the activity is inconceivable. This distinction is of course warranted only if we hold that there are activities that *can* be performed competently simply by following a set of rules that admit of articulation. On my view we can unproblematically say that there are.<sup>65</sup>

The second general remark I wish to make has to do at long last with making a mistake or “going wrong” within the performance of an activity that requires mastery of a technique. What counts as a mistake within the realm of a particular technique will be determinable by no criteria besides what other masters of the technique take to be a mistake. There are no rules to which one may appeal in order to back up an accusation of error. A mistake within the performance of a technique amounts to nothing more than a

---

<sup>65</sup> It might be objected that in order to understand the rules in question, one will still have to have mastered the technique of speaking the language in which the rules are expressed so as to be furnished with the required stage-setting with which to interpret the rules unambiguously. While this is true, I want to say that for the purposes of my distinction I am taking for granted a relative mastery of the English language. Taking this for granted, we could say that the rules informing one of how to “strike middle C on the piano” can be expressed unambiguously.

breakdown in the normal flow of activity that sustains the technique.<sup>66</sup> In the same way, “successful” or “appropriate” moves within the performance of a technique are not deemed so in virtue of their meeting a prescribed criteria of performance. Mistake-free performances of a technique are nothing more than normal performances of the activity related to a particular aspect of our form of life which both sustains and is sustained by the linguistic concept associated with the technique.

The upshot of this is that the only people who can rightfully be said to detect flaws in the performance of a technique are other masters of the technique, and the only way to qualify as a master of a technique is by demonstrating your ability to participate in it conversantly with other masters. There is a necessary degree of vagueness in this description of who is and who is not to be considered a qualified participant in a technique. This vagueness is necessitated by the fact that there is no objective set of criteria, no definitive set of rules that, if followed, guarantee one’s acceptance.<sup>67</sup> The proof is in the pudding, so to speak, and one must demonstrate one’s competence *through one’s actions alone*.

I have discussed the concept of a technique in detail because in Wittgenstein’s words, “to understand a language means to be master of a technique”(PI 199). It is a

---

<sup>66</sup> It has been pointed out to me by Phillip Kremer that there are situations in which we would want to say that a mistake has been made, yet there is no “breakdown in the normal flow of activity.” An example would be two calculators agreeing upon the wrong answer to an addition question. We could call this an “unrecognized objective falsehood.” I don’t think this qualification threatens the general point, however. Clearly agreement upon what we would call the “wrong” answer to an addition question will have to be far from the norm for us to merit calling it the wrong answer.

<sup>67</sup> Compare PI 183: “But here we must be on our guard against thinking that there is some *totality* of conditions corresponding to the nature of each case (e.g. for a person’s walking) so that, as it were, he *could not but* walk if they were all fulfilled.”

technique that, contrary to Wittgenstein's interlocutor, cannot be learned by "guessing the essential thing" - the essential rules that lie behind our utterances and sustain them as meaningful.<sup>68</sup> The idea that there is such an essential hidden framework that drives meaning is a myth. Competence with a language is a technique that is learned in the same way that all techniques are learned: by following examples, doing as others do, practicing - at base, acting - sometimes in ways that garner approval, and sometimes in ways that garner disapproval. One's level of mastery with respect to any technique is, of course, a matter of degree. Some people play jazz piano better than others; some people speak English better than others. And the bounds of what constitutes the domain of techniques like playing jazz and speaking English are perpetually changing as well. At the root of all techniques is unjustifiable action. If it is met with agreement - if it does not result in confusion, misunderstanding or breakdown of any kind - it serves to comply with *and* contribute to the domain of the technique. *If an action generates confusion, if it stands there as a setback with respect to the stability of the activities that make up the relevant aspect of our form of life, it will be met with disagreement and will stand in need of correction.*

## 8. THE END OF EXPLANATIONS: AVOIDING THE SIGN-POST PARADOX

---

<sup>68</sup> See *PI* 210 in which the interlocutor asks "but do you really explain to the other person what you yourself understand. Don't you get him to *guess* the essential thing? You give him examples, - but he has to guess their drift, to guess your intention." To this Wittgenstein responds "every explanation which I can give myself I give to him too."

We are at the point in the discussion where we must face Wittgenstein's controversial claim that "explanations come to an end somewhere" (*PI* 1). Explanations, reasons, justifications, definitions; these are all treated similarly by Wittgenstein. They all play important roles in our language - in how we use our language to achieve certain ends within our forms of life. They are vital tools that we learn to employ as we master the languages that we speak. The point of statements like "explanations come to an end," however, is that it is futile to search for ultimate, foundational explanations, reasons, justifications or definitions. Wittgenstein urges us to look at how these words are used in actual practice. If we do this, we will see that explanations, etc. are given only so as to avert misunderstandings. Philosophical difficulties may arise when we are struck by the fact that every explanation, when examined in isolation, could be open to an infinite number of interpretations. This potentially troubling realization leads to the thought that each explanation "hangs in the air" unless it is supported by another one, and furthermore to the view that if there is to be anything grounding meaning at all, it must take the form of an ultimate, foundational explanation upon which all the others rest. Since this foundational explanation is the one explanation that cannot stand in need of another, it must have an exceptional character. We are then left postulating an *a priori* order to which, in virtue of its being the foundation of language and the only means by which we can have secure understanding, all meaningful utterances must conform.

We avoid this need for constructive philosophy if we look at how explanations function in the actual language-games in which they are used. Wittgenstein writes, an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but

none stands in need of another - unless *we* require it to prevent a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or avert a misunderstanding - one, that is, that would occur but for the explanation; not every one I can imagine. (*PI* 87).

And later in the same passage: “the sign-post is in order if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose.” The central point is this: the worry about the lack of definitive support for our explanations is insignificant if, in actual practice, explanations do their job. That is, if they are accepted, understood and used in turn by the practitioners of the language-games of which they are a part. The statement that “explanations come to an end,” then, is a specific response to those who suffer from the “disease of wanting to explain” (*RFM* vi-31); those who seek to uncover the foundational explanations. On Wittgenstein’s view, what remains when explanations come to an end is the “proto-phenomenon” - the contingent fact that “*this language-game is played*” (*PI* 654). Norman Malcolm sums up the points I have just touched on in the following paragraph:

Wittgenstein’s emphasized theme - that reasons, justifications, explanations come to an end - does not mean that there are no reasons, justifications, explanations, for anything. For these concepts do have a place within the boundaries of many of our language-games. Nor does it mean that we do not have the time or energy to go on giving reasons and explanations. What it means is that these come to an end *somewhere*. Where is that? It is at *the existence* of the language-games and the associated forms of life. There is where explanation has reached its limit. There reasons stop. In philosophy we can only notice the language-games, describe them, and sometimes wonder at them.<sup>69</sup>

So how does this idea about the end of explanations relate to comments I have made about rules, sameness and difference, and the sign-post paradox? Much of what I

---

<sup>69</sup> Malcolm, Norman. *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) p.82.



am about to say has been implied and approached in what I have said thus far in this chapter, but I will attempt at this point to be concise and explicit, trusting that the necessary groundwork has been laid.

Wittgenstein writes, “the phenomena of agreement and of acting according to a rule hang together”(RFM vi-41). Statements like this one are intended to get us to see how the normative component of language is sustained not by autonomous rules, but by the natural-historic fact of human agreement. In other words, it is sustained by the fact that in many respects, it is characteristic of us to work together peacefully and not “come to blows.”<sup>70</sup>

When a community of language-users agree that a rule has been followed, any notion that the rule embodies some sort of normative power of its own for which it is up to us to grasp or interpret becomes impotent. Malcolm notes that

what is *primary* to following a rule lies not in interpretations, or in mental states of understanding, but in actually *doing* in particular cases what *we* (the mature speakers of the language) call ‘following the rule.’<sup>71</sup>

This is another way in which we can approach the claim that explanations come to an end. In defending our actions or intentions, we can, up to a point, invoke explanations and reasons citing that such and such rules have been followed. Beyond that point we have no choice but to say “this is simply what I do.” If disagreement in methodological practices persists, we have no choice but to conclude that the disagreeing parties do not speak the

---

<sup>70</sup> “No dispute breaks out over the question whether a proceeding was according to the rule or not. It doesn’t come to blows, for example”(RFM vi-21).

<sup>71</sup> Malcolm, p.62.

same language (do not participate in the same forms of life).

