

Wittgenstein and Nietzsche: Two Critics of Philosophy

by

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Graduate Program in Literature

Duke University

Date: July 23, 2010

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Few philosophers have been more critical of the Western philosophical tradition than Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Nietzsche and Wittgenstein did not just reject the conclusions of their philosophical predecessors; they rejected their most basic assumptions. They rejected the very idea of philosophy as the attempt to rationally develop objective theories of the world. And yet Wittgenstein and Nietzsche have now been absorbed into the discipline they wanted to abolish. This dissertation attempts to recapture the force and extent of their respective criticisms of philosophy, and evaluate their conceptions of what philosophy should be.

I begin by examining Wittgenstein's claim that philosophical problems rest on a misunderstanding of language. I show that this claim does not entail a quietist refusal to engage in philosophical problems, as many have argued. Rather, it offers new insights into these problems, insights which I demonstrate by considering Wittgenstein's analysis of G.E. Moore's attempt to refute external world skepticism. In the case of Nietzsche, I argue that his criticism of philosophy extends beyond the metaphysics of Plato, Descartes, and Kant to include even those anti-metaphysical philosophical movements with which he is now associated: post-structuralism and naturalism. In this way, his criticism of philosophy is more extensive than has been recognized. I conclude by describing his alternative conception of philosophy as the creation of new concepts, and compare it with Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as reminding us of how we ordinarily use words.

For my parents
Arti and Arvind Koshal

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet 1.5 (165-167)

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I dedicate this dissertation to them.

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein occupy a distinct place in the history of philosophy. Their writings are endlessly debated by professional philosophers, and they feature in debates about the nature of truth, objectivity, knowledge, language, ethics, and the self. In this respect they are among the most influential philosophers to have ever lived. And yet Wittgenstein and Nietzsche were both virulently critical of the philosophical tradition to which they now belong. Nietzsche believed that philosophy, “however solemn, conclusive, or definite its manner, may have been nothing but the infantile high-mindedness of a beginner.”¹ And Wittgenstein writes that “[w]hen we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it.”² These are not the usual attempts to build on or correct the mistakes of their predecessors. Wittgenstein and Nietzsche believe that traditional philosophy, since its inception, has been beset by fundamental errors and faulty assumptions, and that a new kind of philosophy is needed in its place.

My aim in this dissertation is simple: to examine why Wittgenstein and Nietzsche are critical of traditional philosophy, and what they advocate in its place. This project is motivated by my belief that, despite the massive amount of secondary literature on each, the depth and extent of their criticisms of philosophy have not

¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Marion Faber. Oxford UP, 1998, §5. (Hereafter BGE)

² *Philosophical Investigations*. Third edition. Ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, §194. (Hereafter PI)

been fully appreciated. Wittgenstein's remarks about rule-following and private language, for instance, have proven exceptionally fertile for contemporary philosophers, but few take seriously his more general criticisms philosophy. And the growing interest in Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism, his perfectionist ethics, and his psychological analyses of human motivation corresponds with an increasing neglect of his criticisms of philosophy. I do not wish to criticize these interpretive practices. The secondary literature on both philosophers has deepened our understanding of them and provided new insights into philosophical problems. But I hope that by considering Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's discussions of specific philosophical issues in light of their more general criticisms of philosophy, we can illuminate a different, and no less philosophically significant aspect of their writings: the question of what philosophy is and should be.

It would be useful to begin with an account of what Wittgenstein and Nietzsche mean by "philosophy," but this is difficult for two reasons. First, both use "philosophy" to refer to what they criticize *and* what they advocate. This can be confusing. For this reason I often use the phrase "traditional philosophy" to refer to what each criticizes, whether it be Platonism, foundationalism, or conceptual analysis. The exceptions are when I discuss how each would respond to non-traditional philosophies like post-structuralism and naturalism. In this case I specify the kind of philosophy under discussion.

The second difficulty is less easily resolved. There are many different kinds of philosophy, and what counts as "traditional philosophy" changes over time. For

Plato philosophy is the search for the necessary and sufficient conditions underlying a word or concept. For Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant it is the search for the foundations underlying our knowledge of the world. For Russell, Frege, and the early Wittgenstein it is the search for the logical basis language, thought, and reality. For contemporary naturalists it is the search for the empirical, causal determinants of a given phenomenon (consciousness, language, ethical behaviour, etcetera). For post-structuralists it is the search for the heterogeneity underlying the supposed unity or essence of things. Some of these movements are mutually exclusive, but all are rightfully called “philosophy,” and most can be called “traditional.” How do we find a definition that fits them all?

I will not attempt such a definition here. Trying to find one merely takes us away from our project, which is to understand what Wittgenstein and Nietzsche are against, what they advocate, and why. The important point, which I demonstrate in the ensuing chapters, is that what Wittgenstein and Nietzsche criticize as “philosophy” encompasses *all* of these movements, even those movements (like naturalism and post-structuralism) which came after them, and even those which claim them as precursors.

Surprisingly, given the amount of secondary literature on Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, this dissertation is the first book length study of these two philosophers. There are, however, eight articles and book chapters linking them. Of these four deal with the cultural, historical, and existential aspects of their thought (their views

on Romanticism, Viennese modernism, and nihilism, for instance).³ These issues are not my concern here. The other four articles are more directly relevant to this project. Three of these compare a specific aspect of Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's respective philosophies (their views on meaning and metaphysics for instance), but they do not address their more general criticisms of philosophy.⁴ Meredith Williams's article is the lone exception.⁵ Williams examines Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's respective approaches to philosophy, contrasting Wittgenstein's supposed philosophical conservatism with Nietzsche's supposed philosophical

³ Erich Heller writes that Wittgenstein resembles Nietzsche "in one philosophically most important respect. Like Nietzsche he knew that philosophical opinion was not merely a matter of logically demonstrable right or wrong... it was above all a matter of authenticity. "Wittgenstein and Nietzsche," *The Importance of Nietzsche*. University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 141-157. Gordon Bearn finds that both philosophers aim to "wake us to the wonder of existence." *Waking to Wonder: Wittgenstein's Existential Investigations*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997. Nicholas Burbules shows that Nietzsche was a major influence on Viennese modernism, which in turn influenced Wittgenstein. He also argues that Wittgenstein and Nietzsche similarly conceive of themselves as "physicians of culture." "Nietzsche and Wittgenstein: Philosophers of the Future," *Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Postmodernism, Pedagogy*. Ed. Michael Peters and James Marshall. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999, pp. 33-51. Christopher Janaway illustrates Schopenhauer's influence on both philosophers in "Remarks on Wittgenstein and Nietzsche," *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 317-357.

⁴ Aydan Turanli, "Nietzsche and the Later Wittgenstein: An Offense to the Quest for Another World." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*. 26.1 (2003): 55-63. M.J. Bowles, "The Practice of Meaning in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*. 26.1 (2003): 12-24. Maria Alvarez and Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche on Language: Before and After Wittgenstein." *Philosophical Topics*. 33.2 (2005): 1-18.

⁵ Meredith Williams's "Transcendence and Return: The Overcoming of Philosophy in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 38.4 (1988): 403-419. Bernard Williams compares the anti-theoretical stances of Wittgenstein and Nietzsche in "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," *Senses of the Past*. Cambridge UP, 1995, pp. 299-310, but the comparison is not sustained.

radicalism. This dissertation shares Williams's focus, but has a different approach and reaches different conclusions.

My approach is not primarily comparative. I examine Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's respective approaches to philosophy independently of each other, and only compare them in the conclusion. There are two reasons for this. First, a primary aim of this dissertation is to clarify our understanding of, and contribute to the existing literature on, each philosopher. My reading of each is meant to stand alone. Second, though Wittgenstein and Nietzsche are similar in some respects – both rail against philosophy's tendency towards metaphysics, its tendency to assume that there is one true reality underlying language, and its tendency to generalize about particular cases – these similarities are relatively superficial. They are interesting primarily to the extent that they illuminate more subtle differences. Focusing too quickly or heavily on their similarities distracts from the subtlety and complexity of both writers.

Accordingly, this dissertation proceeds in two parts. Part One consists of two chapters on Wittgenstein (one on his criticism of philosophy, one on his positive conception of philosophy), and Part Two consists of two chapters on Nietzsche (arranged in the same way). Organizing the dissertation by author rather than theme (i.e. first the two criticisms, then the two proposals) gives me the space to examine each author in depth and consider arguments and counter-arguments to the issues they raise. In the conclusion the focus is more directly comparative. Here I consider how each philosopher would respond to the other's conception of

philosophy. Readers awaiting a determination of which conception is superior, however, will be disappointed. While I disagree with Williams that these two conceptions are mutually exclusive, I conclude that they are so different as to be incommensurable. Each one rests on entirely different assumptions about what philosophers can and should aspire towards. Still, the comparison is useful in shedding further light on what is distinctive about each.

