What Was Already There: On Scepticism and the Fundamental Reference of Signification

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Abstract

The first half of the paper discusses Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics in the *Philosophical Investigations*, why metaphysical uses of language are idling, by examining the rationale and method of inquiry informing Descartes' *first principle of philosophy*. The focus will be on clarifying how it is that metaphysical language use reproduces the very sickness of thought it is supposed to cure. In the second half, the paper discusses in what sense, and to what extent, the critique of metaphysics eliminates the relevance of the kinds of concerns that underpin metaphysics. The proposal is that while the central problem with metaphysical uses of language lies in its excessive urge to subdue its philosophical concerns to questions of knowledge, *Philosophical Investigations* brings to light the essentially moral-existential nature of these concerns.

1. The "kink" in Wittgenstein's later philosophy?

Wittgenstein seems to have thought, to some degree at least, that (especially) his ("later") style of philosophising and the philosophical aim it implied constituted "a 'new subject', and not merely a stage in a 'continuous development'; that there was now, in philosophy, a 'kink' in the 'development of human thought'" (Moore 1993). This self-assessment has been understood to be connected with Wittgenstein's readiness to categorise all philosophy prior to him as essentially confused (ibid.) – although he did express concern that the turn philosophy was destined to take after him implied a loss of greatness and he did have great respect for a host of philosophers from the past (ibid.). However, one might ask whether not these two facets, namely the notion of a "kink in the development of human thought" and the accusation of a past

failure of thinking – combined with a deep respect for the past – are what precisely binds Wittgenstein to the history of philosophy. For is it not common that the "giants" of philosophy – or the "progressive steps" in philosophy – exactly proclaim that past thinkers have been, despite the degree of greatness that might also have been involved, plagued by a fundamental misconception, which shall now be set aright?

In the so-called "philosophy section" of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009, henceforth PI: § 88–133), which most interpreters have taken to be a kind of blue-print of Wittgenstein's (programmatic) reorientation of the task of philosophy, we find numerous characterisations of what sets PI apart from previous philosophy. Let us begin with the suggestion put forth in PI § 92, which comes as a response to a particular picture of where philosophy is driven when following the rationale of what PI characterises as metaphysical uses of language, namely that it "may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our linguistic expressions, and so a single completely analysed form of every expression" (PI: § 91). So in PI § 92 we read:

> This [i.e. the goal of metaphysical uses of language] finds expression in the question of the *essence* of language, of propositions, of thought. —For although we, in our investigations, are trying to understand the nature of language—its function, its structure—yet *this* is not what that question has in view. For it sees the essence of things not as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes *surveyable* through a process of ordering, but as something that lies *beneath* the surface. (PI: § 92)

Apparently, the "grammatical" investigations of PI, *pace* previous philosophy, do not uncover some yet unknown or even "hidden" fact or order (cf. PI: § 91). Rather, clarity is reached, problems done away with, by "arranging what we have always known" (PI: § 109). This emphasis on what lies open to view, on what we already know, is in turn tied to a dismissal of the possibility for philosophy to produce *explanations*: "description alone must take its place" (PI: § 109).

Note, however, that the idea that philosophy is essentially concerned with things we already know or perceive is certainly not a new discovery, but has rather been a crucial feature of the claims of philosophy all along (obviously not all of philosophy, and not every philosopher). One need only to read Plato's dialogues and take into consideration, for instance, the idea of knowledge as recollection (*anamnesis)* (Plato 1997a; 1997b). Moreover, from

Augustine to Descartes, from Kant to Hegel to phenomenology, modern hermeneutics, critical theory and psychoanalysis – and in Wittgenstein – we find the notion that philosophy or critical thinking/scrutiny aims to expose not some new facts, but rather *something* that is already there in the very words we speak, in our experience of phenomena, etc. We simply need to rearrange our awareness so as to bring what is already there to light.

This is not to deny that Wittgenstein constituted a "kink" in the history of thought. Only that the notion that nothing is hidden does not suffice to demarcate it. Instead, the kernel of this "kink" must be sought in the way the "open to view" and "always known" is connected to other features, other concerns, raised in PI. In other words, it must be sought in the reorientation of what it is that philosophy rediscovers in its discovery.

2. Contra Descartes

2.1 Infallible knowledge with fallible sense: the idling of metaphysical uses of language

Let us allow Descartes to play the role of the brilliant yet fundamentally confused philosopher in order to more clearly identify how Wittgenstein's later philosophy, PI that is, *does* and *does not* deviate from the goal and path of traditional philosophy as metaphysics.[1]

While certainly conceived of as a foundation of knowledge, Descartes' infamous declaration *Cogito, ergo sum* does not, however, constitute a piece of *new* knowledge or information. Rather, the first principle of philosophy is internal to the (faculty of) understanding, i.e., it is something we *already* understand – insofar as we have understanding at all (Descartes 1967a: 186). Furthermore, understanding is not a private matter but a "publicly accessible" one (cf. Cottingham 2008: 117–119). Descartes does not stipulate the sense and truth of the *idea* he claims to perceive with full clarity and distinctness. Rather, he finds it there, internal to the mind itself and articulated in a language that is not of his own making. Consequently, the clear and distinct understanding of any given idea cannot be detached from its notational structure (Descartes 1967a: 180; Toivakainen 2023: 45–48), which is why Descartes claimed that the clearest proof of the existence of other minds – and

[1] It should be noted that Wittgenstein, particularly in PI, never directly and explicitly refers to Descartes. The comparison developed in this article is my own invention.

why animals lacked such minds – was the common practice of language *use*, i.e., of the human capacity to use and to respond to language in ways that *display* the understanding internal to the soul/mind (Descartes 1967b: Part V).