It should now be clearer as to how it is unproblematic to assert that each instantiation of a rule is a contribution to the content of the rule. If a community of language-users agree that a rule has been followed, then it is of no consequence what the prior history of the rule is. This is simply how the words “agreement and “rule” are used. Neither one *explains* the use of the other.

In another place, Wittgenstein writes

It is of the greatest importance that a dispute hardly ever arises between people about whether the colour of this object is the same as the colour of that, the length of this rod the same as the length of that, etc. This peaceful agreement is the characteristic surrounding of the use of the word “same.”(*RFM vi-21*).

And also, “the use of the word “rule” and the use of the word “same” are interwoven”(*PI* 225). We can thus see how the account that was just given of rules and their relation to agreement will go for the determination of sameness as well. On this topic, Allen writes

how is sameness of definition measured? How is understanding evaluated, differentiated, determined in practice? The answer is that this is determined (to the extent that it is “determined” at all) by constant reference to a stabilizing, normative agreement in particular cases.<sup>72</sup>

The standards by which we evaluate sameness and difference are in effect rules of the sort that we have just examined; rules whose identities are thoroughly and continually conditioned by what Allen calls “stabilizing normative agreement.” Agreement in practice is the most basic thing we can point to as the “cause” of the fact that the forms of our

---

<sup>72</sup> Allen, p. 142.

language, and hence our forms of life, are infused with meaning.

The fact that I say it is the most basic thing we can *point to* is especially significant, because it reinforces the fact that this ultimate cause itself has one foot planted *outside* the sphere of meaning, or the “space of reasons” as John McDowell would say. It is equivalent to the point at which explanations come to an end. Now, I say it has *one* foot outside (out of the possible two that this anthropomorphic metaphor implies) because the sort of agreement in question is not to be seen simply as a natural, biological phenomenon - our not coming to blows, for example - that stands in causal relation to the emergence of the space of reasons as it is manifested in language. Meaning is not imparted into our world causally by the mechanisms of brute nature (more on this theme in chapter three). To suppose this would be to overlook the fact that what we call “agreement in practice” is an aspect of our nature that we have no choice but to describe *in language*, using the very tools of the space of reasons. It is in this necessary use of language that the other foot is planted.

Earlier in this chapter we saw how our forms of life are a conceptually inseparable conjunction of unjustifiable reactions and conceptually-mediated activities. The two cannot be distinguished in any particular case, but instead feed-back into one another perpetually to make up human existence as we know it. Taking this claim seriously is the only way we shall avoid what I described earlier as the sign-post paradox. You will recall that the paradox arises from the fact that on one hand, it is possible to “go by” a linguistic sign, that is, take it to be playing a meaningful role within a language, only if such signs exist. On the other hand, a sign cannot be said to exist in any useful or meaningful sense

unless there is a custom of its being used in more or less regular ways. This, as was emphasized in chapter one, is because a sign examined in isolation is subject to an infinite number of interpretations, which is as good as saying that it is useless. Now, we have seen that there is no sense to be made of detecting sameness without a symbolizing practice that incorporates the relevant standards of measurement. But a custom of following “would-be” signs in regular ways is necessary for the very identity of the signs that are needed to make up the symbolizing practice. How, then, could any individual or group of individuals possibly recognize these would-be signs as “the same” in subsequent instances - something that is surely necessary for there to be a custom - the custom that is necessary for the identity of the sign?

What I am attempting to demonstrate is that the conceptual tools one would need to construct an explanation of how the aforementioned feedback cycle is initially put in motion are lacking. It is in reflecting upon this fact that we face having to “follow through” with Wittgenstein’s program, and perhaps even having to reach beyond it. What we are left with at the end of explanations *could* potentially be seen as a threat to the comforting view that we are rational creatures who can, through our rational powers, gradually come to a more and more thorough understanding of our place as a species in the grand scheme of the universe. The view I have been presenting suggests that these rational powers cannot be grounded in ultimate explanations of an underlying logical framework to which one might hope that they adhere. Rather, the fate of our meanings is in the extremely general and decidedly un-philosophical realm of “what people go on to do,” or “how people go on to act.” This does not put our grasp of our meanings in

jeopardy, however, because we will be *among* the people who go on to do whatever it is we go on to do; and the only sense we will ever be able to make of our meanings will be a result of what we, and those with whom we share languages, all agree upon.

#### 9.A COMMENT ON THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

I would like to conclude this chapter by saying that the views I have just presented are not intended to be taken as signalling an end to the enterprise that we call academic philosophy. I consider the work presented herein to be a contribution to academic philosophy. I do want to suggest, however, that these views point towards the limitations of what philosophy can hope to accomplish. Philosophy cannot succeed if its goal is the uncovering of a timeless foundational logical framework coupled with the intention of invoking it to ground universal claims about the nature of particular concepts.

Philosophy can and should, however, continue to work within the framework of reason afforded to us by the structure of our language-games, and it should seek to develop more and more convincing accounts of how best to comprehend the phenomena of living in the world. The impulse to do so is undeniably a part of the human forms of life that language has contributed to shaping. Moreover, the philosophers that continue doing philosophy under the influence of the later Wittgenstein and other proponents of anti-foundationalism will, in my view, share a certain sentiment that will pervade their work. This sentiment will amount roughly to a willingness to feel a sense of wonderment with respect to how we ended up as we are - as creatures whose lives are everywhere drenched in meaning. And with this sentiment will come a level of comfort with the notion that

explanations must come to an end.

### CHAPTER 3: LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD

I would like to begin the third and final chapter in the same way that I began the second; that is, by discussing a potential complication facing the progress made in the chapter that just ended. In chapter two, we saw that the meanings of the terms in our language do not get their normative shape by way of fitting aspects of a nature that has a determinate order prior to being described in linguistic practice. The very notions of the sameness and difference of things, and the concept of “going on in the same way” were shown to be vacuous when considered in isolation from a practice credited with enforcing the norms according to which evaluations of sameness and difference are to be made. Moreover, our language was seen to be bound up with what we have been calling our form of life in a perpetual feedback cycle, the upshot of which is that these two concepts mutually contribute to one another by means of the sustaining phenomenon of “human agreement.” Recognizing this leads directly to the idea that as far as inquiries into how our words manage to possess graspable meanings are concerned, explanations must come to an end.

Another way of putting this point is to say that neither the realm of reasons nor the realm of natural scientific law can furnish us with a complete explanation of meaning. Kripke’s elucidation of the rule-following paradox clearly demonstrates that meanings cannot be grounded in ultimate interpretations. Conversely, the descriptive tools of natural science will not help us to find a foundational explanation for why speakers of English *agree* that, for example, there is an activity we perform with monkeys that is

relevantly similar enough to an activity we perform with egos to warrant the use of the word “feeding” in both cases. Any attempt to formulate a foundational explanation of meaning will end in the fact that we human beings simply do what we do, and facts of this sort can only be observed and described.

In saying that grasping a meaning is not a matter of “guessing the essential thing,” but instead is manifested in the act of going by a sign in an habitual way according to the contingent custom of a linguistic community, we seem to be rescuing the idea of meaning from the need for it to involve something supernatural;<sup>73</sup> identifying it instead with contingent processes that are to be seen as part of the natural history of human beings. In doing this, we seem to be saying that the rational connections that constitute our language somehow supervene on or emerge from natural processes that we think of as being describable in terms of natural-scientific law.

In this modern age, we think of the subject matter of natural science as being devoid of meaning. That is to say, we take natural processes to have a certain sort of autonomy apart from the sorts of human concerns that are shaped by the “realm of reasons.” We can observe and describe the hunting habits of wild animals, but we cannot expect a fox to feel guilty about killing a chicken. Similarly, we can observe and describe the motion of falling bodies, but we can’t train a rock out of falling according to the law of

---

<sup>73</sup> Examples of what I mean by “supernatural” in this sense are universals, Platonic forms, and the idea of an *a priori* logic in which the meaningfulness of our statements must be grounded. The philosophical pursuit of attempting to disclose the essence of these sorts of posited logical entities is what Wittgenstein is chiefly reacting to in the *Investigations*.



gravity. I have argued that language is at least in part contingent on processes that find their descriptive home in this realm of natural science.

The complication emerges on consideration of the fact that the very linguistic resources with which we formulate coherent statements about concepts such as “nature” and “natural science” are embedded in our language already. In light of this, for the same reason that it makes no sense to think of anything being determinately the same or different from anything else in the absence of a language-game that involves making the relevant evaluations, we must heed caution in attributing the existence of the phenomenon of language to factors at play in the phenomenon of natural human behaviour for the reason that the very concepts involved in forming the idea of the second phenomenon are manifestations of the existence of the first.

