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What's Reality Got to Do with It? Wittgenstein, Empirically Informed Philosophy, and the Missing Methodological Link

Abstract

"Don't think, but look!" (PI: § 66). This exhortation has served as a methodological mantra for several influential thinkers in the broadly defined tradition of "empirically informed" philosophy, which has flourished in recent decades. However, a methodological gap exists between Wittgenstein's work and these turns to practice, history, science, field-work, and everyday life: Wittgenstein's approach differs substantially from that of thinkers who claim to take their cues from him, and no argument for the legitimacy of the move from Wittgenstein to empirically informed philosophy has been advanced to date. This article will demonstrate how such a move may be justified within a Wittgensteinian framework, as well as how it is philosophically beneficial and, at times, even necessary.

1. "Don't think, but look!"

Wittgenstein's insisting exhortation in *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) § 66 has served as a methodological mantra for thinkers in the broadly defined tradition of empirically informed philosophy, which has flourished in recent decades, casting the armchair philosopher into disrepute. The orientation towards "the empirical" has been justified on various grounds, including its ability to help thinkers avoid becoming ensnared in problematic conceptual dichotomies, such as "subject" vs "object" or "theory" vs "the empirical" (Stern 2003: 185; Hermansen 2017: 54); its potential to counter false empirical or biased premises in arguments (Hämäläinen 2021: 43); and its ability to support our thinking in addressing both what actually is and what ought to be at stake in human life (Appiah 2009: 1; Greene 2014: 5).

Several of these thinkers, including Winch (2008), Bloor (1983, 2006), Schatzki (1996, 2002), Chappell (2017), and Hämäläinen (2016, 2020), point to Wittgenstein's later work as a source of inspiration for the direction of philosophical attention towards, for instance, actual practices, historical cases, scientific research, anthropological fieldwork, and scenes from everyday life. However, a methodological gap exists between Wittgenstein's work and current empirical turns in the sense that Wittgenstein's approach differs considerably from that of these researchers in his description of language games, practices, and forms of life. This raises the question as to whether – and if so, how – one may justifiably claim to be taking a methodological cue from Wittgenstein in engaging in empirically informed philosophy. To date, no argument for this claim has been advanced.[1]

This article investigates how one can justify the claim that one is taking their methodological lead from Wittgenstein's later work while engaging in forms of empirically informed philosophy. I examine the sense in which Wittgenstein recommends that thinkers turn towards and describe practices and forms of life in three steps. Firstly, I provide an account of his methodological recommendations, secondly, I compare Wittgenstein's recommendations with his own methodological approach and lastly, I compare his recommendations with the work of thinkers who have been inspired by Wittgenstein and who engage in empirically informed philosophy. The first part of this article concludes that it is possible to adhere to a Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy and yet still investigate and use, for instance, empirical case studies, historical research, and fieldwork in ways that differ from those applied by Wittgenstein. I shall also argue that, in some cases, it can be philosophically necessary to describe actual – as opposed to possible or imaginary – practices and forms of life. Finally, I shall elaborate why, in other cases, it may be philosophically rewarding to describe practices and human life in more elaborate ways than generally described by Wittgenstein.

[1] To avoid misunderstandings, getting inspiration from something requires no justification or explanation. Therefore, I do not claim that researchers who have read and been inspired by Wittgenstein but who have subsequently diverged from Wittgenstein in their approach are doing something academically problematic when they do not supply their readers with justifications for this divergence. Rather, my aim in this article is to investigate whether such a justification can be determined for those researchers who wish to take their cues from Wittgenstein in a more committed sense but who continue to engage in types of empirically informed philosophy in which Wittgenstein did not engage. Hämäläinen (2021: 31–40, 43–7) unpacks why some Wittgensteinians have interpreted Wittgenstein as rejecting "empirical means" in philosophy.

2. Wittgenstein and empirically informed philosophy

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, philosophers and thinkers in other disciplines have found it increasingly beneficial to turn their attention towards and allow their thinking to be informed by what I term here "the empirical".[2] This manifests as attention to and investigation of, for instance, the work that is performed in medical laboratories; research results in neuroscience, biology, and psychology; and field-work in anthropology, historical archives, and aspects of everyday life. It can also include empirical experiments in the case of experimental philosophy (x-phi).[3]

The later work of Wittgenstein is regarded as a source of methodological inspiration for thinkers across various academic disciplines, including jurisprudence, sociology, moral anthropology, social science, technology studies, moral philosophy, and the philosophy of science.[4] As noted by one of the editors of *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Wittgenstein's work has been influential in shaping practice theory, which denotes thinkers who either "develop an account of practices [… or] treat the field of practices as the place to study the nature and transformations of their subject matter" (Schatzki 2006: 2).