What then distorts our everyday understanding? Following the Augustinian Neoplatonist rationale (cf. Menn 2003), Descartes claims that confusion is inherently due to the ways in which our understanding, i.e. mind/soul, is tied to bodies, which in turn is "opposed to our reason" (Descartes 1967c: 353; cf. Descartes 1967c: 248). This is why the method of hyperbolic doubt is needed in order for the understanding to be cleansed of all those (non-)things, the inessential features, that do not belong to the ideas themselves (Menn 2003: 251–252). However, the true *cause* of error and sin lies, according to Descartes, in the transgressive potential and in the factual act of the will – not in bodies. As he notes, an essential feature of the *free* will is that its domain spans unboundedly wider than the understanding, making it possible for the soul to will to make judgements it does not understand (Descartes 1967a: 175–176). So, while bodies might muddle the clearness and distinctness of ideas, this fact does not force or necessitate the human mind to make judgements that transgress the limits of understanding. Instead, it is the will's unbound and free nature that makes possible transgressive judgements, which means that the sole cause of error and sin is the *act* of the free will (ibid.: 176–177). [2] Confusion, error and sin are essentially problems of the will – a notion close to heart to Wittgenstein as well (cf. Wittgenstein 1998: 25).

Not only, then, is there something shared by Descartes and the later Wittgenstein concerning the "always known" and "open to view". For there is also a strong sense in which for Descartes, as for Wittgenstein, "[a] main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words", as the grammar of our everyday language "is lacking in this sort of perspicuity" (PI: § 122). Moreover, for Descartes, as for Wittgenstein, we are driven by an "urge" to (PI: §§ 89, 109), "tempted" to (e.g. PI: §§ 159, 254, 277, 345), "seduced" (PI: § 192) to misunderstand the actual grammar of our language. Problems of philosophy are, as noted, essentially problems of the will.

If the decisive "kink" of Wittgenstein's later philosophy does not simply lie in the "always known" and "open to view", then perhaps it is this: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (PI: §

[2] For a more detailed account, see Toivakainen (2023: 52–59).

116). Traditionally, and in this case especially for Descartes, metaphysics represents a means, a necessary means, for combatting the confusion, the sickness, engraved in and informing everyday consciousness. As noted above, the declared motivation for Descartes' method of hyperbolic doubt is that only by such means can we illuminate what is essential and what is confused in our everyday thinking. Obviously, Wittgenstein is not denying that our everyday conceptions are muddled with confusion, that we are plagued by a sickness of thought – and spirit. Yet, while sharing such an outlook on human life with traditional philosophy, including Descartes, in PI we find the diagnosis that metaphysical uses of words constitute a language use that is led to speak outside of any actual language game, de-contextualised, thus failing to tie itself to the "original home" (PI: § 116) of words. The consequence being that the language use by which metaphysics seeks to reveal the essence of things becomes "idling" (PI: § 132), "running idle" (PI § 88) and, moreover, that our confusion is precisely engraved in this idling. *Bon voyage*, language has gone "on holiday" (PI: § 38). And the (phantasmatic) destination of this holiday is of course the pure idea, or ideal, of metaphysics. In other words, what PI is suggesting is that the very search for, the "requirement" of a "crystalline purity" of ideas, which metaphysics thinks to be the cure to the sickness of thought, in fact reproduces or manifests that sickness.

> The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had *discovered*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming vacuous. (PI: § 107)

The crystalline purity of the metaphysical ideal is idling because there is no longer any sense or meaning it can attach itself to. PI § 88 exemplifies this forcefully. The concept discussed is "exactness", a kind of synonym for an ideal or purity. In the remark, Wittgenstein gives different examples of the uses of "exactness", all of them more or less familiar to us, i.e. instances of "everyday uses". At one point, a voice suggests that: "'Inexact' is really a reproach, and 'exact' is praise. And that is to say that what is inexact attains its goal less perfectly than what is more exact. Thus the point here is what we call 'the goal'" (PI: § 88). The same voice continues by asking whether one is inexact if one does not "give our distance from the sun to the nearest foot, or tell a joiner the width of a table to the nearest thousandth of an inch?" Certainly, in various cases, and in certain contexts, we can, could, or even should admonish the