In the end, this project aims not just to analyze and compare Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's respective approaches to philosophy. It aims to inquire as to what philosophy is and should be, and whether (and how) our current modes of philosophizing meet this criteria. This larger aim is not one I address directly, nor do I answer it definitively. But it forms the background of the specific aims that I pursue. Few have explored this larger issue more deeply than Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, and I hope that by understanding their views we can better understand it. For this reason I hope that this dissertation will be of interest not just to scholars of Wittgenstein and/or Nietzsche, but to anyone interested in philosophy, in the attempt to critically reflect on how we think about ourselves and the world.

To summarize, this dissertation has three specific aims:

- To explain Wittgenstein's criticism of traditional philosophy, and the conception of philosophy he advocates in its place.
- To explain Nietzsche's criticism of traditional philosophy, and the conception of philosophy he advocates in its place.
- To compare these two criticisms and proposed conceptions.

And these specific aims are directed towards one larger aim:

- To inquire as to what philosophy is and should be.

In the rest of this introduction I explain how I pursue these aims, why I pursue them as I do, and the results of these investigations.

0.1. Wittgenstein

My reading of Wittgenstein is restricted to his later writings, especially his *Philosophical Investigations*. Although Wittgenstein was critical of philosophy in his early writings, only in the later writings does this criticism become comprehensive; only then does it include all the various kinds of philosophy previously mentioned, including his earlier writings. Since his later criticism of philosophy includes his earlier one, it makes sense to start there.⁶

⁶ In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein argues that traditional philosophy, including metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, is a futile attempt to think beyond the limits of language. “Thus the aim of the book,” Wittgenstein writes, “is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought but to the expression of thoughts.... It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn.” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge Classics, 2001, pp. 3-4. Proponents of the “resolute” interpretation argue that the difference between Wittgenstein’s early and later writings is not as great as it appears. See the articles in *The New Wittgenstein*. Ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read. London: Routledge, 2000. I agree that there are general similarities between the early and later Wittgenstein, but there remain important differences. We do well to recall Wittgenstein’s claim in the preface to the *Investigations*: “I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book.” (x)

My reading of Wittgenstein takes seriously his general criticism of philosophy. This marks a significant departure from much of the secondary literature. This literature tends to focus on the specific philosophical problems that Wittgenstein investigates rather than the criticism itself. Judging from this literature one would think that Wittgenstein's aim in doing philosophy was to present us with the problems of rule-following and private language as though they require some solution, just as Descartes presented us with the problem of how we know the existence of God or Kant presented us with the problem of how we form empirical knowledge. Wittgenstein's claim that philosophical problems rest on "a misunderstanding of the logic of language" have been brushed aside (PI §92).⁷ Thus Sir Michael Dummett, one of Wittgenstein's most famous commentators, writes:

We all stand, or should stand, in the shadow of Wittgenstein, in the same way that much earlier generations once stood in the shadow of Kant.... Some things in his philosophy, however, I cannot see any reason for accepting: one is the belief that philosophy, as such, must never criticize but only describe. This belief was fundamental in the sense that it determined the whole manner in which, in his later writings, he discussed philosophical problems; not sharing it, it could not respect the work as I do if I regarded his arguments and insights as depending on the truth of that belief.⁸

⁷ See also PI §108, §111, §115, §116.

⁸ *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991, xi.

Dummett has no problem extracting Wittgenstein's discussions of particular issues (meaning, understanding, rule-following) from the larger criticism of which they are a part. In the same book he goes on to develop a Wittgensteinian theory of meaning which he uses to solve metaphysical problems. That is, he develops a Wittgensteinian solution to the very problems that Wittgenstein claims do not require solutions.

A similar approach is found in Saul Kripke's influential *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Unlike Dummett, however, Kripke believes that he is consistent with Wittgenstein's intention.⁹ After summarizing the problem of rule-following in the first half of the book, Kripke begins the second half by assuming that Wittgenstein "does not wish to leave us with this problem [of rule-following], but to solve it" (60). He then proceeds to develop a solution to the problem which he says Wittgenstein would endorse. Kripke's reading has since inspired reams of further arguments and counter-arguments, all designed to solve Wittgenstein's problem of rule-following.¹⁰ The fact that Wittgenstein believes that this problem rests on a misunderstanding and requires no solution has been largely ignored (Cf. PI §201).

⁹ *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982. I discuss this work in chapter one section five.

¹⁰ Crispin Wright is the most prominent contributor to his discussion. He develops an alternative response to Kripke, and argues that Wittgenstein would have endorsed *his* response. "Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Considerations and the Central Project of Theoretical Linguistics," *Reflections on Chomsky*. Ed. A. George. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 233-264. For a criticism of Wright's response that fits with the interpretation of Wittgenstein I offer here, see David Finkelstein,

What exactly is this misunderstanding? And why has it been largely ignored? I explore these two questions in part one of this dissertation. As I have suggested, Wittgenstein believes that philosophers misunderstand how human beings actually use language, and that this misunderstanding produces the philosophical problems (rule-following, private language, skepticism) which they try to solve. Wittgenstein believes that these problems can be dissolved (rather than solved) by clarifying the initial misunderstanding from which they arise. That Wittgenstein held this view can be established by pointing to the text. More difficult is to explain why he held it, and whether it is justified. This is the goal of the opening two chapters.

The first chapter explores the origins of this misunderstanding in what has come to be called the Augustinian picture of language. I start by showing how this picture arises from the tendency to make our ordinary observations bear more explanatory weight than they can. This tendency, common to philosophers, is a main target of the *Investigations*. I then show how, once formed, this picture leads to the problem of how words connect with their meanings, and invites philosophical solutions to this problem (Platonism, mentalism, conventionalism), none of which solve the problem in question. I conclude by showing how the problem disappears when we undo the initial over-reading that led to them.

A major theme of the *Investigations*, then, is that a proper understanding of language is needed to properly deal with philosophical problems. It seems like it

“Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism.” *The New Wittgenstein*. Ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 53-73.

should be fairly straightforward to explain how human beings use language in the course of their daily lives, but the thrust of the first chapter is to show just how difficult it is, especially for philosophers who are prone to look for a general theory of language. Wittgenstein shows that our language is simply too variegated and unpredictable to be meaningfully captured by the usual theoretical approaches.

The variety and unpredictability of ordinary language is a major theme of Stanley Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein, and my reading of Wittgenstein in is largely indebted to Cavell's work. I feel that Cavell captures the subtlety and originality of Wittgenstein's vision of language better than most, and I turn to Cavell at key moments to explain this vision. Cavell's key contributions to the understanding of Wittgenstein are two-fold. First, he shows that Wittgenstein does not believe that language is governed by a set of logical, transcendental rules which exist outside of language, but he (Wittgenstein) nevertheless believes that language follows its own kind of internal logic or rules. This logic, these rules, follow a certain kind of necessity, one which cannot be violated except at the cost of misunderstanding and incoherence, and Cavell follows Wittgenstein in trying to describe this necessity. Second, Cavell shows that Wittgenstein does not aim to refute skepticism, as some early commentators (Malcolm, for instance) had argued. Rather, Wittgenstein shows that skepticism cannot be refuted by traditional philosophy, and that our inability to refute skepticism reveals the limits of our language and our knowledge. On Cavell's reading, Wittgenstein does not refute skepticism, he explores its origins and enduring appeal.

My interpretation of Wittgenstein's response to skepticism in chapter two follows from this Cavellian insight. However, while I rely on Cavell for many insights, my reading of Wittgenstein is not properly "Cavellian." It does not pursue many or even most of the themes he discusses, and it departs from his interpretation of Wittgenstein at various places.¹¹ Cavell, for instance, is concerned with the question of why human beings are attracted to privacy and skepticism, even when they are not doing philosophy.¹² This is a fascinating existential question, which Cavell explores brilliantly, but not one with which Wittgenstein is primarily concerned. My interest is in Wittgenstein's responses to traditional philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge, truth, language, meaning, and the self. Although Wittgenstein rejected the usual approach to these questions, I believe that his major concern in writing philosophy was to grapple with these questions and develop new approaches to them. For this reason, my use of Cavell is largely restricted to his (Cavell's) accounts of language acquisition and philosophical skepticism.¹³

¹¹ There are useful studies of Cavell by Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*. Lewisburg PA: Bucknell UP, 1989, and Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. Oxford UP, 1999.