These thinkers have the shared goal that such investigations, in addition to dialogues with other research disciplines, will help philosophers do justice to,

[2] The tendency among philosophers to turn to versions of "the world of phenomena", "the empirical" or "reality" is not new but rather has been a recurring trend in philosophy since the birth of the field (compare, for instance, Aristotle's empirically informed approach to the rational approach adopted by Plato). An analysis of whether – and if so, how – current empirical approaches differ from earlier turns lies beyond the scope of this article.

[3] Several different strands have emerged within this multifaceted trend. One concerns *how* thinkers should turn, for instance, to practices, scientific research or everyday life (see e.g., Frankfurt 1995: 80–94; Mattingly 2014: ix–79; Das 2020: 1–27; Chappell 2017: 710, 718; Sandis 2010). Another strand is characterised by debate among those thinkers who make practice their key focal point as to how "practice" should be defined – if at all (see, e.g., Morawetz 2000: 19–36; Stern 2003: 185–186; Rouse 2007: 46; Schatzki 2008: 89; Koopman 2017: 104).

[4] See, e.g., Winch 2008: 22–38, 106–108; Bloor 1983: 1–5; 2006: 95; Stern 2003: 194–201; Heyes 2003: 8; Schatzki 2000, 2002: xii, 2008: 18; Bix 2006: 137; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks and Yanow 2009: 1310–1314; Lambek 2010: 2; Hui, Schatzki and Shove 2017: 1; Hermansen 2017: 41; Hämäläinen 2020: 363, 2021: 28–30, 47. Among this sub-group of researchers, we also find disagreements about, for instance, whether philosophy aims to produce "theories" and "explanatory empirical work" (see, e.g., Bloor 1983: 4–5, 182–183; Cerbone 1994: 159–180; Stern 2003).

or develop better theories of, the phenomena they seek to understand. In the next two sections, I shall briefly describe what the later Wittgenstein writes about the nature of philosophy and how he engages in philosophy.[5]

3. Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and philosophical methods

Wittgenstein points out that philosophers often attempt to understand the nature of everyday familiar phenomena (PI: §§ 89, 120), such as 'law', 'understanding', or 'time'.[6] He also notes that philosophical investigations are conceptual investigations that should be initiated when we face conceptual challenges (PI: § 90; Z: § 458). The philosophical tradition deals with conceptual questions and problems as its raison d'être, but such challenges also arise and must be dealt with in various other contexts of human life.

When we wish to understand what "a justification" is, for instance, Wittgenstein recommends that we look at and describe how the word is used: "How is the word 'justification' used? Describe language-games!" (PI: § 486). "The word 'language-*game*' is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (PI: § 23l). According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of signs, sounds, pictures, and gestures is our use of them in practice (PI: §§ 43, 116). Philosophical investigations are thus investigations not only of mere words but also of human practices and forms of life, given that language is intertwined with and expresses ways of living (RFM VI: § 34). Wittgenstein recommends that we use words to describe our practices and experiences of everyday life based on his belief that, in many cases, philosophical problems are resolved when we are reminded and obtain an overview of the uses of the word in question (PI: §§ 116, 127). The goal of philosophy is to dissolve philosophical problems and attain conceptual clarity (PI: § 133; Kuusela 2008: 75).

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[5] The following account can neither claim to do full justice to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy nor to represent a neutral standard interpretation, as his conception is a continuously debated topic in Wittgenstein scholarship (see Fann 1969; Hacker 1972; Anscombe 1981; Malcolm 1986; Creegan 1989; Glock 1991; McGinn 1997; Cavell 1999; Baker 2006; Kuusela 2008; Conant 2011; de Mesel 2015).

[6] In this article, Wittgenstein's works are abbreviated as follows: Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: LFM. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics:* RFM. *Culture and Value*: CV. *On Certainty*: OC. *Philosophical Investigations*: PI, and part two: PI II. *Zettel*: Z. Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: RFGB.

It can thus be established beyond any reasonable doubt that "practices", "the everyday", "forms of life", "looking", and "describing" all play a central role in the later Wittgenstein's thinking and that he further recommends that we philosophise from the perspectives of human practice and ordinary life as a good means to gain conceptual clarity. It is therefore unsurprising that several philosophers working today in empirically informed ways consider Wittgenstein a source of methodological inspiration. The conundrum arises when we consider not only what Wittgenstein says but also what he does and compare it with the work performed by empirically informed philosophers. The comparison is apt, as Wittgenstein's way of engaging in philosophy may be considered the best explication of what he means when he urges philosophers to examine and describe quotidian practices and uses of words. In the next section, therefore, I shall describe how Wittgenstein conducts philosophy.