Another way of framing this complication is to say that on one hand, it is only by way of having a mastery of conceptual resources that we can make any sense of living *in a world*. This thought is a correlate of Allen’s thesis that apart from actual linguistic practice, there is *nothing* to the idea of a natural order of things with determinate identity. On the other hand, however, we want to preserve the insight afforded to us by modern science that there is nothing “supernatural” about meaning, and that the rational, language-using aspect of our form of life should be seen as requiring nothing outside of our actualization of ourselves as human beings - members of the animal kingdom. In order to leave these two insights intact and mutually compatible, it will be necessary to elaborate on both the concept of the world made manifest through the acquisition of language, and the concept of nature - the stuff within which we humans, according to the dominant

scientific view, constitute a mere evolutionary blip.

In clarifying these concepts, I will be contrasting the work of John McDowell in his book *Mind and World* with some aspects of the work of Richard Rorty (and to a lesser extent Donald Davidson) that I take to be representative of what is on the face of it an opposing view. I have chosen to exhibit these views side by side because I take them to be representative of divergent conclusions that stem from many shared premises. That is to say, if one strips away the baggage associated with the terminological biases of their respective academic traditions (post-Kantian epistemology for McDowell and post-modern pragmatism for Rorty), one will see that despite their disagreement in the literature, there is much upon which the two camps agree. In the remaining pages I shall attempt to shed light on some of the sources of disagreement between the above parties, and in so doing, develop a position of my own that preserves the best insights of both.

## 1. THOUGHT'S BEARING ON REALITY

In *Mind and World*, McDowell is concerned with preserving a common-sense view of the objectivity of the world around us. He writes, “thinking that aims at judgment, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world - to how things are - for whether or not it is correctly executed.”<sup>74</sup> On this sort of view, I would be wrong in my judgment that a particular thing is a tree if and only if it is in fact not a tree. End of story.

In order for us to see how the external world unproblematically exerts this sort of

---

<sup>74</sup> McDowell, John, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) p.xii.

normative constraint on our thinking, we philosophers need to be comfortable with the idea of what McDowell calls a “minimal empiricism.” This is the idea that “experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all.”<sup>75</sup> He goes on to say, however, that there is a prevalent frame of mind that has emerged in conjunction with the increasing prominence of modern science that makes it hard to see how experience, in the sense of “taking in” the world through our senses, could have any normative connection to our thinking. This frame of mind corresponds to Wilfrid Sellars’s attack on the Myth of the Given, and it can be summed up roughly as follows: the concept of justification (or answerability) is a normative one that belongs in what we could, following Sellars, call the “logical space of reasons.” Experience, on the other hand, is something that we tend to want to describe in natural scientific terms as “impingements by the world on a possessor of sensory capacities.”<sup>76</sup> Now the logical space within which such natural-scientific description takes place is, on Sellars’s view “different in kind from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons.”<sup>77</sup> This threatens to leave us with an unbridgeable gap between logical spaces at the point at which a minimal empiricism would require sensory experience to provide justification for our judgments.

Both McDowell and Rorty are in agreement with Sellars in thinking that the idea of an extra-conceptual given is indeed a myth. They differ, however, in that McDowell

---

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.xv.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

sets out to preserve the idea that a minimal empiricism in which direct experience can serve as a justification for beliefs is still possible and desirable, whereas Rorty rejects empiricism altogether and adopts a form of coherentism with respect to justification according to which beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs.

The form of coherentism that Rorty subscribes to is essentially that which has been developed by Donald Davidson. On Davidson's view, "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, although our experience of the world upon which "meaning and knowledge depend," itself depends "ultimately on sensations," this is "the 'depend' of *causality*, not of evidence or justification (my italics)."<sup>79</sup>

McDowell's opposition to this view involves two claims. The first is that "if our activity in empirical thought and judgment is to be recognizable as bearing on reality at all, there must be external constraint."<sup>80</sup> The second claim is that Davidson's picture, which encloses rational constraint on beliefs within the scope of the linguistic activity of giving and asking for reasons "does nothing to allay the worry" that it cannot accommodate "the sort of bearing on the world that empirical content amounts to."<sup>81</sup>

To frame the debate in alternative terms, both McDowell and Davidson (and for that matter Rorty) think of language and the external world in the context of a spatial metaphor in which language on one hand and the external physical world on the other

---

<sup>78</sup> Davidson, Donald, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) p.310.

<sup>79</sup> Davidson, p.314.

<sup>80</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.5.

<sup>81</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.14.

comprise intelligibly separable domains.<sup>82</sup> Within the context of this picture of the world as something “outside” of language, Davidson and Rorty maintain a sharp distinction between what *causes* our beliefs about aspects of the world and what *justifies* or *warrants* them. On their coherentist view, the objects or events in the world towards which our thoughts are directed exert only causal constraint on what we believe. Normative or rational constraint can only come from other beliefs, and hence is confined to the domain of the activities of thinking and speaking. McDowell is not happy with the implications of this distinction between cause and justification, and he maintains that in experience our conceptual capacities are drawn into play in such a way that “when we see that such-and-such is the case, we, and our seeing, do not stop anywhere short of the fact.”<sup>83</sup> Facts, unlike causal transactions in nature, are conceptually structured, and thus exert a rational constraint on our thinking. Furthermore, a fact is distinguished from a belief in that it is part of the layout of reality. Hence, in claiming that we *perceive facts*, McDowell can exploit a notion of constraint that is both rational and external in the way it needs to be if we are to accept the plausibility of a minimal empiricism.

McDowell’s notion that our conceptual capacities are to be understood as being “drawn into play” in experience requires further elaboration. As I see it, there are two

---

<sup>82</sup> This claim is not to be interpreted as being philosophically loaded. All three philosophers subscribe to a rejection of the ‘scheme/content’ distinction, so my claim is not meant to imply that they think there is a world that we have a right to be sceptical about our knowledge of. It is simply intended to register the fact that (a) Rorty and Davidson see a clear distinction between the statements and beliefs of thinkers which are connected by rational relations, and the common-sense world that causally-impinges on us; and (b) that McDowell sees a distinction between what we say in any given instance, and the objective common-sense world that many of our statements are about.

<sup>83</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.29.

aspects to this claim that are absolutely fundamental to his position if it is to be seen as resting comfortably between a frictionless coherentism and a futile appeal to the Given. Firstly, conceptual capacities must be thought of as pervading the *entire scope* of what we take to constitute perceptual experience in order for McDowell to deflect accusations that he is invoking a form of the Given himself.<sup>84</sup> In the Kantian terminology that he often employs, McDowell says that “in experience, spontaneity is inextricably implicated in deliverances of receptivity.”<sup>85</sup> This could be roughly translated as “in experience, our rational freedom to exercise conceptual capacities is inextricably implicated in our intake of perceptual data by way of the senses.” To avoid falling into the Myth of the Given, McDowell holds that “we must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to its co-operation with spontaneity.”<sup>86</sup>

This view reflects McDowell’s desire to respect what we might call a phenomenological (and I would argue commonsensical) conception of experience, in the sense that what I see when I look at a tree is *the tree itself*, as opposed to a pattern of sensory impressions or something along those lines. McDowell is not denying that the events that result in one’s having, say, a visual impression, are describable in terms of the realm of natural science. He is, however, arguing that the experience as conceived by an individual is *thoroughly structured* by his or her conceptual capacities, so that the notion of an extra-conceptual “bare presence” - the Given - is not in the picture. The following

---

<sup>84</sup> Michael Williams criticizes him along these lines in his paper “Exorcism and Enchantment” in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.46, No.182. pp 99-109. See especially p.106.

<sup>85</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.40-41.

<sup>86</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.41.

passage sums up his view of experience nicely:

In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content.<sup>87</sup>

The continuation of this passage leads nicely into a discussion of the second fundamental aspect of McDowell's view of experience as conceptually-saturated. It reads, "*that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are." And further, "experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks."<sup>88</sup> McDowell's entitlement to the claim that we directly perceive facts about the layout of reality, and moreover, that these facts exert a rational influence on our thinking, hinges on an acceptance of the premise that experience is passive.<sup>89</sup> By saying that experience is passive, he simply means to assert, as Michael Williams puts it, that "how we experience things as being is not in general something we can control."<sup>90</sup> Although we may be active in the sense of participating in the activities of looking, listening, touching, etc., the content of what we experience is *received*.<sup>91</sup> McDowell exploits this notion of passivity in conjunction with an argument

---

<sup>87</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.26.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> See McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.28.