other for not being precise enough, insofar as there is a more precise, ideal, standard of exactness we can appeal to, for instance the "nearest foot" or "the nearest thousandth of an inch". But would any such standard constitute *the* "ideal exactness?" Would it be "exactness" *as such*? Note, however, that the point of PI § 88 is not simply that it would be hard to define, or to discover, an absolute limit to how exact something can be measured. Rather, the decisive challenge here is how any single ideal convention of "exactness" could stand for, could cover, all of the *uses* of the word/concept of exactness *as they occur in our everyday practices of language use*, i.e. the "original home" of our words. There are different language games of "exactness", of praise and reproach, and there is no, *pace* Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1933), one single object or substance, one single underlying referent, that each of these different uses have in common. The different uses of "exactness" are related to each other, rather, through "family resemblance" (e.g. PI: §§ 67, 77, 108, 179). PI § 88 ends, then, by concluding: "No single ideal of exactness has been envisaged; we do not know what we are to make of this idea – unless you yourself stipulate what is to be so called. But you'll find it difficult to make such a stipulation – one that satisfies you" (PI: § 88).

If this is so, if our concepts and conceptions lack pure ideals as referents, i.e. if the idea of such referents lacks sense, how then is it that philosophers committing the fallacy of metaphysics, including Descartes, nonetheless seem to have been quite *satisfied* with their claims to have identified exactly such ideals? What, in other words, makes Descartes' satisfaction with the first principle of philosophy possible? The preliminary steps to an answer are to be found in the following passage from *The Principles of Philosophy,* where Descartes defends and further elaborates on the rationale of his first principle.

> [W]hen I stated that this proposition *I think, therefore I am* is the first and most certain which presents itself to those who philosophise in orderly fashion, I did not for all that deny that *we must first of all* know *what is knowledge, what is existence, and what is certainty,* and that *in order to think we must be*, and such alike; but because these are notions of the simplest possible kind, which of themselves give us no knowledge of anything that exists, I did not think them worthy of being put on record. (Descartes 1967d: 222. Second emphasis added)

Descartes' reasoning is certainly sound in this respect: in order for him to infallibly know that he exists because he is thinking/doubting he must *first* know – but know infallibly? – a great deal, namely he must already understand – but understand infallibly? – the meaning of the words he is articulating his thoughts in. What Descartes fails to do, however, is to explain why the realm

of meaning has been spared the purifying flames of hyperbolic doubt. He of course says that the meaning of some of the basic concepts his mediations presuppose are "notions of the simplest kind" which "give us no knowledge of anything that exists". However, the same applies to the propositions of geometry and arithmetic. They are also "very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they are actually existent or not" (Descartes 1967a: 147). Yet, in contrast to the former, the latter propositions (of geometry and arithmetic) are exposed to the method of hyperbolic doubt, unable to withstand the treacherousness of the "evil genius". According to Descartes' own reasoning, then, there seems to be no rational justification for why the realm of meaning should be excluded from the same doubt as geometry and arithmetic (Toivakainen 2023: 34–41).

The consequence of this exclusion of the realm of meaning from hyperbolic doubt is of course that the *infallible knowledge* Descartes claims to achieve relies on, call it, *fallible sense*. For to the extent that the method of hyperbolic doubt is supposed to set the criteria for what counts as infallible knowledge and certainty, it follows that Descartes cannot infallibly say that he understands – knows – what "I think, therefore I am" *means*. Ergo, he cannot be infallibly certain about his conception of the "certainty" – as a concept – in the first principle. Apropos of PI § 88, we might then say that Descartes' "single ideal" for (infallible) knowledge fails to satisfy us, that is, fails to satisfy the very criterion of the ideal itself. The ideal itself seems to be contradictory, driven by an unsound requirement – like an engine idling.

Descartes' first principle tells us something interesting, something crucial, about the relationship between methodological scepticism, knowledge, and meaning. For there are, I propose, three different options that pertain to this relation, or three different attitudes one might take towards it. (i) If hyperbolic doubt were to be allowed to enter the domain of sense, then it would annul sense as such since what we call sense *might just as well* be completely senseless. As we might put it, sense cannot be grounded on knowledge. Yet, since we need to presuppose the sense of "doubting" in order for us to know that we are doubting in the first place, and as hyperbolic *doubt* is what would annul sense, exposing the realm of sense to hyperbolic doubt is self-contradictory. This train of reasoning seems to underpin Descartes' reasoning about why doubt can be excluded from the realm of meaning and why what one must know *before* one can know the first principle does not undermine the principle