4. Wittgenstein's philosophical practice

If we look to the later Wittgenstein's work to learn how to engage in forms of empirically informed philosophy, it is surprising – given the above quotations and given that several influential thinkers claim to have been inspired by Wittgenstein in this regard – to discover that his writings are not significantly characterised by elaborate empirical descriptions or empirical investigations of the everyday realities of human practices. Moreover, Wittgenstein does not report the results of activities such as entering medical laboratories, setting up empirical experiments, interviewing and observing families dealing with cancer, consulting the latest empirical research, or studying legal history. That is, Wittgenstein does not engage in any of the activities that modern-day empirically informed thinkers consider philosophically beneficial. What, then, do we encounter in Wittgenstein's work?

The first noteworthy aspect of Wittgenstein's approach is the genre in which he writes, which is perhaps best characterised as "dialogical aphorisms". As readers of his texts, we encounter remarks and conversations on shifting topics between unnamed and concerned voices: voices that are passionately insistent, that urge – if not outright command – the reader to do things. These voices express doubt and rethorical tone; they pose questions and give

responses, only to go on to question these responses from yet another perspective. It is not always clear which voice – if any – is that of Wittgenstein himself (McGinn 1997: 10; Cavell 1999: 344).

Wittgenstein uses various tools and methods in his philosophical enquiries: he invents language-games as objects of comparison to existing practices (PI: § 2); he reminds the reader of facts (PI: § 27), mentioning well-known details about human nature and the world (PI: § 25); he poses questions (PI: § 10), at times he is adopting a tone that (to this reader, at least) is characterised by humour and sarcasm (PI: §§ 250, 327); he points to differences or similarities between real or invented language games (PI: §§ 164, 268); he invents alternative natural histories and cultures (PI: §§ 142, 312); he produces drawings to illustrate philosophical points (PI: § 86); he employs metaphors and analogies (PI: §§ 119, 164); he asks the reader to engage in certain activities – for example, to imagine something, to ask oneself a question, to compare two phenomena, to contemplate or examine something (PI: §§ 4, 78, 79, 330, 411, 502, 578); he draws a line between phenomena that we find strange and those that are familiar (RFGB: 123); he dismisses a question's implicit presuppositions by exposing it as a nonsensical question (PI: § 47); and he employs classical *reductio ad absurdum* arguments (PI: §§ 243–315). Wittgenstein further invokes ordinary aspects of actual human societies and practices, such as some societies' practice of weighing cheese on a scale to determine its price (PI: § 142), or the fact that we do not expect houses to evaporate inexplicably (OC: § 513). His invocation of actual practices and the everyday is merely a minor aspect of his approach and does not extend to lengthy or detailed empirical descriptions of what typically unfolds in human life. Most of the practices and scenarios that Wittgenstein mentions are provided only brief descriptions (Cerbone 1994: 171, 179). It seems fair, therefore, to categorise his remarks as "touching on" or "pointing to" aspects of our practices and life-form, rather than substantially describing them.

A greater source of concern, however, regarding the legitimacy of the claim that Wittgenstein's work offers methodological insights for those wishing to engage in empirically informed philosophy is that the practices often encountered in Wittgenstein's later work do not reflect actual activities but rather evoke *imaginary* practices and scenarios, and at times even odd or bizarre ones (Cerbone 1994: 161–165; Peach 2004: 299; Moi 2017: 24). For example, Wittgenstein describes people using soft, elastic rubber rulers rather than

wooden or steel rulers to take measurements (RFM I: § 5), or a tribe who consult an oracle in situations where we consult and invoke our knowledge of physics (OC: § 608–609). At times, the practices Wittgenstein describes are scarcely recognisable as *human* practices. Such is the case of the famous opening scenes from a building site in *Philosophical Investigations*: here, the linguistic scarcity and silence between the builders assumes an empty, machine-like character: "'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam' […] – conceive of this as a *complete* primitive language", Wittgenstein exhorts us (PI: § 2, emphasis mine). Although most of us can probably do this, it does not appear to be the language of humans. He also asks us to picture a reality that is difficult to truly imagine, as follows:

> What if something *really unheard-of* happened? – If I, say, saw houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause, if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words; if trees gradually changed into men and men into trees. (OC: § 513)

Such cases can by no means be regarded as descriptions of actual practices, facts about the world, or scenes from everyday life.