<sup>90</sup> Williams, p.100.

<sup>91</sup> This should not, however, be taken as contradicting the claim that our conceptual capacities are inextricably implicated in experience. In an un-published criticism of the claim that experience is passive, Barry Allen writes "even the most striking experience is already an interpretation, already a response, hence partly our activity." ("Epistemological Friction: McDowell's Minimal Empiricism" p.6). I think that McDowell would agree. The fact that our conceptual capacities are drawn into play is evidence of the activity that we bring to an experience. Yet the point holds that *what* we experience is taken to be part of

quite similar to another one put forward by Sellars in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” Sellars argues that “instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it.”<sup>92</sup> This thought is intertwined with the idea that ‘having the concept of a thing’ like, say, the concept of “green,” involves a whole battery of rationally connected concepts like, for example, “the ability to tell what colours objects have by looking at them,” and “knowing in what circumstances to place an object if one wishes to ascertain its colour by looking at it,” etc.<sup>93</sup> Combining the thought that to experience something necessarily implies the integration of a broad conceptual framework with the thought that experience is passively received, McDowell finds it unproblematic to say that we are entitled “to understand an experience as awareness of something independent of the experience itself:

something that is held in place by its linkage into the wider reality, so that we can make sense of the thought that it would be so even if it were not being experienced to be so.<sup>94</sup>

To sum up these last few points, McDowell thinks we are entitled to the claim that our empirical statements are answerable to the way the world is because in experience our conceptual capacities thoroughly condition what we perceive, and this perception (which is passively received) is only possible against the backdrop of a web of concepts that

---

an external world that would be the way it is whether we experienced it or not.

<sup>92</sup> Sellars, p.176.

<sup>93</sup> See Sellars, p.146.

<sup>94</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.32.



implies a wider reality of which the object of our perception is merely a part.

I should like to make one final point before concluding this preliminary summary of *Mind and World*. The overall effect of the arguments that I have outlined thus far is that on McDowell's view, the sense in which we can say that a subject exists in and experiences *a world* is contingent on the sense in which we can say that she has come to possess the conceptual capacities that accrue from membership in a linguistic community. The upshot of this thought is that human experience, which is of a world structured by rational connections, is fundamentally different from merely animal experience which McDowell says is structured by biological imperatives, and has the character of coping with an environment.<sup>95</sup> He stresses the significance of this difference, yet takes pains to insist that it does not threaten an ultimately naturalistic view of human beings. The key to understanding this intermediary position lies in grasping the concept of what McDowell calls "second nature." Our second nature amounts to the aspect of our form of life that embodies our capacity to learn and use language, and it is manifested in our experience of a world shaped by rational connections as opposed to an environment shaped by biological imperatives. Equipped with this notion of second nature, McDowell thinks we can maintain a comfortable picture that respects both the idea that human beings do not transcend biology (for second nature could not "float free of potentialities that belong to a

---

<sup>95</sup> See McDowell, p.114-118. This idea, as McDowell acknowledges, is explicitly Gadamerian. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes, "To have a world means to have an orientation (*Verhalten*) toward it. To have an orientation toward the world, however, means to keep oneself free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of *world* is thus opposed to the concept of *environment*, which all living beings in the world possess." *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) p.443.

normal human organism”)<sup>96</sup>, as well as the idea that the human form of life, shaped in part by the ability to reflect on the world and decide what to think and do, is uniquely free and pervaded by reasons.

Having summarized the central themes of McDowell’s project in *Mind and World*, I shall turn now to a critical examination of Rorty’s objections to it

## 2. RORTY ON ‘THE VERY IDEA OF ANSWERABILITY TO THE WORLD’

The aspect of *Mind and World* to which Rorty chiefly objects is that which is embodied in the idea of ‘answerability to the world:’ the idea that our statements about things in the world are normatively constrained by the very things themselves. Rorty takes the “linguistic turn” in philosophy to be a turn away from having to see any point in asking questions about how thoughts bear on independent reality. His criticisms of *Mind and World* do not take the form of pointing out errors in McDowell’s arguments from an internal standpoint, so much as they attempt to portray his themes as irrelevant in light of what Rorty takes to be the intellectual advances of pragmatists like himself and, allegedly, Davidson.

Rorty claims to be a therapeutic philosopher in the tradition of Wittgenstein - one who would prefer to have earned the right to shrug his shoulders at problems involving the relationship between language and the world, rather than attempting to solve them. In light of this, one might be persuaded by Rorty’s claim that he and McDowell “have very

---

<sup>96</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.84.

little neutral ground” to stand on in debating their disagreements, since the McDowell of *Mind and World* clearly sees the relationship between language and the world as one that is still in need of being given philosophical peace.<sup>97</sup> Yet McDowell too claims to be a therapeutic philosopher in the tradition of Wittgenstein, and this should suggest to us that while there may not be neutral ground between Rorty and philosophers who offer systematically constructive solutions to the problems in question, there may still be room to evaluate the relative effectiveness of the therapies of Rorty and McDowell, respectively. Over the next several pages, I shall argue that Rorty has no choice but to accept that (a) the neutral ground he thought he had left behind is still very much beneath his feet and (b), he is not equipped with the proper footwear. In doing so, I will to a large extent be augmenting McDowell’s own arguments against Rorty in *Mind and World* by framing the issues in terms that have not been emphasized by either author. The position I aim to defend retains the spirit of McDowell’s arguments, yet differs in certain respects which will become apparent. Let us turn more directly to Rorty’s opposition to the idea of answerability to the world.

Rorty holds that there is no useful distinction between the idea of answerability to the world on one hand, and the idea of answerability to our peers on the other. Simply put, he thinks that the tradition of philosophy that has concerned itself with establishing whether our statements about things can be true (or at least warranted) in virtue of

---

<sup>97</sup> Rorty, Richard, “The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World” in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.151.

reflecting the way things *actually are* is superfluous when we consider that in practice, this criterion of truth is indiscernible from that which is embodied in the simple agreement of our peers with respect to what we say. Regarding the questions “Did *X* happen?” and “Can saying *X* happened pass muster in the current practice?”, Rorty says

anything that helps you decide to answer either question in the affirmative will, assuming that you yourself are a participant in the current practice, let you answer the other question in the same way.<sup>98</sup>

Hence, the difference between answerability to the world and answerability to one’s peers is, as the pragmatists say, “not a difference that makes a difference.” Rorty takes seriously both the idea of the contingent development of human language-games in an evolutionary context, and Wittgenstein’s idea that we must look upon language-games as primary. Accordingly, it is the notion of answerability to one’s peers that retains paramount importance on his view, while the notion of answerability to the world is rendered pointless.

Rorty’s objection to the idea of answerability to the world is an objection to what McDowell insists we must have if we are to retain a conception of common-sense objectivity: a minimal empiricism. Without going into detail regarding Rorty’s general renunciation of empiricism, it will be sufficient to say that Rorty’s rejection of traditional empiricism rests on a distinction that I have already discussed; namely, the distinction between causation and justification. As we have seen, he advocates drawing a “sharp line

---

<sup>98</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Response to John McDowell” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p.125

between experience as the cause of the occurrence of a justification, and the empiricist notion of experience as itself justificatory.”<sup>99</sup> Now you will recall that McDowell’s defense of a minimal empiricism stems from what he takes to be the incoherence of an alternative that Rorty endorses: a coherentism that prefers to connect the normativity of our claims about the world to other people’s claims about the world, rather than to the way the world is. McDowell thinks that we need a minimal empiricism to salvage the notion of thought’s being “in touch” or “bearing” on reality in the most general sense; in the sense that allows one to comfortably maintain that when one says things like “cold-fusion has not occurred,” one is making a claim about whether or not cold-fusion has occurred, rather than “achieving unison with one’s fellows in some perhaps purely decorative activity on a level with a kind of dancing.”<sup>100</sup> He thinks that this is a distinction that we can clearly make from within the practice of claim-making, and making it is central to his therapeutic project of rescuing common-sense and ordinary language from the clutches of sceptical philosophy. To put this point another way, McDowell thinks that if we do not let our perceptions stand in rational relations to the objects that we perceive, the very notion of the content of the beliefs that we have about these objects is put in question.<sup>101</sup> I shall return to this point about content shortly.