itself. (ii) An alternative would be this: Since we are obliged – due to reasons alluded to in the previous paragraph – to allow hyperbolic doubt to enter the realm of sense, the unavoidable consequence is that scepticism is all-pervasive in questions of knowledge and existence. We simply cannot know anything with certainty because we cannot *know with certainty* that the *sense* of our judgements is sound. Notice that this second option, or attitude, does not take full-blown scepticism to entail a definitive annihilation of sense (and thereby a restoration of sense), as the first option did. Rather, it sees the impossibility of excluding any domain of reality from the sceptical stance to entail a fundamental indecisiveness, and interprets this indecisiveness as, in turn, warranting the notion that *nothing* can be known with certainty; scepticism is unavoidable and irresolvable. Perhaps we are making sense, perhaps not – we cannot *know*. (iii) But does indecisiveness really warrant such a judgement? Does it not, instead, simply declare that the matter is and remains, well, undecided? And would this not, in turn, imply that one cannot, on grounds of indecisiveness, declare or opt in favour of fundamental unknowability, since such a statement would be a declaration of knowledge? Perhaps we in fact do know, do understand, infallibly and with certainty all kinds of things. We can neither affirm nor deny that this is so. But what sense can we make of such a conclusion, namely that we cannot know – or can we know? – whether we can or cannot know? Is not the indecisiveness we are left with a deadlock; is not the problem of scepticism, if we allow it to proceed unrestricted, in the end idling? It seems to me, and I read PI as pointing towards such a suggestion, that the lesson we might learn here is that the epistemological requirement of a form of infallibility and certainty that we cannot really make sense of due to the way epistemology presupposes meaning *produces the epistemic object of indecisiveness*; it turns (the) meaning (of infallibility and certainty) into something epistemologically indecisive.

By cutting off scepticism prematurely, Descartes fails to see the actual point of scepticism's self-implosion.

2.2 The goal of methodological scepticism: excess, enjoyment, and the sickness of thought

Above I have used Descartes in order to show, as a kind of case study, that the ideal of crystalline purity is satisfied, apropos of PI § 88, only by way of omission, displacement, repression. Pushing the case of Descartes even further

will help us see how – at least in Descartes' case – the omissions, displacements, repressions involved in the idling of metaphysical language use in fact manifest or reproduce the very sickness metaphysics sets out to cure. Let us begin by rephrasing the problem of metaphysics: if the object of crystalline purity is a fantasy insofar as it always depends on omitting, repressing, the realm of meaning it presupposes, this implies that there is something *excessive* in the very urge for this purity. But if so, in what sense can we then say that the objective of such a pursuit of purity is to *satisfy* the requirement of purity?

Excess, per definition one might say, counters any possibility of satisfaction – as Plato already observed (e.g. Plato 1997c). Consequently, the impossibility of satisfaction seems to be the very *enjoyment* of excess. Perhaps one might thus come with the suggestion that the indecisiveness hidden or inscribed in Descartes' first principle secretly fuels the principle's libidinal economy. It is enjoyment, rather than satisfaction (as the annihilator of the tension in which enjoyment as excess exists), that is the true objective of the *Meditations* and its first principle. On the other hand, Descartes cuts off the excess of his sceptical stance prematurely, with the pretence of achieving satisfaction. In this sense, the first principle of philosophy seems to strive to preserve, maintain, its enjoyment of excess by, paradoxically, *not* enjoying too much or all the way. Enjoying excess all the way is, apropos of our discussion on scepticism above, self-imploding.

In *Mediation I,* Descartes famously raises the concern as to whether his proposed method of hyperbolic doubt is sound, noticing the more or less indistinguishable kinship between his "extravagant" proposal and insanity (Descartes 1967a: 145). His countermeasure against this threat of insanity is what I have elsewhere (Toivakainen 2023: 41–44) called a division of labour between, on the one hand, the contemplative faculty, which is allowed to continue in its excessive mode and, on the other hand, practical (and ethical) life, which Descartes organises according to "three or four maxims" (Descartes 1967b: 95–97) – maxims arguably excessive in their *moderation* (Toivakainen 2023). The rationale of this division of labour seems to be that by organising practical life according to the maxims of moderation, Descartes avoids insanity *realised* in the practical sphere of life while nevertheless preserving the right to utilise, to embrace, excess in pursuits of knowledge and certainty in contemplative terms. In other words, Descartes never denies that his method

of hyperbolic doubt, i.e. his requirement for infallibility and certainty, is anything but excessive.

And excessive it is. But not only in terms of being extreme, i.e. transgressing "normal sanity". Rather, it is (also) excessive in the sense that the very rationale informing Descartes' reasoning in developing his method and arguments, particularly the notion of the "evil genius", exceeds the grounds he gives for each step in his reasoning.

Consider how, in the *Meditations*, Descartes famously moves in successive steps from the possibility of deception to certainty and infallibility. Beginning with questioning the knowledge gained through his cultural inheritance, he then moves on to "the senses", which he says seems to provide a more rigid paradigm for certainty, noting however that "it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive" (Descartes 1967a: 145). Next up are the propositions of geometry and arithmetic of which Descartes states that "it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity (or uncertainty)" (ibid.: 147). Yet, Descartes reasons, since one cannot establish clearly and distinctly that *what* one perceives to be certain really is so, one must suspend judgement as to whether geometrical and arithmetic propositions are true/rational *as such*. Perhaps an "evil genius" simply manipulates our reasoning as such (ibid.: 147–148). Finally, then, when all judgements as to the *contents* of any cognition is suspended, the *act* of doubting, of thinking, as such reveals itself to be unsuspendable, allowing for the first certain and infallible judgement to be made.