¹² Cavell also pursues questions of ethics and self-knowledge which, though inspired by Wittgenstein, are not directly at issue in Wittgenstein's later writings.

¹³ I therefore focus on Cavell's "Must We Mean What We Say" and "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," both in *Must We Mean What We Say*. Second edition. Cambridge UP, 2002, and part two of *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford UP, 1979. That I rely on this part of the book and not the other three is telling of the use I make of Cavell. It is the most "traditional" part of the book.

The first chapter, then, explains Wittgenstein's account of language. Understanding this account is necessary to understand his claim that philosophical problems arise from misunderstanding how language works. In the second chapter I examine a concrete case of this misunderstanding and the philosophical problem it produces: G.E. Moore's claim to refute external world skepticism. Wittgenstein's analysis of Moore in *On Certainty* shows Wittgenstein applying his philosophical approach to a specific, well-known philosophical problem.¹⁴ It therefore provides an excellent example of just what this approach does and does not entail.

Some argue that *On Certainty*, which comprises Wittgenstein's writings over the last two years of his life, marks a third phase in Wittgenstein's thought, one which breaks from the *Investigations*.¹⁵ This is not my understanding of *On Certainty*. I believe the two texts complement each other well: the *Investigations* sets out Wittgenstein's general approach to philosophy, while *On Certainty* applies this approach to a specific philosophical argument by Moore. Thus after explaining Wittgenstein's general approach to philosophy in chapter one, I examine his particular use of this approach in chapter two. I argue that this approach does not

¹⁴ *On Certainty*. Ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975. (Hereafter OC)

¹⁵ The leading proponent of this reading is Avrum Stroll, *Moore and Wittgenstein On Certainty*. Oxford UP, 1994. Stroll's claim that there is a "third" Wittgenstein is based on his claim that Wittgenstein turns to a kind of foundationalism in his later works, a foundationalism of action. See also the collection, *The Third Wittgenstein*. Ed. Daniele Moyal-Sharrock. Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004. For a reading of *On Certainty* more along the lines of my own, see Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein's On Certainty*. Ed. D.Z. Phillips. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

entail common sense nor a rejection of philosophy altogether, as many readers have suggested. Rather, it offers a novel and compelling contribution to the problem of external world skepticism.

At the end of chapter two I analyze Wittgenstein's positive conception of philosophy: his conception of philosophy as "assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (PI §127). Both critics and admirers of Wittgenstein tend to read this conception as entailing the claim that philosophical ways of speaking only lead to problems and confusion, while ordinary uses of language do not, and that we are therefore better off abandoning philosophy altogether. Several of Wittgenstein's own remarks seem to suggest this reading. He writes, for instance, that his approach to philosophy "simply leaves everything as it is" (§1240). Still, I argue that this reading is mistaken. Since the misunderstandings that lead to philosophical problems arise in the course of our everyday lives, there is always a need for the kind of philosophy Wittgenstein advocates. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy does not "leave everything as it is," it offers new insights into the nature of our language, our concepts, and traditional philosophical problems, and it explains why philosophy so often fails to have any purchase over our everyday lives. In this respect it marks a substantial contribution to philosophy.

In chapter two I also consider why Wittgenstein's general criticism of philosophy has been largely ignored. The reason, I suggest, is that Wittgenstein's critical remarks about philosophy have not been adequately understood; they have not been shown to be persuasive, either by Wittgenstein or his defenders. When

Wittgenstein says that philosophical uses of words are “nonsense,” for instance, he has not made clear why that is. And even those interpreters of Wittgenstein who subscribe to this view and have done much to clarify it, have not succeeded in conveying its force. Dummett, for instance, writes that he “cannot see any reason for accepting” Wittgenstein’s general criticism of philosophy. This is something I hope to rectify. Though I cannot be sure that my reading of Wittgenstein will persuade Dummett or others, I hope that it compels them – and us – to take Wittgenstein’s criticisms of philosophy more seriously than we have so far.

0.2. Nietzsche

Nietzsche, even more than Wittgenstein, has always had an ambiguous relation to philosophy. Wittgenstein studied with Russell in Cambridge; he learned the rules of the game, so to speak. Nietzsche was always an outsider. Trained in philology, he had little patience for the academic philosophy of his day, and his writings routinely flout the basic rules of the discipline: his analysis of morality seems to partake in the naturalistic fallacy, he unashamedly deploys *ad hominem* arguments; he often seems to contradict himself. And yet his reflections on the nature of the self, consciousness, language, and morality are of obvious philosophical interest. Perhaps because of his ambiguous relation to the discipline, admirers have tried to show that he is in fact a philosopher. Arthur Danto is a case in point:

I wanted to show that whatever else [Nietzsche] was or not, he was certainly a philosopher in just the way that everyone who is one is one: that he

thought systematically and deeply about each of the closed set of questions which define what philosophy is, and that he gave serious, original, and coherent answers to them all. Whatever else he was, he was a philosopher.¹⁶ Since Danto wrote this in 1965, scholars have continued to try and make Nietzsche philosophically respectable. This effort has produced significant insights into Nietzsche's thought, insights to which this study is indebted. But I believe it has also obscured the nature and extent of his criticism of philosophy.

For instance, Nietzsche scholars today generally agree that Nietzsche's disparaging remarks about philosophy apply only to metaphysical philosophy: philosophy, like that of Plato, Descartes, and Kant, which distinguishes a noumenal from a phenomenal world. On this view, Nietzsche is attacking philosophy as it once was, not philosophy as it currently is. And since contemporary philosophy has long since disowned these metaphysical presumptions, philosophers can now claim Nietzsche as one of their own. Thus post-structuralists like Foucault and Deleuze find in Nietzsche the seeds of their own anti-metaphysical philosophies. Their Nietzsche is one who exposes the contingency and multiplicity underlying the supposed unity and essence of metaphysics. Similarly, Anglo-American philosophers like Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter argue that Nietzsche criticizes metaphysical truth, not empirical truth.¹⁷ And they align Nietzsche with

¹⁶ *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. New York: Columbia UP, 1965, pp. 9.

¹⁷ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Cambridge UP, 1991. Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*. London: Routledge, 2002.

contemporary philosophical naturalism. Foucault and Deleuze's readings of Nietzsche are completely at odds with Clark's and Leiter's, but all agree that Nietzsche's criticism of philosophy is restricted to metaphysics.

Part Two begins by arguing that Nietzsche's criticism of philosophy extends beyond metaphysics to include even those philosophical movements, like post-structuralism and naturalism, which have appropriated him in their name. I show that post-structuralism is susceptible to Nietzsche's criticism in two respects. First, Nietzsche does not simply privilege contingency over essence. As recent scholars have shown, he believes that there is something fixed, pre-given, in our bodies: namely, a certain arrangement of drives and instincts (*trieb und instinkt*). And he argues that these drives and instincts help determine our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Understanding this aspect of Nietzsche's thought is crucial to understanding his criticism of philosophy. If Nietzsche is right that our conscious thoughts come from instincts over which we have no control, then we cannot be confident that rational deliberation or logical argumentation will deliver the insights we hope. Second, Nietzsche does not simply privilege multiplicity over unity. While he believes that the unity of the self is not pre-given, he maintains that a unified self is something which must be achieved. A unified self, for instance, is what distinguishes the *Übermensch* from the current race of men.

The naturalist reading, which emphasizes the essentialist strain in Nietzsche's thought, has served as a useful corrective to the post-structuralist interpretation. But it goes further than this. On this reading, Nietzsche's criticism of the value of truth is restricted to metaphysical truth, not empirical truth. Clark, for

instance, argues that once Nietzsche broke from the Kantian/Schopenhauerian distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal world, his skepticism about truth dissipated. Without the possibility of a noumenal world, the will to truth is not a will to escape the phenomenal world; it is not life-denying. His last six books, Clark writes, “exhibit an unambiguous respect for facts, the senses, and science” (105). There is much evidence for this reading. Nietzsche writes, for instance, that “the *ideal* scholar in whom the scientific instinct, after thousands of total semi-failures, for once blossoms and blooms to the end, is certainly one of the most precious instruments there are” (BGE 207). Clark, Leiter, and others combine remarks like these with Nietzsche’s notion of fixed drives and instincts and his sympathy for historical and psychological analysis to portray him as a precursor to contemporary naturalism.