Now Rorty does not want to deny that thought is “in touch” with reality; he merely wants to contest the nature of the contact. Rorty says that human languages and practices

---

<sup>99</sup> Rorty, “On the Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World” p.141.

<sup>100</sup> McDowell, John, “Rehabilitating Objectivity” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p.118.

<sup>101</sup> See McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.68.

“are as natural as the beaver’s teeth, and equally in touch (causal touch, rather than any sort of ‘answerability touch’) with the world.”<sup>102</sup> It is this view of Rorty’s - that the only sort of bearing on the world that our beliefs about aspects of the world require is that of a non-normative, causal connection - which will serve as the focal point for my criticisms of his position. I shall turn to these criticisms now.

### 3. IN DEFENCE OF ANSWERABILITY: A CRITIQUE OF RORTY

The nature of my critique of Rorty will emerge more clearly if we look at his take on Davidson’s story of radical interpretation. In “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” Rorty enlists Davidson as a supporter of, among other things, the view that “we understand all there is to know about the relation of beliefs to the world when we understand their causal relations to the world.”<sup>103</sup> I wish to contest the way in which the notion of causation is here invoked, and I intend to cast doubt upon what Rorty thinks is accomplished by this invocation.

In his contribution to the philosophy of the “field linguist,” Rorty clearly separates two points of view from which we can look upon the relation of language to the world. The first is the “outside point of view” of the field linguist who is observing the linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour of an alien community - say, the natives of a remote island; and the second is the “inside point of view” that each one of us (and, of course, each one of the natives) has naturally in virtue of being a member of a linguistic community. From

---

<sup>102</sup> Rorty, “Response To John McDowell.” p.123.

<sup>103</sup> Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth.” p.335.

the outside point of view, according to Rorty, we can tell a *descriptive* story about the causal relationships that hold between objects in the world and bits of linguistic behaviour displayed by the natives. From the inside point of view, we can tell a *normative* story that simply consists of the un-philosophical, everyday “seeking after truth” that all speakers participate in in virtue of speaking a language. From within the inside point of view, “there is nothing more for us to know *about our relation to reality* than we already know.”<sup>104</sup>

Taken alone, Rorty’s characterization of the inside point of view appears to have much in common with McDowell’s therapeutic vision of language’s relation to the world. For example, a statement of Rorty’s like “in one sense of ‘world’...we know perfectly well what the world is like and could not possibly be wrong about it”<sup>105</sup> seems entirely compatible with statements of McDowell’s such as “in a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*.” They both reflect the sort of therapeutic, anti-sceptical sentiments embodied in Wittgensteinian remarks such as the following from *PI* 95: “when we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we - and our meaning - do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this-is-so*.” Where Rorty diverges from McDowell and Wittgenstein is in the way that he treats the relationship between the normative story associated with the inside point of view with the descriptive story associated with the outside point of view. Let me explain.

---

<sup>104</sup> Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” p.341.

<sup>105</sup> Rorty, Richard, “The World Well Lost” in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p.14.

Rorty writes, “the world thrusts beliefs on you, in the course of causal interactions between the program you have internalized in the course of becoming *gebildet* (trained into the custom of participating in a linguistic community) and your sense organs.”<sup>106</sup> He thus wants us to see our ordinary, everyday beliefs like “that is a tree” as being ultimately caused (but not justified) by some aspect of the world - the aspect of the world thrusting the belief on us. More specifically, I take it that Rorty would endorse the claim that in the case of the belief “that is a tree,” the object to which the cause of the belief would be ultimately attributed is the tree.<sup>107</sup> Here we arrive at the problems associated with Rorty’s picture.

Backing up a bit, you will recall that the descriptive story told by the field linguist depends on her identifying certain objects as being the causes of the bits of linguistic behaviour that are eventually credited with being the native’s beliefs. These objects, however, have determinate identities for the field linguist only in virtue of the forms of language and associated forms of life that are made manifest through the customs that are specific to the linguistic community of which she is a participant. This was the central point of the previous chapter.

In other words, the field linguist’s knowledge of what a tree is, and her

---

<sup>106</sup> Rorty, “On The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World,” p.147.

<sup>107</sup> At one point Rorty writes “McDowell agrees that rocks and trees do not talk, but they do not *just* cause us to make judgments either.” (“Answerability,” p.148). At another point he writes (as cited above) “the world thrusts beliefs on you, in the course of causal interactions between the program you have internalized in the course of becoming *gebildet* and your sense organs.” (“Answerability,” p.147). Assuming that “the world” is the world of determinate things (like rocks and trees), these passages support the claim that Rorty sees a sense in which determinately identifiable objects *do just cause* us to have beliefs and make judgments about them.



corresponding grasp of the meaning of the word “tree,” are outcomes of thoroughly normative pressures - the pressures of mastering the technique of participating in the language-games of the linguistic community of which she is a representative. Setting aside the external, interpretive viewpoint and focusing for a moment on the relationship between the field linguist’s use of language and the world in which she lives, I charge that it is invalid to suppose, as I think Rorty does, that objects (like trees) that exist in her world are *merely* causally-related to the beliefs that she has about them. The reason for this is that as soon as we talk about trees - as soon as we use the word “tree” meaningfully, we are both engaging in and contributing to a normative story. In uttering the statement “that is a tree,” our meaning does not stop anywhere short of the fact. There is nothing to the concept of “tree” outside of the sustaining normative-agreement of the community as to how that word is to be used that could possibly remain as something to which causal powers alone could be attributed

The point is analogous to McDowell’s criticism of Wright’s desire to “dig below bedrock” and attribute significance to sub-normative dispositions on the part of people to react the same way to certain stimuli (see chapter one). With respect to the present issue, Rorty wants to attribute causal powers to objects that operate on a sub-rational level, “below” the level at which we can talk of the norms that constrain what we can say about them. The normative level, for Rorty, is wholly a matter of justificatory links that hold between beliefs; links that hold between the manifest program-states of the members of a linguistic community. He thinks that the common-sense world of trees and rocks and stars and planets is perfectly understandable as a manifestation of a coherent web of these

program-states, and no philosophical problems arise with respect to how these program-states bear on the world. All the external constraint that is necessary comes in the form of the natural world's exercising "it's brute causal pressure on us."<sup>108</sup> He asks us to see the chain of justifications for our beliefs - "the lines of evidential force," and the causal "lines of referential direction," as being perpendicular to one another, and thus constitutive of mutually-independent stories. He says that "to know about the former lines is to know the language in which the beliefs are expressed," and

to know about the latter is to have an empirical theory about what the people who use that language mean by what they say - which is also the story about the causal roles played by their linguistic behaviour in their interaction with their environment.<sup>109</sup>

But here an important point of McDowell's must be made. The point is that to assume that a belief like "that is a tree" has the content *of a belief*, that is, that it operates as a "stance with respect to how things are in the world," while stipulating that the only form of constraint that the belief has with respect to the aspect of the external world which it is purportedly about is precisely *not* normative, is effectively to exacerbate the sceptic's feeling that there is a gap that needs to be bridged between what we *say* about the world and the way things *are* with the world.

It will not help Rorty to stipulate, as he does, that "norms are one thing and descriptions another," with the aim of this stipulation being to secure the thought that from the internal point of view, all that is required with respect to the notion of "being in

---

<sup>108</sup> Rorty, "On the Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World," p.148.

<sup>109</sup> Rorty, "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth," p.353.

touch with the world” falls out of our basic ability to speak a language.<sup>110</sup> This is clearly his intention in “The World Well Lost” when he invokes Davidson’s view that “belief is in its nature veridical,” to claim that because of “the fact that we shall *always* be holding mostly true beliefs...we shall automatically be ‘in touch with the world’ (most of the time).”<sup>111</sup> The reason why this will not do, is because the perfectly good insights that accompany this anti-sceptical notion of the internal point of view are spoiled by the implications of Rorty’s associated descriptive story. Were Rorty to have given us only the normative story that goes with the internal point of view, his position would come much closer to achieving the sort of philosophical peace that he strives for. By presenting the descriptive story as well, however, which incorporates a causal notion of language’s “being in touch” with reality that implicitly takes precedence over the sort of “automatic” touch that the normative story has, Rorty - as McDowell points out - leaves the door open for questions about the nature of the normative story’s bearing on the world.