Although Wittgenstein recommends that philosophers turn their attention to and describe human practices and how words are used, in this section we have seen that he does not himself engage in empirically informed work by consulting scientific findings, providing detailed descriptions of life and practices, entering laboratories, or exploring historical archives. On this basis, we are left with two questions. First, is Wittgenstein contradicting himself by recommending one approach while adopting another? Second, is it possible to justify the claim that one is taking a methodological cue from Wittgenstein in investigating and describing actual practices, while using approaches that differ from Wittgenstein's? The following two sections will respond to these questions, and the response to the first will provide vital clues to the second.

5. Remember how many different things are called "description"

How should we understand the apparent tension between what Wittgenstein urges philosophers to do and what he himself does? One solution is to suggest that much of what Wittgenstein does with his philosophical exercises, language

games, alternative natural facts, and imaginary scenarios *is* a way of describing our actual concepts, practices, and forms of life. Wittgenstein describes how things are *not* as a means of helping philosophers in the grip of a philosophical problem, to notice and remember how things in fact *are*. Cerbone takes this line of interpretation (see also Peach 2004: 299):

> Our reflective considerations of what we say when confronted with more or less familiar imaginary scenarios show us what our own language is like. […] it serves to enlighten us further about the character of our own lives with concepts. […] in coming to see just how alien a life with different concepts would be and how strange a world in which the formation of such concepts is intelligible appears, we also come to appreciate what might be called the naturalness of our concepts and their centrality to the shape and character of our lives. (Cerbone 1994: 165, 174, 177)

I consider this to be a meaningful approach to handling the apparent tension in Wittgenstein's work; furthermore, it aligns with Wittgenstein's own explanation for his use of imaginary scenarios: "Nothing is more important though than the construction of fictional concepts, which will teach us at last to understand our own" (CV: 85). Imaginary scenarios, invented tribes, and alternative facts about nature can, as objects of comparison, serve to eliminate conceptual confusion and cast light on our actual ideas, practices, and forms of life.

However, Wittgenstein wishes to accomplish more than simply remind us and get us to see how things actually are. With similar urgency, he sometimes seeks to make us remember our freedom and how things *might be* to counter forms of dogmatic thinking (and, perhaps, living). He is thus at pains to counter narrow views of other cultures and "the right form of life", as exemplified to some extent by Sir James George Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough* (RFGB: 119–155). Wittgenstein often aims both to make us see the familiar in the unfamiliar and the unfamiliar in the familiar, as well as to spark our imagination by reminding us of the possibility of living a life that is different in character from the one we are currently living.

The line of interpretation espoused by Cerbone carries further merit in that it dissolves the apparent contradiction between what Wittgenstein says and what he does. Wittgenstein is not doing anything different from that which he exhorts other philosophers to do; rather, he is doing precisely what he urges others to do. First, he does not recommend that philosophers produce lengthy,

elaborate descriptions of actual practices, perform empirical experiments, or consult the latest research findings in biology or psychology. Second, the concept of 'description' covers multiple diverse activities:

> Remember how many different kinds of things are called "description": description of a body's position by means of its co-ordinates, description of a facial expression, description of a sensation of touch, of a mood. (PI: § 24)

A description may be either detailed or brief. A description may consist of a factual statement of how things are – for instance, the recording of the physical facts of a human being's death in a forensic report. A poem, a fable, or an allegory can also describe a situation: for example, rather than a judge's detached summary of a case, the Biblical story of Solomon's Judgement captures more vividly the predicaments experienced by some children and parents in divorce proceedings when custody disputes culminate in year-long court battles. Although Wittgenstein may appear to be self-contradictory on the issue of description, this is the case only if we, his readers, are restricted by excessively narrow ideas of what "describing something" amounts to. This appears to be the case when Bloor, inspired by – but also deeply dissatisfied with – Wittgenstein's work, exclaims: "If we are going to describe, then let us *really* describe, if we are going to look and see, then let us *really* look and see" (Bloor 1983: 183, emphasis mine). Bloor further argues that good philosophy must include empirical studies and descriptions, just as "historical, anthropological and sociological enquiry" do (Bloor 1983: 182).[7]

We now have a partial explanation for the conundrum arising from Wittgenstein's methodological recommendations and his own mode of philosophical engagement. It remains necessary, however, to address the initial concern regarding the possibility of engaging in contemporary forms of empirically informed philosophy in a Wittgensteinian vein because the description of imaginary scenarios and alternative facts of nature is not what those thinkers claiming to be inspired by Wittgenstein do, nor is it their goal.