Although Clark’s reading inaugurated the naturalist interpretation of Nietzsche, Brian Leiter has been its most staunch and subtle defender. I devote a substantial part of chapter three to debunking Leiter’s reading of Nietzsche (and by extension Clark’s). Leiter argues that Nietzsche seeks to explain phenomena (morality, consciousness, action) by locating (or speculating as to) their empirical, causal determinants. I argue that this reading reduces Nietzsche to the kind of philosopher he criticizes: one who over-values truth and partakes in the ascetic ideal. I agree with Leiter, against Rorty and others, that Nietzsche values the scientific perspective above others. But I disagree that Nietzsche does not value science for its own sake. He values it only to the extent that it furthers his larger

project: a re-valuation of values. On its own, a scientific perspective requires us to subordinate our individual instincts and perspective to an authority other than ourselves. In this respect it partakes in the ascetic ideal.

The attention I give to the naturalist reading, and especially to Leiter, might seem undue to those unfamiliar with recent Nietzsche criticism. But this reading has become very influential in recent years. Ken Gemes, a respected Nietzsche scholar, writes that Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality*, which presents Leiter's reading of Nietzsche as a naturalist, is "simply the best, most sustained, book length exposition of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*. As such it will be the reference point for all further scholarly work on the subject."¹⁸ My reading of Leiter illustrates Gemes's second point. Leiter's detailed, systematic reading has influenced my own, and though I disagree with it on some fundamental points, I feel compelled to articulate these disagreements carefully and thoroughly.

In chapter four I turn to Nietzsche's "philosophy of the future": his alternative conception of philosophy as the creation of concepts. This conception differs from both traditional philosophy and Nietzsche's skeptical and psychological analyses. And yet it too has received little attention in the secondary literature. There are several reasons for this, which I outline in the chapter, two of which stand out: first, Nietzsche says very little about this conception of philosophy, making it hard for scholars to piece together a coherent picture of it. Second, this conception is virtually unrecognizable as anything we ordinarily call "philosophy." It is a

¹⁸ This quotation appears on the inside cover of the paperback version.

creative practice, not an analytical one. It is not meant to be understood or adjudicated as much as felt and experienced. For this reason it proves resistant to the usual philosophical analysis. I conclude by considering what, if anything, is distinctively philosophical about Nietzsche's philosophy.

Finally, I must address the question of how I use Nietzsche's unpublished writings (his *Nachlass*), especially *The Will to Power*. Some scholars cull freely from these writings, taking them as something Nietzsche would have published had he not gone mad in 1889. I find this practice unjustified. It has been established (by Montinari) that Nietzsche abandoned the project for a major work on *The Will to Power* and did not want his notebooks published.¹⁹ His sister Elizabeth, who compiled and published his notes after he went mad (and who was keen to promote her fascist sympathies), took many liberties with the selection and arrangement of them. Furthermore, during his lifetime Nietzsche took volumes of notes but published few of them. This suggests that he did not want everything in his notebooks attributed to him. My practice is therefore to use material from the *Nachlass* only to bolster points Nietzsche published during his sane life. This way I can be sure that the views I attribute to him are ones he did want published.²⁰

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¹⁹ *Reading Nietzsche*. Trans. Greg Whitlock. Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003. See also R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy*. Revised edition. Cambridge UP, 1999.

²⁰ This practice is consistent with my use of Wittgenstein's unpublished writings, particularly *On Certainty*.

Each part of this dissertation, then, tries to answer two basic questions: What are Wittgenstein/Nietzsche criticizing? And is this criticism justified? Answering the first question is an exegetical task. It requires elaborating and clarifying Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's respective approaches to philosophy. Answering the second question is a philosophical task. It requires trying to defend each approach against challenges, real and imagined, from various philosophical perspectives.

But while this dissertation tries to defend Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's criticisms of philosophy, it should not be read as an endorsement of these criticisms. It is rather an attempt to understand each thinker as I think they would have liked to be understood. Though I am largely sympathetic to their criticisms, I am no less sympathetic to what they criticize. This includes not just acknowledged classics of traditional philosophy by Plato and Kant, but also recent and current work in the field. It is difficult to read Kripke's distinction between necessity and *a prioricity*, or John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, without admiration and respect both for the results of their investigations and the methods underlying them. And yet I cannot help but feel the force of what Wittgenstein or Nietzsche would say about their work. The impetus for this dissertation emerges from this tension, from the competing sympathies I have for the tradition and its two most trenchant critics.

PART ONE
WITTGENSTEIN

1. WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITIQUE OF THE AUGUSTINIAN PICTURE

"Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves. We have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see."

George Berkeley¹

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* has attracted considerable disagreement, but few disagree that it comprises a sustained attack on traditional philosophy. The *Investigations* is littered with remarks such as, "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it" (§124), "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything" (§126), and most strikingly, "When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it" (§194). A recurring theme of the *Investigations* is that traditional philosophy has not adequately grasped the subtlety, complexity, and polyphony of everyday language and life, and that a new kind of philosophical approach is needed in its place. But what exactly does Wittgenstein mean by "philosophy" in these quotations? Is he referring just to the analytic tradition of the early twentieth century, or does his target include the philosophical tradition since Plato? If the latter, is he simply defending our daily, largely unreflective practices and thoughts? And is this a defense of common sense?

¹ *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Oxford UP, 1998.

My aim in these first two chapters is to answer these questions by reading the *Investigations* in the context of Wittgenstein's other late writings. I begin, in this chapter, by exploring what Wittgenstein considers to be the fundamental problem with traditional philosophy: its failure to adequately account for how we actually use language in our everyday lives. For Wittgenstein this failure is the original sin of the discipline; the mistake that dooms its investigations from the start. In the next chapter I show how, for Wittgenstein, this failure leads traditional philosophers to make claims which do not have the force or implication they intend, and thus explains why traditional philosophy so often fails to have any purchase over our everyday lives.

How and why do traditional philosophers fail to account for how we actually use language? Wittgenstein's answer, I will suggest in this chapter, is that they are prone to three methodological tendencies. First is the tendency to leap from the particular to the general, to develop universal explanations that account for particular phenomena (i.e. the meanings of words) outside the social and historical circumstances of their various instantiations. Wittgenstein calls this tendency "the craving for generality," or "the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case."² Second, philosophers presume that things must be a certain way rather than try to see how they actually are. They presume that language, for instance, must be reducible to simple, discrete, logical rules, and then criticize it for failing to meet this standard. Wittgenstein summarizes this view when he writes that for Russell, Frege,

² *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations.'* Second edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1965, 18.

and the *Tractatus*, “the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement” (PI §107). Third, having assumed that the arrangement of words and things must follow certain rules or be arranged in a logical order, philosophers posit hidden processes in order to fit observed phenomena into the framework they have adopted. For Wittgenstein, these three aspects of traditional philosophy lead to a distorted picture of our language, our selves, and our world.

This chapter proceeds in six main sections. First I outline the Augustinian picture of language: the picture of language that Wittgenstein believes underlies traditional philosophical investigations. I show how this picture emerges from the philosophical impulse to make otherwise innocuous observations bear more explanatory weight than they can. Second, I show how, for Wittgenstein, the Augustinian picture leads to a paradox. In the third, fourth, and fifth sections I consider three traditional philosophical ways of resolving this paradox – Platonism, mentalism, and conventionalism – and show why none are satisfactory. Finally, I explain Wittgenstein’s answer to the paradox. This answer illustrates his conception of language as a distinctively human activity, one borne out in practices rather than thoughts.