Before elaborating on this point, I should address the fact that my claim that the descriptive story’s notion of ‘causal touch’ implicitly ‘takes precedence’ is apt to be contested by those inclined to side with Rorty on the issue at hand. It is, after all, Rorty’s point that the descriptive and normative stories are not meant to work in tandem; rather they are intended to be two ways of describing the same phenomena. Hence, I grant that Rorty does not intend for there to be a question of which sense of “being in touch with the

---

<sup>110</sup> See Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” p.347-355.

<sup>111</sup> Rorty, “The World Well Lost,” p.13.

world” is supposed to take precedence. The fact remains, however, that there is ample textual evidence in Rorty’s work to support the claim that when he talks about language’s being in touch with the world *in general*, it is *causal* touch that he is talking about. And this suggests that he himself does not keep the internal and external viewpoints separate in every respect, as we can gather from statements like “*things* (my italics) show up only as they causally impinge on *us*,” as well as the suggestion that experience, described in neurological terms, is “the cause of the occurrence of a justification.”

Returning to McDowell’s point, it can be re-stated in the following way: Rorty’s view that the objects of our beliefs are only causally-related to those beliefs leaves it looking mysterious as to how our ordinary thinking bears on the ordinary world “precisely because it separates relatedness to the world from the normative surroundings that are needed to make sense of the idea of bearing - rational bearing - on anything.”<sup>112</sup> Again, it is my view that Rorty could have avoided this accusation if he stuck to talking about the sense in which our thinking is “automatically” in touch with the world on the internal view. By insisting as he does, however, that relations of justification hold solely between beliefs, and that external constraint on our thinking comes *only* in the form of non-normative, causal impingements, he makes himself vulnerable to McDowell’s criticisms; criticisms which amount to the ironic claim (in light of Rorty’s explicit objectives) that his position provides “an object lesson in how not to rid ourselves of the illusory intellectual

---

<sup>112</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.151.

obligations of traditional philosophy.”<sup>113</sup>

With respect to Rorty’s normative and descriptive stories, McDowell thinks we should do exactly what Rorty forbids; that is, combine them together. He thinks that our normatively-shaped internal point of view towards the world must “embrace the causal interactions between believers and the objects of their beliefs,” so as to avoid the threat of its appearing mysterious as to how our beliefs, guided by our norms of inquiry, are to be understood as being stances toward the way things are.<sup>114</sup>

Although he does not explicitly draw the connection himself, I believe this point of McDowell’s is a parallel to his view that experience is, as I put it earlier, ‘conceptually-saturated.’ You will recall that McDowell thinks our normatively-structured conceptual capacities are thoroughly drawn into play in experience, so that we cannot make sense of any sort of ‘bare-presence’ or perceptual given that is subsequently converted into conceptualized information about the world. In the same way, McDowell thinks that one’s belief that “that is a tree” is *normatively* constrained by whether or not the object in question is a tree; and further, that whatever descriptive story we have to tell about the causal relationship between the object and belief must be told from within the bounds of the normative story. Like a pair of Russian dolls, the normative and descriptive stories can represent two ways of describing the same phenomena, provided that the latter always ‘fits inside’ the former.

It is important not to interpret McDowell as implying that the world to which our

---

<sup>113</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.146.

<sup>114</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.150.

thoughts are answerable is the world of “antecedent being” (to borrow a term from Allen) that figures into traditional correspondence theories of truth.<sup>115</sup> While it is true that McDowell thinks the world “vouchsafes facts” to us through our conceptually-mediated experience of it, these facts are not to be thought of as being structured by a natural order of things whose identities transcend human practices of referring to them. At one point McDowell writes: “there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case.”<sup>116</sup> The objective facts that our thinking is open to and constrained by are incomprehensible outside the notion of a world that is structured by rationally-connected concepts; the sort of world that is available only to one who has been trained into the customs of a linguistic community.

Having said this, the charge of idealism is equally as understandable as the charge that McDowell is putting forth a version of a correspondence theory. I will address the concept of idealism as it pertains to McDowell’s view in the final section. Right now I wish to turn to a second sort of criticism that can be levied against Rorty’s notion of causal constraint.

#### 4. ILLEGITIMATE CAUSES: A FURTHER CRITIQUE OF RORTY

At one point in his criticism of the notion of answerability to the world, Rorty

---

<sup>115</sup> Allen criticizes McDowell along these lines in “Epistemological Friction: McDowell’s Minimal Empiricism.”

<sup>116</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.27.

writes “human beings’ only confrontation with the world is the sort that computers also have.”

Computers are programmed to respond to certain causal transactions with input devices by entering certain program states. We humans program ourselves to respond to causal transactions between the higher brain centres and the sense organs with dispositions to make assertions. There is no epistemologically interesting difference between a machine’s program state and our dispositions, and both may equally well be called “beliefs” or judgments.”<sup>117</sup>

This is a fundamentally misleading analogy, and here is why: the content of a computer’s program state may be nothing more than a function of the program and its causal transaction with an input device, but the program will have been designed to respond one way or another to causal inputs whose identity is determinately known by the programmer. This makes it seemingly unproblematic to assert that a computer’s “confrontation with the world” is purely causal, because it implies an innocuous external standpoint from which we can glean a picture of a physical mechanism (e.g. the pressing of a key) on one hand and a rationally-structured program-state on the other, with nothing but a causal transaction connecting them. This external standpoint is precisely what we do not have, however, when it comes to understanding language’s bearing on the world.<sup>118</sup>

For to suppose that we could look upon our beliefs and judgments as being caused by

---

<sup>117</sup> Rorty, “On the Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World,” p.141.

<sup>118</sup> A field linguist, of course, has access to this standpoint when he or she is interpreting the linguistic behaviour of an alien linguistic community. But when Rorty says things like “*We* humans program ourselves to respond to certain causal transactions between the higher brain centres and the sense organs,” and “*we* can describe both ourselves and machines in normative, programming terms or in non-normative, hardware terms,” (my italics) he clearly implies a sense in which his version of the normative story (told from the internal point of view) can be supplemented by a causal story in which the ultimate objects of the causal story are identifiable only by means of the normative story.

various transactions in nature in the way that various computer program states are caused by pressing one key or another would require that we could make sense of the determinate identity of certain aspects of nature outside of the normative reach of the forms of our language to which the causes are attributed. The arguments of Allen and Cavell were intended to demonstrate that the notion of a determinate natural order understood in isolation from actual linguistic practice is untenable. According to Allen and Cavell, the identities of things attain determinate significance concurrently with the flourishing of linguistic practices that involve referring to them. This leaves no room for an intelligible causal story, in which some determinate entity, whether known or merely posited, is to be seen as standing in relations of cause and effect with a belief; relations that are devoid of the sort of normative character that is needed for there to be any meaningful content to the linguistic signs that make up the belief.<sup>119</sup>

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the external standpoint accompanying Rorty's computer analogy implies that the program states ("beliefs" or "judgments") are to be thought of as *corresponding* to the particular input devices that cause them. It is precisely Rorty's point that the identity of the cause has no normative connection to the identity of the program state, with the consequence being that what really matters with respect to the identity of the program state is the program, not the causal input.

The fact remains, however, that in suggesting that there is a purely causal

---

<sup>119</sup> This does not contradict McDowell's claim that causal relations must be embraced in thought's normative bearing on the world. The important difference is that the causal-descriptive story is told from within the bounds of the normative story - from within the bounds of the thinkable world.



connection between things in the world and the linguistically-structured belief states that we have, Rorty is exacerbating the sort of dualism of reason and nature that he wants to leave behind. There may be no point in talking about a correspondence between language and aspects of reality on Rorty's view, but the notion of causal connection that he advocates clearly implies the idea of a world outside of and conceptually prior to normatively-structured language, consisting of entities sufficiently determinate to be held responsible for causing our beliefs and judgments. It is one thing to cite a purely causal connection between certain objects in a field linguist's internal world-view on one hand, and the bits of linguistic behaviour that she takes to be native beliefs on the other. It is another to suppose that the objects in *our* world *cause* our beliefs without also normatively constraining them. The latter is what is, on my view, problematic.