The thing to note here is that each step of the deepening suspicion and bracketing, i.e. each step towards infallibility and certainty, entails an excess. Certainly, Descartes – as all of us – had good reasons for having a critical attitude towards the paradigms of knowledge sustained by his cultural setting and by the senses. Yet, just as certainly, his actual experience could not have shown him, nor given him reasons to think, that *everything* that these sources of knowledge provided might be false or confused. Rather only *some things*, albeit perhaps very important ones. As Descartes notes, everyday experience shows us that the senses deceive not always, but "sometimes" (ibid.: 145), "from time to time" (ibid.: 189). Our question here is of course what moves Descartes' reasoning from the "sometimes" to an all-pervasive suspension of judgement. Whatever it is, it cannot be, contrary to what Descartes seems to want us to believe, derived from the actual experiences of deceit and illusions for the

simple reason that these everyday experiences, in order to be experiences of deceit and illusions, presuppose paradigms of certainty. Were this not the case, we would have no means of discerning, or naming, something as an illusion; any experience would be neither true nor false, neither real nor illusory. There must be "everyday sense experiences" that provide paradigms of certainty and truth in order for the possibility of illusion in the realm of the senses to be entertained. Consequently, the requirement that certainty and infallibility must be achieved or found out by bracketing the very sphere of life that provides the paradigms of certainty *and* illusion *exceeds* the rationale of any examples of paradigmatic everyday cases of deceit and illusion.

Although the case of deceit and illusion with respect to the senses and inherited knowledge does not as such supply Descartes with reasons for his method of hyperbolic doubt, we nonetheless do know what it is to be deceived by the senses and by inherited, socially canonised knowledge. Such is, however, not the case with propositions of geometry and arithmetic, which Descartes himself duly acknowledges. There is simply no precedence for what it might mean to be deceived that, say, 2+2=4 – once one understands the notation. Nor does Descartes ever supply us with any notion of what such a deception might be like, what it could mean. In other words, the rationale of the "evil genius", which derives its final substance from placing the propositions of geometry and arithmetic in doubt, exceeds any precedence of experience *and* of conceivability. Ergo, the only thing that in the end sustains the rationale of the method of hyperbolic doubt, throughout all of the successive steps in Descartes' *Meditations*, is an excessive requirement.

Insofar, then, as it is an excessive requirement that organises the method of inquiry in Descartes' *Meditations*, we are – are we not? – obliged to conclude that the first principle is the very pinnacle of this excess. In the *Meditations* Descartes observes, as we noted above, that the single *cause* of error and sin stems from false judgements, which is in turn framed as a misuse of the free will. In *The Principles of Philosophy,* Descartes rephrases this a bit by saying that

> [f]or although there is no one who expressly desires to err, there is hardly one who is not willing to give his assent to things in which unsuspected error is to be found. And it even frequently happens that it is the very desire for knowing the truth which causes those who are not fully aware of the order in which it should be sought for, to give judgement on things of which they have no real knowledge and thereby fall into error. (Descartes 1967d, 235–236)

Interestingly, the very cause of error lies not in the will's desire to transgress the understanding. Rather, it lies in the will's desire to assent to, to know truth – without regard to the understanding. The causal locus of error, it seems, is located in our – inherently – excessive desire for truth. A method, a technique or program of discipline is required to mend this relationship between truth and the excessive desire for it. However, the thing with Descartes' method is that it in itself builds on, its very rationale is informed by, an excessive desire for, and excessive requirement of, truth. Consequently, the first principle he arrives at by way of this excessive desire crystallises this very excess. As one might put it, the first principle embodies the very cause of error and sin and finds satisfaction only by hiding, repressing, its true objective, namely the maintenance of the enjoyment of excess (cf. above).[3]

To repeat, the case of Descartes brings to light the crux of Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysical uses of language, namely that the very thing that is supposed to cure our (excessive) relationship to reality, being, existence, meaning, etc., i.e. metaphysics, in fact reproduces, reiterates, or manifests, the sickness of thought itself. Perhaps we might thus say that the virtue of Descartes' metaphysics lies in the way in which it lays apparent this very feature: Descartes acknowledges the insanity, the excess, of his requirement for infallibility and certainty and of the method by which to achieve it. He affirms that he must know things, understand the meaning of basic concepts, *before* he can know the first principle, and he affirms that he cannot know these things by the same standard as the first principle since he cannot expose the domain of sense to hyperbolic doubt. Furthermore, he affirms that the very cause of error and sin, of confusion, lies in an excessive desire for truth, the same excess that in fact guides the very method by which this excess is to be mended. All lies open to view.