One final note before I dive into the text. The *Investigations* has given rise to a massive amount of secondary literature, and much of this literature has divided the text into a series of problems such as “the private language argument” and, most famously, “the rule-following considerations.” While this literature has been useful

and important, I abjure any detailed discussion of it, relegating it to the footnotes even as I rely on it to develop my own thoughts. My reasons for this are two-fold: first, my goal is to elucidate how Wittgenstein breaks from the tradition that preceded him, not the subsequent effects of this break. Secondly, a proper understanding of the *Investigations* requires staying close to the text itself – not just its content but also its form.³ By its form, I mean not only its dialogic style, its apparent lack of coherence or narrative, but also Wittgenstein’s use of particular examples to ground the often esoteric points he makes. Getting immersed in the details of the secondary literature not only risks turning the *Investigations* into a

³ How one reads the *Investigations* depends on how one reads the different voices in the dialogue. If one reads the narrator’s voice as rebutting the skeptical interlocutor, then it appears that Wittgenstein is advancing his own philosophical theses and refuting skepticism. This would contradict Wittgenstein’s claim not to be advancing philosophical theses (PI §128). My reading is generally consistent with the approaches of Stanley Cavell and David Stern. Cavell describes the two voices in the dialogue as “the voice of temptation,” which seduces us into accepting a philosophical position and leads us into further confusion, and a “voice of correctness” which snaps us out of that temptation and gets us to see how the confusion is produced in the first place. Cavell writes that the debate between these voices “is not to be decided but to be dismantled.” “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” *Must We Mean What We Say*. Second edition. Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 71. David Stern writes that the text does not privilege one voice or another, but produces a deflationary effect according to which we cannot privilege any voice. Stern compares this deflationary effect to Pyrrhonian skepticism: it leaves us unable to adopt any position with certainty. *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction*. Cambridge UP, 2004. On the question of dialogue in the text more generally, see Jane Heal’s “Wittgenstein and Dialogue” *Philosophical Dialogues: Plato, Hume, Wittgenstein* ed. T.J.Smiley Proceedings of the British Academy 85 1995, pp. 63-83.

While I agree with Cavell and Stern that neither voice is straightforwardly Wittgenstein’s, there are exceptions to this. At times Wittgenstein’s voice emerges clearly and forcefully. For instance, when he writes, “What we do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (§116); in §201; and indeed throughout the sections §90-133.

series of philosophical problems, which is precisely what Wittgenstein wanted to avoid, it also risks eliding the importance of the form of the text, and further obfuscating the already difficult simplicity of his ideas.

1.1. How the Augustinian Picture Arises

In one of the most cited passages in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language, and our language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (§115). This picture is the Augustinian picture of language Wittgenstein describes in §1. The first part of the *Investigations*, and the bulk of this chapter, is devoted to showing how this picture leads traditional philosophers into confusion. I begin in this section by illustrating how this picture first emerges: through a subtle and unwarranted leap from the observation of a particular phenomena – namely, a child learning language – to a general explanation for this phenomena. Such leaps, I will argue, are a primary target of Wittgenstein’s critique of traditional philosophy.

The Augustinian picture consists of three related assumptions: “Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands” (§1). The basic idea is that the function of words is to refer to objects or ideas, and the problem it introduces for philosophers is how this reference occurs. Although no philosopher has actually articulated these assumptions, Wittgenstein suggests that something like this picture underlies

traditional philosophical investigations. Indeed this picture can be found in various philosophical attempts to think about language, including those of Socrates, Locke, Frege, Russell, Saussure, Wittgenstein's own *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and even Jacques Derrida.⁴ Each of these philosophers conceive of language as

⁴ In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates argues that language consists of "primary elements" or universals. For such universals there is no distinction between the name and the concept or object – the name *is* the concept or object. Wittgenstein discusses this at PI §46. Plato, *Theaetetus*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. London: Penguin Classics, 1987.

For John Locke, words stand for ideas which stand for objects, and we understand the particular instantiations of a word by relating it to the idea under which it falls. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Roger Woolhouse. London: Penguin Classics, 1987. Book 3, Chapter 3, Sections 1 and 6.

According to Russell,

In a logically perfect language there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the words for the simple things that enter in, one word for each simple component. A language of that sort will be completely analytic, and will show at a glance the logical structure of the facts asserted or denied.

I discuss Russell's conception of naming in more detail below. *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Ed. David F. Pears. London: Open Court Classics, 1985.

Wittgenstein adopts this Russellian view of naming in the *Tractatus*.

For Wittgenstein language is reducible to primary elements, or "simple signs," which have a direct, unmediated connection to their referents: "The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate" (3.022). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge Classics, 2001.

Ferdinand de Saussure adopts the same picture, but he departs from the others in positing convention as that which connects the word with the object. I discuss this view below in section 1.5. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Roy Harris. London: Open Court, 1998.

Jacques Derrida may seem like an unusual addition to this group, as he argues that there is no connection between a word and an object, and that language and meaning are therefore unstable, subject to a play of signifiers and a myriad of interpretations. In some of these respects he resembles Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein's view of language is crucially different in that Derrida focuses primarily on the connection between word and object. This focus is what Wittgenstein is trying to shift. For Derrida, as for Plato and Saussure, what is most important about language is whether there is (or is not) a connection between word

consisting of words on one hand and things (or concepts) on the other, and then try to determine how (if at all) the two connect. In Augustine, Wittgenstein seems to have found a clear expression of the basic assumptions underlying even the most disparate attempts to philosophize about language.

Wittgenstein has three criticisms of the Augustinian picture. First, although it seems to account for nouns, it does not account for prepositions, adjectives, conjunctions, and many other kinds of words. Second, even nouns are not always, or even often, used as names. Wittgenstein lists, among other examples, "Water!" and "Help!" and asks, "Are you still inclined to call these words 'names of objects'" (PI §27). Even the few words that comprise the language-game of §2, the famous "builders" story that corresponds to the Augustinian picture, can be used in various ways.⁵ The word slab, for instance, can be the name of an object ("This is called

and referent. The others find a connection and this forms the basis of their theories. Derrida argues that there is no connection and this forms the basis of his theory. For Wittgenstein, this undue emphasis on the connection (or lack thereof) is a mistake. This is the picture which Wittgenstein believe holds us captive.

For a more complete account of the similarities and differences between Wittgenstein and Derrida, see Toril Moi, "They Practice Their Trades in Different Worlds: Concepts in Poststructuralism and Ordinary Language Philosophy." *New Literary History*. 40.4 (2009): 801-824, and Martin Stone, "Wittgenstein and Deconstruction," *The New Wittgenstein*. Ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read. London: Routledge, 2000. Henry Staten draws the comparison between Wittgenstein and Derrida too closely, in my view, in *Wittgenstein and Derrida*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

⁵ In his "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*," Stanley Cavell points out that there are two ways of reading the language game of §2. First we can imagine a world, a form of life, in which the language-game of §2 was the only form of communication. This world is completely alien to our own. Second, we can imagine ourselves behaving like the builders, for whatever reason. It is not clear which reading Wittgenstein endorses: he seems to offer both when he

'slab.'"), a request by the builder for a slab ("Slab!"), or a gesture suggesting there are no more slabs left ("Slab?"). Third, Wittgenstein shows that the Augustinian picture of language does not even account for how we learn names. I will address this third criticism in the following section. What interests me in this section, and what I think interests Wittgenstein, is how a picture of language so clearly limited and flawed retained, and continues to retain, such a deep hold over us. Answering this question will go a long way towards understanding Wittgenstein's criticism of traditional philosophy.

We can begin to answer it by asking how the Augustinian picture arises. What is striking about this picture, especially in light of Wittgenstein's subsequent critique, is how intuitive it seems, how naturally it follows when we think about how we learn language. A closer look at §1, however, reveals that this picture does not emerge from Augustine himself. It emerges, rather, from Wittgenstein's interpretation of what Augustine actually says. This point has been made before, but the implications of it have not been fully drawn out. While the Augustinian picture is presented as so basic, so fundamental, that it cannot be broken down into simpler components, it does not lie fully formed in the back of our minds. As several scholars have pointed out, Wittgenstein, not Augustine, draws the Augustinian

writes, "That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one may also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours" (§2). See Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*," *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*. Ed. Hans Sluga and David Stern. Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 261-295.

picture, and it is not a very accurate portrayal of the latter's words.⁶ On its own Augustine's account is unobjectionable – an innocuous observation that children learn the names of some things by having objects pointed out to them:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice that expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. (Augustine, *Confessions*, quoted in Wittgenstein §1)

This is a largely descriptive account. Augustine does not generalize about language or posit an essential link between the object and the word. Wittgenstein, however, does not simply recount what Augustine wrote, he tries to infer the deeper

⁶ Anthony Kenny writes that "Augustine is a curious choice as a spokesman for the views which Wittgenstein attacks since in many respects what he says resembles Wittgenstein's own views rather than the views that are Wittgenstein's target." *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1984, 10. Robert Fogelin writes that Wittgenstein's picture is "more naïve than the view actually presented by Augustine." *Wittgenstein*. Second edition. London: Routledge, 1999, 109. Similar views are expressed in M.F. Burnyeat, "Wittgenstein and Augustine 'De Magistro,'" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* (1987) 61: 1-24; Warren Goldfarb. "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab: Remarks on the Opening Sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*," *Synthese* (1983) 56: 265-82; Peter King, "Augustine on the Impossibility of Teaching," *Metaphilosophy* (1998) 29 (3): 179-195; Christopher Kerwin, "Augustine's Philosophy of Language," *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. Ed. E. Stump and N. Kretzman. Cambridge UP, 2001.

assumptions underlying his words. He takes Augustine's observation to imply a more general theory of language:

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. (§1)

Wittgenstein's gloss neglects the subtlety and color of Augustine's description, including those aspects that echo his own views.⁷ Wittgenstein's picture takes Augustine to reduce the question of language to the association between a word and its referent, and ignores the emotive aspect of teaching that Augustine is careful to include (the "seeking, having, rejecting, and avoiding something"). And whereas Augustine simply describes the actions and practices by which he was taught some words, Wittgenstein takes Augustine to provide a picture of "the essence of human language." Wittgenstein, in short, takes Augustine to say and mean more than he actually does.