Rorty seems to come close to avoiding the problem when, referring to our internal point of view towards the world, he says things like "there is nothing more for us to know *about our relation to reality* than we already know." A statement like this suggests the idea that our thoughts touch the world directly simply in virtue of our speaking a language. As I have mentioned already, however, Rorty spoils this insight by criticizing McDowell's notion of answerability to the world, invoking instead a picture of a merely causal connection between our statements and the objects they are about. McDowell's notion is not meant to imply answerability to what Rorty would call "the world well lost" - the sort of world with which our beliefs could conceivably be largely out of touch; rather it is, in McDowell's words "the perfectly ordinary world in which there are rocks, snow is

white and so forth.”<sup>120</sup> I would add that it is the ordinary world in the sense that to know what a thing in it is is simply to be able to use a word correctly, rather than to be *caused* to use a word that is then deemed to be correct or incorrect according to what other people say.

Ultimately, the point is this: since we are incapable of attributing a determinate identity to anything that is to operate as the cause of a belief without using language to articulate what it is, the vertical component of Rorty’s picture of perpendicular lines is stripped of any sort of descriptive usefulness. Furthermore, his causal story depends on a conception of nature prior to linguistic mediation that is sufficiently determinate to be held responsible for causing beliefs. This is a conception of nature that the arguments of the previous chapter have shown to be incomprehensible.

This is not to snub the language of modern science, in which causal descriptions can be given (e.g. light bounces off an object and impinges on our retina, etc.). It is merely to say that this sort of description must fall-out of the more fundamental view that whatever is a part of our world is comprehensible for us only as a result of the language-games we participate in which are, as the first two chapters argued, thoroughly normative.

## 5. CONCLUSION: REASON, NATURE, AND THE END OF EXPLANATIONS REVISITED

I mentioned earlier that McDowell’s position is susceptible to the charge of

---

<sup>120</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 151.

idealism. He recognizes this, and in fact denies the charge.<sup>121</sup> His reasons for maintaining that his position is not one of idealism are essentially captured in a distinction that he makes between (a) the act of *thinking* and (b) that which is *thinkable*. The common-sense notion of independent reality that McDowell wants to preserve a coherent conception of is left intelligibly in the picture, he thinks, if rational constraint comes simply from outside *thinking*. The claim is that this is possible without also having to understand constraint as having to come from outside what is *thinkable*.<sup>122</sup>

So we have a view according to which the objects that make up our world are confined to the bounds of what is thinkable (which is another way of putting the thesis that there is no comprehending a natural order of things with determinate identities outside of the existence of language-games credited with normatively enforcing standards of reference). Yet, independent reality is not slighted, because what we take in in perceptual experience are facts about the world. These facts are held in place by the background network of rational relations that is needed, as Sellars argues, to make sense of perceptual experience in the first place; and these rational relations are in turn a manifestation of the conceptual capacities we possess in virtue of having been trained into a particular linguistic tradition. These conceptual capacities are what McDowell thinks we must take to be thoroughly drawn into play in experience, so as to avoid the need to invoke any sort of problematic pre-conceptual given.

---

<sup>121</sup> See the second lecture of *Mind and World*.

<sup>122</sup> See *Mind and World*, p.28.

In light of the fact that McDowell's position so clearly rests on the notion that what we are inclined to call "the world" is bounded by what is "thinkable," I contend that his attempts to deny accusations of idealism outright are not likely to be taken too seriously. McDowell's only argument in support of the claim that our conceptually-mediated experiences allow us to be aware of genuinely independent reality is summarized in the following passage:

The object of an experience, the state of affairs experienced as obtaining, is understood as part of a whole thinkable world. Since the whole is independent of this particular experience, we can use the linkage into the mostly unexperienced world to hold the object of this particular experience in place, while we ask how things would have been if the experience had not occurred.<sup>123</sup>

"The world," however, is ultimately equivalent to "the thinkable world," and there is no aspect of it that is comprehensible outside of the network of concepts that have significance only insofar as they are the product of a linguistic community's following sign-posts in customary ways. Rather than combating the charge of idealism, then, I think McDowell would be better off exploiting a distinction that Gadamer makes between idealism as a traditional metaphysical doctrine, and what we might call "methodological idealism."<sup>124</sup> Bearing such a distinction in mind, we can deny the metaphysical claim that all things are merely ideas or manifestations of the mind, while recognizing the methodological claim that our linguistic experience of the world is prior to everything that

---

<sup>123</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.36.

<sup>124</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.448, note. 84.

is recognized and addressed as existing.<sup>125</sup> This latter claim is, I believe, perfectly compatible with the sort of common-sense direct realism that McDowell aims to present as philosophically-innocuous. We can recognize that our experience of living in *a world* is contingent on our participation in a linguistic tradition without sacrificing the idea that this world consists of things that are independent of us - part of an objective external reality. The fact that normatively-structured language-games are necessary for the identification of determinate things in the world should not pose any sort of sceptical threat to the idea that our ordinary thoughts and statements are indeed about the world. Wittgenstein reminds us that we must resist the urge to find it mysterious as to how thought can possibly deal with “the very object itself;” otherwise we will be left trying to explain how by means of thought, we manage to catch reality “in our net”(PI 428). Approaching the matter in this way only serves to fuel the need for the sort of constructive philosophy that people like Wittgenstein and McDowell want to expose as futile.

If we take seriously the major points of the last three chapters - that the meanings of our words are exhausted in the customary uses to which signs are put within the institution of a linguistic tradition; that the rules that emerge from this practice of following signs are sustained by the necessarily vague notion of basic human agreement, which is a phenomenon that lies outside the scope of possible explanations for why we do

---

<sup>125</sup> This is a paraphrase of the following passage from Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*: “Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing.” I have chosen to substitute “linguistic experience” for “verbal experience” because I take the bounds of what can potentially count as language to extend beyond merely verbal exercises of it. That is to say, any activity that could be incorporated into the sort of custom that yields recognizable signs could conceivably embody meanings for those who have mastered the technique.

what we do or say what we say; and that the world and its contents emerge concurrently with our distinctively human forms of life which are inextricably intertwined with our forms of our language - we are in a position to see how these points entail what we might call a philosophically-innocuous common-sense realism. What is more, this insight suggests that any debate about whether McDowell's position is one of idealism or realism is pointless. The sort of idealism that is implied by McDowell's claim that reality is conceptually within the realm of what is thinkable is indistinguishable in terms of explanatory power from ordinary common-sense realism, for the reason that the objects which our statements are about are identifiable only as a result of the mediating effects of our language anyway. This of course does not threaten objectivity, for how else is one supposed to assert a fact about the world like "it is snowing" other than by using language? ("How do I know that this colour is red? - It would be an answer to say: 'I have learnt English'"[*PI* 381]).

Now, let us return to the complication with which we began this final chapter. You will recall that we faced a potential problem with respect to accommodating the insights of modern science (particularly those pertaining to evolution) with the claim that everything we can say about the world is conditioned by our contingent language-games. What are we to make of the idea of the raw material nature out of which we humans have evolved, and of which we are still, biologically-speaking, a part?

Before formulating an answer to this question, I would like to make note of a tentative distinction that Noam Chomsky draws between a person's "knowledge of language," which reflects his capacity "to acquire knowledge in a relatively 'pure form,'"

and the sort of higher-level empirical knowledge that pertains to what we think of as being matters of scientific fact.<sup>126</sup> I draw attention to this distinction primarily to pre-empt a possible objection to the position I have been developing throughout. The objection is that if in virtue of simply being trained into the custom of speaking a language our meanings do not stop anywhere short of the fact, it is not clear how we are to account for the intuitive idea that someone who speaks English *and* has, say, a Ph.D in Physics, has a vastly greater knowledge of “facts about the layout of reality” than someone who speaks English just as well, but does not have a Ph.D in Physics? My response is simply to say that the person who has a Ph.D in Physics is the master of certain language-games that the ‘lowly’ speaker of English cannot play. The lowly speaker of English, however, may be an English major and may therefore have a wealth of knowledge about the human emotions as depicted in Shakespeare, or something like that. The point is two-fold: firstly, neither one necessarily knows more about *the world* than the other, because the world consists of whatever we talk about - whatever is relevant to our forms of life; and secondly, there *is* a distinction that can be made between empirical knowledge and other sorts of knowledge, but the criteria for which sort of knowledge falls into which category is embedded in the language-games we play, not in intrinsic facts about pre-linguistically-mediated nature.