[7] Bloor's line of thinking may be regarded as an early example of what has become one of the most prevalent trends in contemporary philosophy – namely, x-phi and the demand for and use of scientific evidence in philosophy, such as reproducible studies that are statistically sound and the completion of empirical experiments as a means by which to solve philosophical problems. The determination of whether all or some such uses of scientific research and methods are in accordance with a Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy would require extensive engagement with this literature and thus lies beyond the scope of this article. However, hints as regards some of the issues that would be likely to arise can be found in Winch (2008) and Sandis (2010).

Rather, they turn to "the empirical" in all its manifestations: to field work, case studies, experiments, and other research fields in the belief that the empirical can supply us with something of philosophical value or because they believe that we can even have, for instance, "a need for history" in philosophy (Hämäläinen 2020: 363).

6. Undogmatic philosophy

To begin addressing this issue, it will be beneficial to align our approach with the interpretations of Baker and Kuusela conerning Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and philosophical method as undogmatic (Baker 2006: 67; Kuusela 2008: 111). When Wittgenstein writes, "There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were" (PI: § 133), he describes and engages in philosophy not as we must practice it but as a possible way to practice it. The above list of philosophical methods is open-ended. Furthermore, the term "description" encompasses a broad range of activities. Therefore, thinkers who claim to take their methodological lead from the later Wittgenstein while simultaneously entering into, investigating, and describing practices in ways that differ from Wittgenstein are not thereby doing something inherently illegitimate. In fact, Wittgenstein encourages us to forge our own paths as philosophers (PI: Foreword).

However, Wittgenstein is not granting a complete licence to label any activity as philosophy. Although philosophy can be practised in various ways, not every activity can be said to constitute philosophy. In seeking to follow Wittgenstein's lead and engage in empirically informed philosophy, it is particularly important to bear two caveats in mind. First, one should take care not to confuse a conceptual approach with an empirical investigation (PI II: xii; Winch 2008: 15–17). Second, the adopted approach should be a meaningful and constructive way of dealing with the philosophical issue in question. I shall unpack both caveats in the sub-sections that follow.

We can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes

Wittgenstein claims that philosophical puzzles and questions are conceptual and that we may attain clarity on a given concept if we attain clarity on its

role(s) in the practices in which it is involved. However, philosophy is not a form of empirical investigation that seeks to establish new knowledge or identify causal links between phenomena (PI: § 90, PI II: xii; Winch 2008: 1–17; Hacker 2015: 55). According to Wittgenstein, treating philosophy as a form of natural science leads to problems, and he therefore offers the following methodological recommendation:

> It was correct that our considerations must not be scientific ones. […] And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place. […] These [the philosophical problems] are, of course, not empirical problems […]. (PI: §109)
>
> Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is. (PI: § 124)
>
> Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. […] The name "philosophy" might also be given to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions. (PI §: 126)

In espousing these views and recommendations, Wittgenstein is at odds with those elements of the philosophical tradition that pursue philosophy in the image of natural science and also with several thinkers in the "practice turn" who are inspired by his work, such as Dreyfus and Bloor (Stern 2003: 187). Bloor argues that we must

> use empirical material and go beyond what Wittgenstein was willing to do with it. We shall even see what a systematic theory of language-games looks like. […] Only in this way can we make a secure estimate of Wittgenstein's capacity to illuminate life, not as it might be, but as it is; and to describe people, not as they might be, but as we find them. (Bloor 1983: 4, 5)

Bloor's work aims to produce a sociological theory of knowledge, "where this means an empirical theory which demonstrates the dependency of a society's body of knowledge upon the organization and interactions of that society" (Cerbone 1994: 160). As the quotations above illustrate (and as Bloor also points out), such an approach is at odds with the intention of working "as a Wittgensteinian", which here denotes being faithful to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. The construction of theory in emulation of the

natural sciences and explanatory empirical theories can thus be excluded as empirically informed Wittgensteinian philosophical methods.

To shed further light on the nature of Wittgensteinian empirically informed philosophy, we may turn to a moral philosopher who follows Wittgenstein in dismissing natural scientific-style theory construction and explanation as philosophical goals while endorsing description and arguing that philosophy – here moral philosophy, in particular – must learn from the sciences, history, and art, namely, Nora Hämäläinen (2016: 3–4, 2020: 363, 2021: 40–47). She writes that

> philosophical ethics *cannot* be pursued in meaningful ways without substantial descriptive or comparative work, which often benefits from other sciences as well as the arts. […] moral philosophers *need* to put a great deal of effort into the description of moral life and into the (broadly) empirical acquisition of different kinds of knowledge about morality, values, and human beings. […] [She further endorses Baier's words that] "We philosophers *need* to work with anthropologists, sociologists, sociobiologists, psychologists, to find out what *actual* morality is: we need to read history to find how it has changed itself, to read novels to see how it might change again". (Hämäläinen 2016: 3, 4, emphasis mine)