⁷ Just as Augustine speaks of the "natural language of all peoples," Wittgenstein will write that "words are connected with the primitive, the natural expressions of sensation and used in their place" (§244). See also *On Certainty* §475, which I discuss in section 1.4. below.

Why does he do so? Has Wittgenstein simply misread Augustine? I do not think so.⁸ Wittgenstein will criticize this kind of over-reading, the leap from a particular account to a general theory, throughout the *Investigations*.⁹ He seems to be alerting us, at the outset, to the tendency to make our ordinary descriptions bear more explanatory weight than they can. He seems to be alerting us to the impulse to turn an ordinary observation into a philosophical one. This tendency, and not Augustine's words, is the source of the Augustinian picture of language. Augustine's observations do not necessarily lead to the picture that Wittgenstein criticizes; it is what we make of such observations, the explanatory or conceptual burden that we impose on our everyday words, observations, and practices that lead to such pictures. That Wittgenstein opens by doing the very thing he will later criticize does not detract from his subsequent claims; it illustrates them even more poignantly. One of the implications of his critique of philosophy, I will suggest, is that the temptation to philosophize cannot be avoided, though it can be remedied.

Indeed Wittgenstein warns against this tendency just a few sections later in §6. He writes, "This ostensive teaching of words can be said to establish an

⁸ In this respect I disagree with Norman Malcolm's claim that Wittgenstein "decided to begin his *Investigations* with a quotation from [Augustine's] *Confessions*, not because he could not find the conception expressed in that quotation stated as well by other philosophers, but because the conception *must* be important if so great a mind held it." *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. Second edition. Oxford UP, 1984, 59-60.

⁹ Later in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein writes that the "problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*.... What is essential, however, was not hidden beneath the surface" (§111). See also §90 and §92.

association between the word and the thing. But what does this mean?" (§6). In questioning this seemingly innocuous sentence Wittgenstein alerts us to the temptation to make this sentence mean more than it does, to turn this observation into a general explanation. We must be careful about thinking that this association underlies *all* uses of language, or that explaining this association explains how we learn language more generally. While ostensive teaching of words "can be said" to establish an association between a word and a thing, this depends on what we mean by "association." Does this association exist *a priori*? Does it transcend the various contexts in which the word is subsequently used? Or is it just the result of the particular circumstances that Augustine describes (the gestures, the sounds, the intonations, the context in which they occur, the relationship between teacher and student, etcetera)? And if the latter, does this mean language is simply a matter of convention? Wittgenstein does not answer this question here, but his raising it suggests that he wants to pause before leaping from the claim that an association is established between a word and an object in particular circumstances to the belief that this association underlies language, or to the belief that this association is permanent or essential.

This hesitation about philosophical leaps recurs throughout Wittgenstein's later work. He believes that traditional philosophy is overly presumptive in grouping disparate things under the same rubric: "Assimilating the descriptions of the uses of words... cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another. For as we see, they are absolutely unlike" (§10). Instead of getting a clear view of a

given phenomenon, observing and appreciating it in all of its subtlety and complexity, philosophers overlook differences in search of something common, with the assumption being that what is common explains what is essential about each particular. Wittgenstein believes that this tendency obscures more than it clarifies. This does not mean that he is adopting an anti-realist metaphysics: Wittgenstein is not denying (or asserting) that there are universals, or asserting that there are only particulars. He is asking us to shift our focus away from such philosophical debates, and trying to show us what we fail to see when we are focused on such metaphysical questions.

Thus after asking, “What does it mean to say that ostensive teaching of words can establish an association between a word and the thing?” Wittgenstein offers a deliberately elliptical response:

Well, it may mean various things; but one very likely thinks first of all that a picture of the object comes before the child’s mind when it hears the word. But now, if this does happen – is it the purpose of the word? – Yes, it *may* be the purpose. – I can imagine such a use of words.... But in the language of §2 it is *not* the purpose of the words to evoke images. (It may, of course, be discovered that that helps to attain the actual purpose.) (§6)

The answer he briefly considers, before rejecting, is that a mental image establishes the association between a word and its object. I will discuss this particular answer in more detail in section 1.4. What is important here is that Wittgenstein does not answer the question. He rejects it. The question presumes that the answer is the

same in all cases, and this presumption is what Wittgenstein wants to challenge: the almost imperceptible leap from the observation that we learn words ostensively, that ostensive teaching helps “establish an association between a word and a thing,” to the assumption that this association explains how we acquire and use language, and that there is something necessary or permanent about this association. This leap leads philosophers to inquire after the nature of this association, to stare alternately at the word and the thing in order to see how a sound or ink-mark can have any purchase over an object. Wittgenstein is trying to pre-empt this inquiry. He will show that it leads to a distorted picture of language.

Wittgenstein returns to this same question at key moments in the *Investigations* in order to clarify various philosophical problems. These problems derive from the temptation to respond to the question “What is the association between a word and the thing” with an answer that is “given once and for all, independently of any future experience” (§92). In §6 he asks this question in the context of language acquisition as he examines how the initial association between a word and a thing is formed. He asks it again in §37 as he moves from discussing language acquisition to language use:

What is the relation between name and thing named? – Well, what *is* it? Look at language game (2) or at another one: there you can see the sort of thing this relation consists in. This relation may also consist, among many other things, in the fact that hearing a name calls before our mind the picture of what is named; and it also consists, among other things, in the name’s being

written on the thing named or being pronounced when that thing is pointed at.

And he asks it again in §244 with respect to the idea that language represents inner thoughts or sensations.

But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up?

This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the names of sensations?... Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences.

I will look more closely at each of these quotations throughout the course of this chapter. But for now the context in which Wittgenstein asks the question is less important than the fact of its recurrence. Each time he asks the question, Wittgenstein's answer is to reject it, to show that no one answer covers all cases, and to get us to look at the particular circumstances in which this question arises.

The opening of the *Investigations*, then, does not just present a picture of language that Wittgenstein will criticize; it illustrates how this picture arises. The Augustinian picture of language transforms an innocuous observation about a child learning words into a general theory of language. This over-reading exemplifies the very tendency Wittgenstein warns against throughout the rest of the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein does not deny that we learn words ostensively, or that ostensive

teaching of words “can be said” to establish an association between a word and a thing, but he wants to resist making this association bear more explanatory weight than it can. He wants to resist leaping from the claim that ostensive teaching establishes an association between a word and a thing to the claim that this association is the key to language acquisition and use, or to the claim that this association pre-exists the practice which establishes it or that once established it is permanent. To see why he wants to resist this temptation, we need to take the leap and see where we land.

1.2. How the Augustinian Picture Leads to Paradox

“The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal ‘*must*’ be found in reality. Meanwhile we do not as yet see *how* it occurs there, nor do we understand the nature of this ‘*must*.’ We think it must be in reality; for we think we already see it there.” (PI §101)

The tendency to make our ordinary observations bear more explanatory weight than they can is the first of three philosophical impulses Wittgenstein warns against. This impulse leads to the mistaken idea that the primary function of words is to name objects, and that all uses of nouns are as names. The second tendency that Wittgenstein warns against is the tendency to believe that language adheres to a logical, systematic structure of rules, which the philosopher should seek to uncover. This tendency leads to the most significant problem with the Augustinian picture: it does not even account for how we learn names of objects.