3. On the fundamental reference of signification, and its absence

Descartes' search for the foundations of knowledge – as a paradigmatic representative of traditional metaphysics – is underpinned by an excessive requirement of "crystalline purity" – by an enjoyment of excess – and finds satisfaction – and thereby establishes the maintenance of the enjoyment of

[3] For a more detailed account of the excess of Descartes' first principle, see Toivakainen (2023: 27–67).

excess – only at the cost of repression. But how is it with Wittgenstein's PI? Is it free of any such excessive demands? Has it overcome the seduction of taking language on holiday? What has it achieved, and what desire drives its requirements?

Consider, for instance, what might be taken as the final remark of the "philosophy section" in PI:

> We don't want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways.
>
> For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.
>
> The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. —The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. —Instead, a method is now demonstrated by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off. — – Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. (PI: § 133)

What might raise our suspicion here is the appeal to complete clarity, that philosophical problems can and ought to completely disappear. Is not such a requirement excessive more or less in the same way as Descartes' requirement? The evident difference would of course be that while Descartes thought that philosophy is essentially troubled by *a single* problem, namely what can be known with infallible certainty, PI seem to suggest that the complete clarity it seeks to achieve does not concern a single problem, that philosophy does not have a single, fundamental, problem. However, the question here is how to exactly understand this. For as any reader of PI will inevitably notice, so much – arguably all – of the discussions in the work circle around the question, the problem, of what constitutes signification as such: how things come to have meaning in the first place, what makes it possible for language to be a means of communication at all. One need only bring to mind the opening remark of PI, where a suggested picture of the essence of human language is presented (as we shall soon see), to note how the very scene and landscape of PI is informed by a "single problem".

One way of interpreting the seeming tension between the constant presence of the question of the essence of human language (PI: § 1), i.e. the "single problem", and the "therapeutic" attitude in PI § 133 is to say that the latter shows us that the former is confused in the sense that this "single problem" does not have any existential significance for us since it is essentially

nonsensical, that any serious attitude towards it is simply derailing. However, one might also read the tension differently. One might say: there is no single problem in philosophy to the extent that philosophy is the means by which the idling of metaphysics is combatted. This does not, however, necessarily imply that the ("single") question of what makes signification as such possible is without relevance for us. For the *confusion* associated with such a *single* problem arises, apropos of Descartes, from the urge, the excessive desire, to subdue the question of "the essence of human language" to an object of knowledge, to find a final explanation, a final analysis, and thereby repress the actual relevance of the question or the event itself. Clearing up such confusion, i.e. exposing the excessiveness in such urges, is the business of philosophy. If this is so, then we could say, without contradicting PI § 133, that there is a fundamental, existential, problem, or challenge, which philosophy cannot eliminate, and which it inevitably deals with, but which does not thereby place philosophy itself in question.

In what follows, I shall try to give an account of how I read PI as illustrating how we might come to think about what is, on the one hand, a source of excess in our pursuits of a single problem, i.e. the question of the essence of signification, and, on the other hand, why this does not reduce the importance of thinking about this single problem. As I will suggest, it is the very reality of the "essence of human language" that produces the repression internal to the excess of metaphysics.

Let us begin from the beginning. PI famously opens with a quote from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which a kind of primal scene of language learning through ostensive practice is presented. Immediately after this opening scene, we find the following suggestion:

> These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. ——In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. (PI: § 1)

Reminiscent of the picture theory in *Tractatus*, PI takes as its point of departure the idea that meaning ultimately comes from, or ultimately signifies, an (single) object. The queer thing is just that, as we have seen, this picture of language/meaning is not so much false as incomprehensible. So how is it that the Augustinian scene, as a scene of initiation into language and meaning,

"gives us a particular picture of the essence of language"? Perhaps it is simply this: when I teach my child language and, say, point towards an object, is it not precisely the *object* that I mean!? However, it is one thing to say that when I point towards an object *I mean* the object and a completely different thing to say that the *object is the meaning of the word*.

Let us push the meaning-object relation further. As said, the queer thing with the object-meaning picture proposed in PI § 1 is that something of the sort has certainly never constituted or been part of any human experience. Not because we lack such experiences, but because we do not have any conception of what it would be like for an object to have meaning in or by itself. Instead, when I teach my child uses of words by, say, pointing towards an object and saying "cup", this very object, namely the cup, is already an "object" (it already has meaning) in an ordered (and certainly also disordered) symbolic universe *for me*, and *this* is the *sense* and *meaning (use of language) I teach to my child*. Furthermore, and importantly, it is by such similar means that "cup" has come to mean something to me (who is now teaching my child this very sense and practice), i.e. it is by such similar means that I have come to identify, single out, objects (and phenomena) in the world. Consequently, the object a child learns to denote – to the extent it does learn to do so – is always already an object with a sense which comes, not simply from the object in itself (and cannot thus be the ultimate meaning of the signification), but from, or rather through, the other's language, as it were. To *mean this* (object), as opposed to saying that the object (in-itself) is the *meaning* of a word, is, in other words, a linguistic activity which draws, queer as it may sound, on this very linguistic activity.