Returning to Chomsky’s distinction, then, I see no difficulty with the idea that causal-descriptive stories like the ones that make up the theory of evolution develop as the

---

<sup>126</sup> Chomsky, Noam, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971) p.22.

forms of our language develop, bringing with them perpetual change in the aspect of our form of life that pertains to our understanding of the physical universe. On this subject Gadamer writes, “the world of objects that science knows, and from which it derives its own objectivity, is one of the relativities embraced by language’s relation to the world.”<sup>127</sup> In following the norms of inquiry that are sustained by the forms of our language, human beings develop scientific narratives that purport to “uncover the truth” (for that is, as McDowell notes, the *point* of norms of inquiry)<sup>128</sup> about the universe in which we live.

What we need to address in more detail, however, is the matter of what I shall tentatively call the “substratum” out of which the grand feedback loop of human language and the corresponding forms of life emerge. This is a difficult sort of thing to talk about, for reasons that should now be apparent.

In his unpublished paper entitled “Epistemological Friction: McDowell’s Minimal Empiricism,” Allen criticises the sense in which McDowell thinks that the world and its contents come into view for us as we acquire language. Specifically, he criticises the sense in which this notion of a world pervaded by rational relations in which only humans live (in virtue of having language) is opposed to the notion of a mere environment, in which all other living things live. Drawing a parallel between McDowell’s view and that of Heidegger (and elsewhere Gadamer), Allen writes

the advent of “the space of reasons” would be what Heidegger calls *das Ereignis* - world-disclosure, letting what-is be. So singular an “Event” is not intelligible as an outcome of evolution. Instead, it would be the

---

<sup>127</sup> Gadamer, p.450.

<sup>128</sup> See *Mind and World*, p.151.



inscrutable Origin of evolution and everything else.<sup>129</sup>

The challenge, then, is to preserve the insight that the world as it is experienced by us humans *is* contingent on the forms of our language (the arguments for which constitute the bulk of the second and third chapters of this work), while simultaneously taking evolution seriously. In order to do this, I think we need to posit some sort of material substratum that underlies and sustains what we, through the benefit of our language, think of as the world. This is the only way we shall be able to accommodate the idea that human history constitutes a mere fraction of the greater history of the physical world; a history that derives its sense and its convincingness from the norms of inquiry that are sustained by our forms of language.

It should be apparent, however, that the sort of substratum I am hinting at sounds suspiciously like the idea of pre-linguistically-mediated nature that the arguments of Allen and Cavell rendered incomprehensible. In light of this, I claim that the most satisfying way out of this potential double-bind is to once again appeal to an idea of Wittgenstein's; one that can be taken as either paradoxical, or as signifying an "end of explanations" of the sort that the last chapter dealt with. The idea is this: what I am calling the "material substratum" (for lack of a better term), should be seen as not a something, but not as a nothing either. Alternatively, it may be seen as something about which nothing can be said. The relevant passage from the *Investigations* reads like this:

"But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour

---

<sup>129</sup> Allen, "Epistemological Friction," p.12.

accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?" - Admit it? What greater difference could there be? - "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*" - Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here.

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts - which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please. (*PI* 304).

Wittgenstein of course presents this idea within the context of his so-called "private-language argument," specifically in reference to the concept of the naming or identifying of one's own pain sensation. I do not have room to go into depth regarding the specifics of the private-language argument, but the relevant points can be summed up as follows: We are seduced by the forms of our grammar into thinking that when we make statements like "I am in pain," we are recognising something - *the pain sensation* - which is determinate and identifiable; something which is a fundamental aspect of reality that, by means of language, we are capable of naming and subsequently referring to when we talk to other people. The corresponding view of language in general is that its function is to *convey* the thoughts that we have about these aspects of reality - thoughts which are initially structured by some sort of interaction with reality that is direct and prior to their subsequent linguistic shaping. It is this kind of thinking that leads the interlocutor to insist that there *must* be "a something" that someone who displays pain-behaviour accompanied by pain has, and that someone who displays pain-behaviour without pain does not have. Wittgenstein accepts that there is clearly a difference (one person is genuinely in pain while the other is not), but the error is in attributing the difference to the pre-linguistic

recognition of something in particular on the part of the person who is in pain. The wider point is that the word “pain” is learned not on the model of strict ostensive definition (see chapter two), but in the context of a technique with respect to the custom of using the word “pain” in one way or another. The upshot is that *the pain itself* is real - it is not a nothing; but it’s identity as a real thing is thoroughly mediated by the way the word “pain” is used, rather than serving as the pre-linguistic foundation for the subsequent conveying of thoughts about pains. In this sense it is not a something; at least it is not a thing about which anything can be said, because to try to say anything about it would involve digging below bedrock - below the normative level that is fundamental to the language-game (see chapter one).

I contend that this principle is applicable to what I reluctantly call the substratum of *everything* that we take to exist in the world. Since this substratum is something about which nothing can be said, it belongs conceptually to the vague family of ideas that we must just point to: ideas that mark the point at which explanations must come to an end.

I would like to end by drawing a connection between my remarks concerning the feedback loop I discussed in chapter two, and McDowell’s notion of second nature. At the end of the last chapter, we concluded that there could be no more foundational explanation of why we do what we do and say what we say beyond recognition of the fact that “this language-game is played.” Furthermore, the normative constraints that shape our meanings and the “space of reasons” within which we live were seen to be the outcome of a feedback-loop of blind reactions and conceptually-mediated activities, sustained throughout by the phenomenon of basic human agreement. The upshot is what

we may call our form of life - a complex of the biological forces that embody our behavioural potential as human beings, and the way in which our lives and the world in which we live are shaped by the forms of our language. In McDowell, we find the same general idea in the concept of “second nature.”

McDowell’s concept of second nature is motivated by the desire to respect the compatibility of two ideas: the idea that our world - our “space of reasons” - emerges from the distinctively human activity of participating in the ongoing customs of a linguistic tradition; and the fact that modern natural science “reveals a special kind of intelligibility” that he dubs “the realm of (natural) law.”<sup>130</sup> Although his terminology is somewhat different, this is essentially the same as the challenge I have just addressed. His key point is that we can refuse to equate the domain of intelligibility specific to the realm of law with the very *idea* of nature, “let alone what is real.”<sup>131</sup> In this way, the aspect of our form of life that is normatively structured and which embodies our experience of the world can be understood as an actualization of certain aspects of our nature: those relating to our human capacity for language. Comprehending our biological nature is in turn contingent on our possession of concepts, and we are right back to where we started. This picture is essentially analogous to that of the feedback loop in which unjustifiable actions form a complex with conceptually-mediated actions (actions that are explicable from within the space of reasons) to give us the human experience as we live it. There is

---

<sup>130</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.109.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

no priority in either direction. What is common to both pictures is the need to respect a point at which we can do no more to explain how the wheels get set in motion. Beyond this point is that about which nothing can be said. Contemplating that about which nothing can be said may inspire feelings (such as “wonder at the existence of the world“), but feelings do not easily fit into philosophical doctrines.

If we respect these ideas, is our reward philosophical peace? I am hesitant to offer a judgment, save for asserting that I think it gets us every bit as close to this elusive goal as Rorty’s rival outlook does. Perhaps I will add one more general comment: as long as the human condition is such that we have the conceptual means to ask interesting questions that have no hope of yielding clear-cut answers, philosophy as we know it will remain, as always, fascinatingly restless.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Barry, *Truth In Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “Epistemological Friction: McDowell’s Minimal Empiricism” (unpublished paper)
- Cavell, Stanley, “Excurses on Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language” reprinted in *The New Wittgenstein*, eds. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Chomsky, Noam, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971)
- Davidson, Donald, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)
- Finkelstein, David, “Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism” in *The New Wittgenstein*, eds. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989)
- Kripke, Saul, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982)
- Malcolm, Norman, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994)
- McDowell, John, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule” in *Mind Value and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “Rehabilitating Objectivity” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)
- Mulhall, Stephen, “Seeing Aspects” in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001)
- Rorty, Richard, “The Very Idea of Answerability to the World: John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism” in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on*

- the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “The World Well Lost” in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “Reply to John McDowell” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)
- Sellars, Wilfrid, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963)
- Williams, Michael, “Exorcism and Enchantment” in *The Philosophical and Quarterly*, Vol.46, No. 182, pp.99-109
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953)
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. by G.H von Wright, R.Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967)
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972)
- Wright, Crispin, “On Making Up One’s Mind” in *Logic, Philosophy of Science and Epistemology: Proceedings of the 11th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, eds. Paul Weingartner and Gerhard Schurz (Vienna: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1987)
- \_\_\_\_\_ “Rule-Following, Meaning and Constructivism” in *Meaning and Interpretation*, ed. Charles Travis (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1986)