According to the Augustinian picture, we first learn words by having our elders point to objects as they pronounce the words that refer to them. This practice, which Wittgenstein calls an “ostensive definition,” establishes the initial association between word and object. This seems straightforward enough. But Wittgenstein questions whether we actually learn words in this way. He shows that for an ostensive definition to work we must first know some of the language, and if we must already have language to learn ostensively, then ostensive definitions cannot be the basis for language acquisition. He illustrates this point through the dialogue between a narrator and a skeptic in §26-32. The narrator invites us to accept ostensive definitions as an explanation for language acquisition, while the skeptic questions our temptation to accept them:

The definition of the number two, “That is called ‘two’” – pointing to two nuts – is perfectly exact. – But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know what one wants to call “two”; he will suppose that “two” is the name given to *this* group of nuts! (§28)¹⁰

How did Augustine, as a child, know he was being taught the word for all blocks, and not just this block in particular? How did he know whether the elder was pointing to the particular object we call a “block” rather than its shape, color, or size?

¹⁰ Wittgenstein offers a similar example in the *Blue Book*. There he describes the possible ways in which an ostensive definition of a pencil can be interpreted: “Let us then explain the word ‘tove’ by pointing to a pencil and saying ‘this is tove’.... Now the ostensive definition ‘this is tove’ can be interpreted in all sorts of ways.... The definition then can be interpreted to mean: ‘This is a pencil,’ ‘This is round,’ ‘This is wood,’ ‘This is one,’ ‘This is hard,’ etc. etc.” (2).

Wittgenstein's skeptic concludes, "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case" (§28). Ostension, it seems, cannot be the basis for language acquisition, since nothing insures that an ostensive definition will be correctly interpreted. Even the act of pointing is not immune to doubt. One could reasonably ask: how did the child learned to interpret *that* action?¹¹

Wittgenstein concludes, "One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name." He then asks, "But what does one have to know?" (§30). Wittgenstein ventures a preliminary answer to this question in the ensuing remark. He claims that "only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name" (§31). Ostensive definitions can be correctly interpreted if the child knows what *kind* of word is being defined. If the child knows the elder is defining a generic object then he can infer that the generic object the elder is pointing to is called a "block"; if he knows the elder is defining a number then he can infer that what is being pointed to is the number "one," and so on. Similarly, when one tries to define the king in chess by pointing to it and saying, "This is the king," this definition only makes sense if the student knows what chess is, what a board game is, what the rules are, etcetera (Cf.

¹¹ Cf. §85: One idea is that correctly interpreting an ostensive definition is a matter of correctly *understanding* it, where understanding means having a certain mental state. Wittgenstein does not deny that certain mental states accompany certain actions, but he resists the idea these states compel us to act in certain ways. I discuss this critique of understanding in section 1.3. At this point, Wittgenstein only denies a certain kind of mentalism – the idea that elder *intends* something that the child *interprets* correctly (Cf. §35).

§31). Wittgenstein concludes “an ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of a word when the overall role of the word in the language is clear (§30). In order to learn and use language, some prior knowledge must already be in place.

This answer raises as many questions as it resolves. How do children acquire the background knowledge necessary to learn a word ostensively, if not by ostensive definitions of other words (such as “kind,” “number,” “color”)? How does one learn to “already know how to do something with it [a name]?” Wittgenstein has shown how an ostensive definition can be correctly interpreted, but the question remains: how do we *first* learn the meaning of words? Wittgenstein ventures an answer at PI §32. He writes,

Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And ‘think’ would here mean something like ‘talk to itself.’ (§32)

This response explains what is wrong with the Augustinian picture’s account of language acquisition: it describes a stranger learning a second language, not a child learning a first one. But even this response, while instructive, does not answer the question we are after, namely, “How does the child *first* acquire language?” What does someone have to know in order to learn a word?

Wittgenstein never directly answers this question. This marks a recurring theme of the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein introduces a way of thinking about an everyday phenomenon, such as learning a word, providing an explanation, or continuing a mathematical series, and then shows that the usual way of thinking about this phenomenon leads us into a paradox or regress: we learn words ostensively, and yet to learn words ostensively we need to have learned other words, and yet to have learned those other words we need to have learned still others, and so on. The paradox of ostension is just the first of three similar paradoxes that arise in the *Investigations*: there are also the paradoxes of explanation (§88) and rule-following (§201).¹² Each paradox emerges out of a dialectic between a narrator, who offers an explanation for the phenomenon in question, and a skeptic who challenges the explanation. In each case the narrator fails to adequately rebut the skeptic, leading to a standoff between skepticism and

¹² In §84-88, for instance, a skeptic demands an explanation for a word which covers all its possible uses and precludes any doubt about its use. Wittgenstein's narrator responds that such an explanation is neither possible nor required. Any explanation may be open to interpretation, and might require another explanation to explain *it*. And even *that* explanation may require another, and so on. This view is echoed in the paradox of rule-following. In §185 Wittgenstein imagines a student who, when told to "continue the sequence that begins: 2, 4, 6, 8...", generates the correct sequence up to 1000, but then begins to add by fours. It is clear to us that the student has erred, yet we can easily think of an interpretation of the instructions according to which the student's behaviour is correct. Perhaps the student thought we meant, "Add by two up to one thousand, then add by four." How shall we prove him wrong? Any words we can offer to prevent such a misinterpretation have no more force than the initial instruction. There is no guarantee that the student will correctly follow the instruction, and no further interpretation or explanation of the instruction can rule out misunderstanding Wittgenstein describes. Each interpretation contents us for a moment until we think there must be another one, as it were, hiding behind it (§201).

Platonism. The skeptic insists that we cannot show with certainty that we learn ostensively or grasp an explanation or follow a series, and that we are not therefore justified in saying that we have learned or understood. The Platonist argues that the mere fact that we learn ostensively, or successfully explain things, or follow a series, shows that there *must* be some element beyond the word, the explanation, or the series, which is immune to doubt and insures that our everyday activities succeed.¹³ This “must” leads us to search for that thing, that element that explains the phenomena we observe. In the case of language, it leads us to search for something that connects a word to its referent and stops the regress of interpretations.

The question “How does a child first learn language?,” like most of the questions Wittgenstein raises in the *Investigations*, is designed to slow down our thinking, to shift our focus from the association between word and object to the circumstances in which this particular association occurs. Wittgenstein’s aim is less to provide definitive answers than to undo our usual way of thinking about these questions. This is a key part of his philosophical method, which I will explain in the rest of this chapter. For those (like myself) looking for answers, the answer emerges through the course of the *Investigations*. I will try to explain this answer in

¹³ There are many philosophical views that fall under the name “Platonism” (as with “skepticism”). By Platonism here I mean the positing of some transcendent object, existing outside space and time, immune to further analysis or interpretation. David Finkelstein offers a useful explanation of Wittgenstein’s criticism of Platonism in “Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism,” *The New Wittgenstein*. Ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read. London: Routledge, 2000.

the final section of this chapter – not to be suspenseful, but because much more needs to be clear about Wittgenstein’s thought before the answer will make sense.

First, we need to see what happens if we try to answer this question from within the framework of the Augustinian picture; if we fail to shift our focus and maintain the assumption that the key to the problem of ostension lies in deciphering the association between word and object. Wittgenstein shows that if we maintain this picture, we develop abstract and unsatisfying explanations for the question introduced in §6: What is the nature of the association between a word and its object? These explanations take the form of a search for what underlies our use of language and insures correct understanding. In the next three sections I consider three responses to the paradox, all of which accept the basic premise of the Augustinian picture: that the child learns language by learning to associate a word with an object. The first two responses, Platonism and mentalism, are considered and rejected by Wittgenstein. The third, conventionalism, is not directly addressed by Wittgenstein but is no less problematic.

1.3. Platonism

The skeptic has introduced a regress that we seem unable to stop: in order to correctly interpret an ostensive definition we need to know what kind of word is being taught, to know what kind of word is being taught we must have previously been taught other words, and yet to have been previously taught these other words,

we must have been previously taught others, and so on. The fact that we learn words ostensively – a fact that Wittgenstein acknowledges in §6 – suggests that there must be something that stops the regress, and for this something to be immune to further interpretation, it cannot be open to interpretation or further analysis. It must be some kind of Platonic or self-explanatory fact. Without such a fact, it seems, we cannot explain how we first acquire language, or how we use it. Platonism, it seems, is the only escape from skepticism.