Here, Hämäläinen makes several claims about what moral philosophy entails, although how we ought to understand these claims remains open to interpretation. For instance, what does "comparative work" entail? How strongly should these claims be interpreted? The claim that "philosophers do currently know something but not all there is to know about morality and not always enough to answer all of their questions: we need science and art to help us out in those cases" and the claim that "philosophers do not know what actual morality is and cannot answer any of their questions on their own: they always need science and art to help them out" differ significantly. Below, I shall reject the latter interpretation and endorse versions of the former as the means by which to practice empirically informed Wittgensteinian philosophy.

Wittgensteinian moral philosophy can, but need not always, entail "investing a great deal of effort into the description of moral life", *if* "description" here refers to activities such as producing elaborate reports of actual events, investigating historical case materials, or performing fieldwork, for example. Meaningful work in moral philosophy may constitute a book that consists entirely of enigmatic aphorisms (e.g., Nietzsche's *Götzen-Dämmerung*) or humorous anecdotes (e.g., Critchley's *The Book of Dead Philosophers*) or a work

that is presented in the style of a dramatic dialogue (e.g., Plato's *Phaedo*). In such cases, we may say that the work describes something of importance about the human condition, albeit not in the form of an elaborate description of actual events. Wittgenstein would reject the claim that philosophers must necessarily – that is, in all instances – engage in comparative work, consult art, or acquire scientific knowledge about morality, values, and human beings: "We are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes" (PI II: xii). Such a view owes much to the fact that Wittgenstein is of the opinion that most philosophical dilemmas and questions are related to our ordinary, everyday concepts (PI: §116; Z: §113). As skilled language users, philosophers often possess the requisite knowledge to respond to their questions and solve their problems, although they may lack a broader overview, be confused, or be "caught by a picture". When we seek to understand, for instance, what "good" means in an ethical sense, Wittgenstein advises us to remember how we learned the word – that is, through which kinds of examples, in what kind of language-games? (PI: §§ 77, 486; CV: 28). Under normal circumstances, the moral uses of words are not unknown (Hanfling 2003: 25–26; Cavell 1999: 177–178), and, therefore, as a universal rule, philosophers need not consult or wait for scientific findings to obtain clarity on moral philosophical issues (Chappell 2017: 710, 718). However, to avoid moral dogmatism and unwarranted universalisations, moral philosophers can benefit from being reminded by research in disciplines such as moral anthropology, history, and the social sciences about how some aspects of morality can differ from how we conceptualise them and from what we learned as children. Moreover, philosophers can also gain being reminded that we – as humans, artists, philosophers, scientists, and members of a particular community alike – can know but will also never be finished with our attempts to figure out what, for instance, love, care, and justice and the ethical demands they make of us are.

In summary, it is Wittgenstein's belief that philosophers do not, as a general rule, need to apply any particular method or consult artists or the results of empirical science to pursue philosophical questions in meaningful ways. In some cases, however, specific methods or knowledge may be either necessary or recommended, as I shall argue below. When engaging in various forms of empirically informed philosophy, it is important to bear in mind how and with what aims we engage with practices, scientific findings, history, or the everyday.

The description gets its light from the philosophical problem

The second caveat for Wittgensteinian philosophy was that the investigation and description of various aspects of actual practices had to be a meaningful and productive method by which to address the philosophical issue in question. In this lies two further clues as to why Wittgenstein, on the one hand, places so great an emphasis on the importance of examining and describing actual everyday practices and how we use words and, on the other hand, does not himself engage in lengthy and detailed empirical descriptions of these uses and practices himself.

First, Wittgenstein seeks to address not empirical but conceptual questions, and to answer them, he invokes "grammar" – that is, the linguistic norms that govern the use of an expression or area of language (PI: §§ 90, 108). He thus offers his readers lengthy descriptions of the grammar of, for instance, the terms "meaning", "understanding", "pain", and "rule-following". Second, a philosopher's business may entail, for example, loosening the dogmatic grip that a certain image has on us. *If* a joke, a more-or-less polite hand gesture, or a drawing of a stick figure are sufficient to serve this purpose, then the production of lengthier accounts is superfluous – and perhaps even counter-productive in that they may create greater confusion. Human practices and life can be described in numerous ways. "It is *sometimes* useful to compare mathematics to a game, and *sometimes* misleading" (Wittgenstein LFM, 142, emphasis mine). That which is useful to do or to describe depends on the problem in question (Kuusela 2008: 42, 74): "And this description gets its light – that is to say, its purpose – from the philosophical problems" (PI: §109). Medicine deals with the treatment of numerous different maladies and disorders, and the optimal course of treatment for polio will differ from that used to treat a broken arm or depression. The same is true for philosophy: the effective treatment of different conceptual problems that arise in different circumstances for different people warrants different philosophical methods. Does the conceptual problem arise from one individual's confusion about a culture's concept of gender? Or does confusion permeate an entire practice, such as law, banking, or schooling, when all its participants are struggling with how to apply or develop its basic concepts under new circumstances? Like doctors, philosophers must consider which methods are best suited for dealing with particular problems.