To get a clearer sense of what this queer sounding suggestion above is aiming at, consider for instance the following remark from the heart of the so-called *private language argument* in PI, where the idea of a pure or simple object (in this case a private sensation) as the ultimate locus of meaning is entertained, tried out.

> What reason have we for calling "S" the sign for a *sensation*? For "sensation" is a word of our common language, which is not a language intelligible only to me. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands. —And it would not help either to say that it need not be a *sensation*; that when he writes "S" he has *Something*—and that is all that can be said. But "has" and "something" also belong to our common language. — So in the end, when one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an

> inarticulate sound. — But such a sound is an expression only in a particular language-game, which now has to be described. (PI: § 261)

In a brilliant fashion, this remark comically illustrates that referents are "objects" (they have meaning) due to and internal to our desire *to signify* – to others and thereby to ourselves.[4] In the same way, it comically illustrates the absurdity of the idea that there could be any referents *in* language that lie *outside* of language – basically because in signifying we signify to each other with expressions that are shared. Or, it illustrates the impossibility of escaping signification in the act of signification, i.e. illustrates the impossibility of encountering the limits of language. However, there is something baffling about this, despite – or perhaps exactly because of – the absurdity, the nonsensicality, of its opposite. For what it seems to imply is that signification always refers to another signification, that meaning and language seem to presuppose meaning and language. What is baffling about all this is not simply that whenever we want to explain or account for the meaning of something we do it by means of (other) signification(s). Rather, the bafflement, so well animated in PI, lies in the way in which our accounts of initiation into language, or the origin of language, where we are supposed to shift, to leap, from a lack of meaning and understanding to these very things – where we in other words encounter the question of "the essence of human language" – in a strange way cannot but presuppose an essential trait, an essential ingredient, of what the account is supposed to account for.

Let us return to the picture of language proposed in PI § 1. Arguably, one reason for why the Augustinian scene seemed to invoke the idea that it is the object that supplies our language with meaning resides in that PI § 1 seems to depict a scene of initiation where the meaning of a word is established *not* by reference to other meanings, but by way of ostensive practices. Here is the word, there is the object – and in between there is the pointing and not another word. However, after some reflection on ostensive practices we find, in PI § 30, the following observation: "So, one could say: an ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of a word if the role the word is supposed to play in the language is already clear." The pointing, it seems, is in fact already a form of, connected to, signification. And soon after, there is this acknowledgement: "And now, I think, we can say: Augustine describes the

[4] PI § 293 brings this point of the desire to say something to the other even more strongly into view (cf. Toivakainen 2023: 152–158).

learning of human language as if the child came into a foreign country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if he already had a language, only not this one." (PI: § 32) I say acknowledgement because the Augustinian scene in fact already quite explicitly stated that the infant already had, or shared, a language. Recall these lines from the Augustinian quote: "When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out. This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples" (PI: § 1; cf. Augustine 2008: 15–16). Indeed, the Augustinian scene already contains, presupposes, the "natural language of all peoples". The essential feature of the role the word is supposed to play is, indeed, already clear, the scene of signification is already set.

PI § 33 nonetheless continues to try out if the finding in PI § 32 can be challenged, only to yet again end up in the same *impasse*. There just is no way in which meaning could be grounded simply on the relation between the pointing and the determinate features of an object/thing. Say I point to an object and say "cup". Something of the sort is certainly an important feature of how we teach and learn language. Yet, how is the other to understand the determinate signification of my pointing, which is the means by which an object is supposedly signified, simply by means of the pointing? How do I account for or point at my determinate pointing? Something inescapably needs to be in place already. This, let us call it structural gap in ostensive definitions and ostensive teaching with respect to the grounding of meaning, reverberates throughout PI and crops up in every instance where a final account or analysis is entertained. For instance, when the discussion on rules and criteria as grounding elements for the (correct) uses of words attempts to find closure, the gap informs itself in the famous rule following paradox: "no course of action could be *determined* by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule" (PI: § 201, emphasis added). So again, when I point towards the object and say "cup" there is no *grounding* rule that could determine how this is to be understood. That is, there seems to be nothing that can ground signification *except the very understanding of the signification of the pointing/rule following*. As if signification presupposed an *understanding* of signification.

Not all too surprisingly (cf. Toivakainen 2023), we find several passages in the works of Jacques Lacan's that acknowledge this very gap in our attempts to account for the essence of signification. Here is one of them:

> Now, in no way can we consider that the fundamental endpoint is to point to a thing. There is an absolute non-equivalence between discourse and pointing. Whatever you take the ultimate element of discourse to be reduced to, you will never be able to replace it with your index finger – recall the quite correct remark by Saint Augustine. If I designate something by pointing to it, no one will ever know whether my finger is designating the object's colour or its matter, or whether it's designating a stain or crack, etc. You need words, discourse, to discern this. Discourse has an original property in comparison with pointing. But that's not where we shall find the fundamental reference of discourse. Are we looking for where it stops? Well then, it's always at the level of this problematical term called being. (Lacan 1993:137)

Not only is meaning not grounded on objects. For what PI – and Lacan – show us is that the system or structure of language (its rules, the relational structure of signifiers), cannot ground, cannot explain, signification as such. For while it is the case that meaning always refers to another meaning, language is not, as it were, self-grounding – whatever that would mean. There resides a fundamental gap in our accounts of the ground or essence of signification. Yet this does not mean that meaning is groundless.