This leads to the question of whether any philosophical issues require, or will benefit from, rich descriptions of what actually unfolds or has unfolded in our practices. Can historical investigations, fieldwork, or new scientific knowledge ever be necessary or of any particular help in philosophical work? Or is it always equally beneficial to turn to our fantasies and create imaginary scenarios? Below, I shall argue that, in some cases, it may be necessary to "turn to reality" and investigate actual practices, in addition to further suggesting that, in other instances, it may be beneficial – but not necessary – to provide rich descriptions of actual practices and forms of life.

7. Roaming the realms of reality

Philosophical questions and problems do not originate from nowhere but rather arise "in particular historical contexts" (Kuusela 2008: 211). During the Middle Ages in Europe, as a result of Christianity's considerable importance and influence, fierce philosophical discussions surrounded how the concept of the Trinity should be understood and how God's omnipotence could be reconciled with our free will. These are discussions that few twenty-first-century philosophers find any reason to enter. However, discussions have arisen in recent times over the concept of 'death' in the context of the invention and medical use of the mechanical ventilator during the 1950s and the use of electroencephalogram (EEG) monitors to track patients' brain activity. These developments have obliged doctors and patients' families to confront the unsettling moral, medical, and legal issues associated with a category of "vegetative ventilator patients", whose hearts are beating but who show no brain activity and thus no likelihood of regaining consciousness (Baker 2019: 144–148): "The medical world in 1967 thus felt a pressing need to resolve two questions: Were persistently vegetative ventilator patients dead or alive? And if they were dead, under what conditions was it permissible to use their organs for transplantation" (Baker 2019: 146). Part of the response to these questions was the development of the concept of 'brain death':

> While the norm that organs may only be removed once the donor is dead did not change, the definition of death was altered drastically. Accepting the new definition changed the practice: organs could now be removed from patients who would previously not have been regarded as dead, without violating the norm. (Keulartz et al., cited in Nickel, Kudia and van der Poel 2022: 272).

Changes to a concept as fundamental and important to human life as 'death' obviously caused confusion and uncertainty "not only among medical professionals and theological authorities, but also among the media and the public." (Ibid. 273); a confusion that, to some extent, may be regarded as philosophical because it pertains to what 'death' is and how it should be conceptualised. However, to clarify this conceptual confusion, philosophers can not only remind people of their everyday uses of the term "death" and how they learned about it as children, or invent stories about possible concepts of death in an imaginary tribe. A thinker wishing to contribute to the clarification of the public debate and the media's conceptual confusion would also need to investigate, for instance, the medical profession's use of the term, medical research literature, and the work of the committees entrusted with the task of proving an examination of the concept of 'brain death', such as the Harvard Committee. In conclusion, the solution to *some* conceptual problems may require the philosopher to acquire new knowledge, for example, about empirical research or professional practice and its use of a given term.

In what follows, I wish to suggest that, in other cases, elaborate descriptions of historical events or actual practices can be particularly heuristically beneficial tools for providing clarity around certain types of phenomena contemplated by philosophers. Jonathan Lear's moral philosophical investigations of hope, imagination, and courage during radical change (Lear 2008) offer one such example of this. As a vehicle for philosophising, Lear, in his book *Radical Hope*, draws on historical and anthropological material about the Native American tribe known as the Crow people.[8] The Crow started out living a traditional Native American way of life in which the principal telos of life centred on hunting and war: "All the rituals and customs, all the distribution of honour, all the day-to-day preparations, all the upbringing of the children were organized towards these ends" (Lear 2008: 35–36). Over a short period of time, however, they were displaced from their lands by a militarily superior power – namely, the invading and colonising Europeans. During the period 1882–84, the Crow moved into a reservation.