Where does the chain of significations end, or rather, where does it begin? Lacan's enigmatic answer that "it's always at the level of this problematical term called being", has, I think, close affinities with what we find in PI. For what Lacan's answer points to is that the ground of meaning remains encapsulated, and veiled for us, in and through our very being – let us say that being veils, necessarily, its own cause; being is radically given. In a similar spirit we read in PI: "Explanations come to an end somewhere" (PI: § 1), because "[i]n giving explanations, I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this is enough to show that I can come up only with externalities about language" (PI: § 120). So, "[o]nce I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'" (PI: § 217). Our "form of life" (PI: § 241) – a variation of "this is simply what I do" – contains, but does not explain, signification. However, "this is simply what I do" is not the final word on the matter. To simply do something, to have and to share a form of life, a life with language, presupposes something in itself. In PI § 241 we read: "What

is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life." And in the following remark: "It is not only agreement in definitions, but also (odd as it may sound) agreement in judgements that is required for communication by means of language" (PI: § 242). So for instance, in cases of ostensive definitions and teaching, it is not only the definition we must come to agree on. Signification presupposes an agreement in our judgements of what is being defined, what is being signified, what is being done, in the act of, say, pointing. Note, however, that the crucial emphasis in these two remarks is *not* on "form of life" and/or "judgement", but rather on "agreement". There cannot be any form of life or judgement without this agreement. This is why there is, at least potentially, a serious problem or shortcoming with the standard translation of the term. For the English word "agreement" loses the sense that "Einstimmung", i.e. attunement, plays in the German original "Übereinstimmung". And while agreement bespeaks rational deliberation, attunement with others bespeaks another, or an additional, dimension of interpersonal life.

It would certainly be misguided to say that the communication at play in ostensive teaching and learning between infant and parent hinges on a "rational", deliberate, agreement. Rather, there is an attunement, a communion, between parent and child at play. When I extend my finger towards an object, pointing at it and naming it, I do it *together with my child*, in communion with him, with a contact between us in which we are already someone for each other, someone who is significant in more or less all that we do, someone with whom we *together* move, voice, look, hear, touch, etc. (cf. PI: § 1). Moreover, ostensive teaching is obviously a latecomer, so to speak. Before the very sense of ostensive practices and naming comes into play, there are other forms of attunement, more primitive as it were, that are being practiced and set in place. And, importantly, from the very beginning there is a primordial attunement always-already in place. In the end – or rather in the beginning – signification depends on, or presupposes, the very fact that we are always-already someone for each other; *that we are addressed as such by each other*. In other words, signification presupposes that there is always-already an attunement between us which constitutes a primordial understanding and sense, a meaningfulness, *between* us – which at the same time thereby veils its own cause or ground (cf Toivakainen 2023: 158–166). As we might put it, the understanding encapsulated in this primordial address is not an understanding

of something, but rather the primordial *form of understanding* on which signification rests. Put differently, the primordial *understanding* presupposed in signification is not a cognitive construct – as any such construct would precisely lack the essential ingredient it needs – and is not thereby an *object* of knowledge, i.e. something that can enter the realm of explanation. We do not enter into being *without* understanding. Rather, internal to the always-already present address between self and other our being is always-already endowed with interpersonal understanding.[5]

4. Coda

If anything, what PI seems to show us is that the very pursuit of transforming the question of grounds into epistemic accounts or explanations, which would exhaustively satisfy the very urge driving such a pursuit, is existentially, morally, excessive – just as much as is any notion that meaning and understanding is groundless. The "ground" is simply coextensive with our *togetherness,* with our desire. The enjoyment associated with the excess for grounding – or de-grounding – seems to be the enjoyment of a denial that we are inescapably addressed by each other, that we inescapably mean something to each other, that we fundamentally care about each other, and that understanding and meaning is internal to, inevitably tied to, this *togetherness*. Put differently, the pursuit of grounds – or the affirmation of groundlessness – seems to conceal within its enjoyment of excess a disdain, or a terror, for meaning, as if meaning was, at its core, a curse.

The care about, the significance of the other internal to the primordial address between self and other informs all of language use. Meaning and understanding always travel from the primordial address, through history and the conventions of language communities, to the objects and phenomena in "the world". Ergo: one cannot separate ethics, i.e. moral understanding and its displacements, from language use, from thought. Thinking, speaking, *is* ethical; it is informed by, and expresses, the very nature of ethics.

[5] For important developments on the fundamental addressedness between human beings, see Backström (2007) and Nykänen (2018).

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