Here, they lived through what Lear describes as the death of their form of life (Lear 2008: 96). They could no longer engage in warfare or travel as nomads, as both practices were forbidden by the government. They could no

[8] The following summary of Lear's book is taken from Eriksen 2020, 51–56, but is put to another use here.

longer engage in subsistence hunting, as all game had been depleted. In other words, the preconditions for their form of life, which centred on warfare and hunting, crumbled, and with that, the traditional Crow life-form also crumbled (Lear 2008: 2). The Crow ceased conducting their traditional ceremonies, such as the Sun dance, as these rituals no longer made sense in their new settings. Various activities that were formerly associated with honour among young men who aspired to be great warriors, such as conquering horses from the Sioux tribe, also took on another meaning in the new context – namely, as dishonourable acts of theft (Lear 2008: 27–28).

Lear describes the way in which this loss of meaning permeated every aspect of Crow life. All members of the tribe suffered massive disorientation, as they no longer knew their way around life: "Even with the collapse of the nomadic way of life, there were still meals to cook; there were families that needed support. Yet in the written records of women's experiences there is also expression of confusion" (Lear 2008: 60). The overall conception of what constituted a good life and the concepts, values, and ideals that imbued life with meaning had ceased to exist. The Crow continued to live but no longer had any clear idea as to why they were living, what living well could amount to, and what they should raise their children for (Lear 2008: 57, 61). They faced the choice of either abandoning "all things Crow" or finding and developing new concepts, values, and ideals that might perpetuate the Crow's way of life and permit them to flourish under these radically changed circumstances. As Lear notes, rising to such challenges required hope, courage, and moral imagination, and in the years that followed, the Crow demonstrated that it is humanly possible to rise to such challenges.

Although an extreme case, the Crow's story reveals an existential challenge that many humans encounter and must handle during the span of their lifetime, namely, a loss of meaning, value, and orientation (see, e.g., Kleinman 2016). This may arise following the loss of a parent, spouse, or child, when one retires or is fired from an identity-giving job, or when one is obliged to flee one's homeland during times of war. Lear's investigation through the Crow's story focuses partly on the concepts of hope, imagination, and courage: what is their nature during a period of radical change and, as part of this, how might real hope be distinguished from hope in vain, how might an ethically creative imagination be distinguished from empty fantasy, and how might courage be distinguished from recklessness? Lear embarks on these conceptual

investigations to elucidate what, in relation to an idea of human flourishing, may be regarded as examples of dealing well or poorly with the devastation and reinvention of one's form of life.

Among the advantages of the lengthy and detailed descriptions of the Crow's history, according to Lear, is that "looking at their actual experience may make it somewhat easier to grasp this elusive possibility of things ceasing to happen" (Lear 2008: 8). An understanding of how dignity, hope, courage, and creative ethical imagination are in fact practised by humans in extreme conditions of cultural devastation may also help us to understand the equally elusive possibility of genuine hope, conceptual creativity, and being courageous regardless of the circumstances. For some, novels, poems, fables, and films are helpful in providing insights into such issues. For others, I believe, the power of the historical example is stronger; Nelson Mandela found strength in Henley's poem *Invictus* in his attempt to practice forgiveness and avoid succumbing to hate during 27 years of unjust imprisonment (Boehmer 2008: 84). The example of practicing forgiveness set by Mandela helped an entire nation to embark on the same task.

This line of reasoning carries the implicit conviction that conceptual clarity is not reduceable to a purely intellectual issue, such as the ability to formulate the right moral principle or to produce a valid argument. Conceptual clarity also entails the ability to make good decisions and to navigate our practices and lives. The ways in which the members of the Crow tribe managed to maintain hope and reconstitute their form of life contribute to a narrative that is not only about hope but also about how hope might be induced. It can do so because if these humans did manage to survive such massive destruction, so too can we – the readers – hope to handle the challenges we meet in life. At the very least, their example offers us a reason to try to do so.

In this section, I have presented several ways in which "the empirical" can matter in Wittgensteinian philosophy. First, I offered an example to demonstrate that, in some cases, it is philosophically necessary to be empirically informed by investigating and describing actual practices and forms of life. Second, I suggested that in other cases, the use of anthropological case materials, for instance, and the provision of lengthy and rich descriptions of historical events is heuristically helpful in serving the philosophical aims of providing conceptual clarity of existentially important phenomena, such as dignity, hope, faith, despair, and courage.

This article began by acknowledging the perturbing tension between Wittgenstein's later work and the empirically informed philosophy that claims to draw methodological inspiration from it. The article ends with the conclusion that, under certain conditions, it is possible to engage in empirically informed philosophy that remains faithful to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. This engagement, as moral anthropologist Veena Das remarks, has the potential to take philosophy "on paths to which it is not accustomed" (2015: 145) and thereby expand our disciplinary horizons and hopefully help us address the issues that really matters.

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