This is the situation in which Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein (in the *Tractatus*) found themselves in the early part of the twentieth century. All three rejected the skeptical conclusion that nothing insures that we interpret a meaning one way rather than another. Buoyed by the observation that we routinely use words to successfully convey meaning, all three sought to offer an explanation of the process by which this occurs. In “On Sense and Reference,” Frege argued that the association between a word and its referent is established by an intermediary *sense* which accompanies a word in each of its uses, thus enabling words to have the same meaning in different contexts. This sense, according to Frege, is neither part of the physical world nor purely subjective. It cannot be the former because it is not bound by space or time, and it cannot be the latter because it is accessible to everyone.¹⁴ It exists in a “third realm” of objective, non-physical things. Fregean

¹⁴ That each name had a corresponding sense was evident for Frege in the fact that the phrase “Hesperus is Phosphorus” conveys genuine knowledge whereas “Hesperus is Hesperus” does not, even though Hesperus (the evening star) and Phosphorus (the morning star) refer to the same object. If the meanings of these two names were reducible to their referents, the two sentences would convey the

sense is precisely the kind of mystical solution to a false problem that Wittgenstein attacks in the *Investigations*:

And we do here what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify any *one* bodily action that we call pointing to the shape (as opposed, for example, to the color), we say that a *spiritual* activity corresponds to these words. Where our language suggests a body and there is none; there, we should like to say, is a *spirit*. (§36)

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. (§108)¹⁵

The temptation to descend into Platonism stems from our belief that the skeptic *must* be wrong, that there *must* be something that stops the regress of interpretations and secures the meanings of our words. This source of this *must*, what Wittgenstein calls “the hardness of the logical must,” is the simple observation

same information. That they do not led Frege to claim that each name has an associated, extra-linguistic element connecting a name to its referent that allows us to distinguish names with identical referents. “On Sense and Reference,” *Meaning and Reference* ed. A.W. Moore. Oxford UP: 1993.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein’s also criticizes Frege’s notion of sense at §117: “You say to me: ‘You understand this expression, don’t you? Well, then – I am using it in the sense you are familiar with.’ - As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which is carried into every kind of application.”

that we use language to convey our intended meanings everyday, without thinking twice about it.¹⁶

Russell proposed an alternative theory of naming, which Wittgenstein adopted in the *Tractatus*. This theory is equally subject to the later Wittgenstein's attack. Russell claimed that language could be reduced to primary elements that form the basic building blocks of language, and which, when arranged in certain ways, correspond to certain states of affairs.¹⁷ These primary elements, or "genuine names," are words that have an unmediated and therefore necessary connection to their referents. They are not open to interpretation or to variations in meaning depending on their context. Russell attempted to reduce language to these primary elements and then arrange them to correspond isomorphically with objects in the world, with the goal of producing a perfect representation of language and the world.

This attempt to describe an immediate connection between words and referents, to dig down and find the basic constituents of language, is less mystical than Fregean sense, but no less Platonic, since for genuine names to be genuine,

¹⁶ *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1983, Book 6 §49.

¹⁷ In "On Denoting," Russell argues, contrary to Frege, that names have an unmediated reference to things. That "Hesperus is Phosphorus" has a different meaning than "Hesperus is Hesperus" reveals only that "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" are not genuine names. That they seem like names merely illustrates that our language requires further philosophical analysis to distinguish true from false names. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein adopted Russell's view of the relationship between words and their referents. "On Denoting," *Mind*. New Series. Volume 14 (56), 1905, 479-493.

according to Russell, they cannot be broken down into simpler parts; they cannot be analyzed further. But if there is a perfect isomorphism between names and objects, then the objects to which the names refer cannot be broken down into simpler parts either without the corresponding name losing sense, and this is obviously false.

Taking Wittgenstein's example, we can say that "Excalibur" is a proper name that refers to an object consisting of parts combined in a particular way, and that if the parts are combined differently then Excalibur does not exist. But, as Wittgenstein writes, "it is clear that the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" makes sense whether Excalibur is intact or not" (§44). Similarly, when someone with a name dies (Mr. N), the bearer of the name dies but the meaning does not. Russell tried to avoid these problems by claiming that names like "Mr. N" and "Excalibur" are not genuine names. He eventually concluded that the only genuine names, the only names that connected immediately with its referent, are the demonstratives "this" and "that," since their meaning is always fixed in the particular context in which they are used.

Here it becomes clear that Russell is trying to describe language as he thinks it *must* be – logical, simple, broken down into discrete units, free of contingency – rather than how it actually *is* used everyday. Wittgenstein criticizes this attempt to make language logically perfect as "a tendency to sublime the logic of our language" (§38) – a tendency to account for language by first transforming it into something it

is not, something supposedly more “genuine.”¹⁸ We saw this tendency to sublime earlier with respect to the shift from what Augustine actually says to the Augustinian picture of language. Russell, the *Tractatus*, Socrates’s *Thaetetus* – all works that correspond to this picture – explain language by transforming it into something it is not. As Wittgenstein writes, “the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement” (§107).¹⁹ Rather trying to understand how language *actually* works, these philosophers try to make it fit their pre-established view of how it *must* be. They therefore ended up with a distorted view of the very thing they sought to explain.

It is easy to see in retrospect, and with the help of Wittgenstein’s later writings, how Russell, Frege and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* were captive to a particular picture of language (cf. §115). But what seduces us into this picture in the first place is the seemingly innocuous leap Wittgenstein makes in §1 – the same leap he warns against in §6 – from the observation that we learn words ostensibly to a more general theory of language; from the observation that ostensive teaching establishes an association between a word and a thing to a focus on the nature of

¹⁸ “Sublime” can be interpreted in two ways: in the Romantic, aesthetic sense, as a realm of beauty accessible to a privileged few, or in the sense of “sublimation,” the scientific process by which a solid turns to a gas without a liquid phase. The second reading is more consistent with the German original (Wittgenstein uses *sublimieren* rather *erhaben*), as well as the thrust of his critique. For a Romantic reading of Wittgenstein’s sublime, see Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein*. Albuquerque: Living Branch Press, 1989.

¹⁹ “For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is... not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.)” (§PI 131)

this association. This leap, combined with the idea that language *must* be a certain way (logical, systematic) leads to a stand off between skepticism and Platonism, each one feeding the other: that we learn some words ostensively leads us to insist that there is a context-independent association between the word and a thing, and the skeptic's legitimate questioning of this association pushes us to look harder, dig deeper, develop increasingly elaborate and sophisticated explanations for it. But these explanations only take us farther away from what we are trying to explain. They "surround the workings of language with a haze that makes clear vision impossible" (§5). And as Berkeley reminds us, it is a haze that we created ourselves.

1.4. Mentalism

We need not posit a Platonic or otherworldly object in order to stop the regress of interpretations. It could be that what enables us to understand a word, to connect the word to its referent, is that we develop a mental image of the object in question when we hear the word, even if the object is not present. On this view, correctly interpreting an ostensive definition, *understanding* it, is a matter of having the right mental image. This notion is implied by the Augustinian picture: we learn to associate a particular word with a corresponding object, and a mental image of that object is then stored in our memory. The stored mental image comes to serve as a standard, or rule, against which we check the use of a word. This mental image stops the regress of interpretations while avoiding the metaphysical baggage of Platonism.

Consider, for instance, using and understanding a word like "cube." In most cases "cube" refers to a three-dimensional, six-sided structure. We learn the word by associating the sound with the object in question. We subsequently use or understand the word, even in the absence of the object, by bringing to mind a mental image of a cube. This "bringing to mind" is just what understanding the word "cube" amounts to. Wittgenstein's narrator expresses this point:

But we *understand* the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time!... When someone says the word 'cube' to me, for example, I know what it means. (§138-139)

That we understand the word "cube" when we hear it, even if we hear it independently of other words, seems to show that the meaning of "cube" lies not in its use, but somewhere in our minds. "What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word" the interlocutor asks, "Isn't it something like a picture? Can't it be a picture?" (§139). The question implies not just that a picture of the object comes before our minds when we hear the word, but that this picture *is* the understanding. It implies that without the correct mental picture we could not understand the word.

On this view, understanding is a two-step process: once we hear the word "cube," we develop a mental image of a cube, and this image then compels us to point to a cube (and not, say, a triangular prism). Once the mental image is formed, the next step, the correspondence of image to object, follows automatically. There is

no possibility of misapplication. Wittgenstein's skeptic challenges the necessity of the second step. He accepts that a mental picture *may* come before our mind when we hear the word, but he denies the further implication that this mental picture *is* the understanding. It is entirely possible that when we hear the word "cube" we form a mental image of a cube and nevertheless point to a triangular prism. "I have purposely so chosen the example that it is quite easy to imagine a method of projection according to which the picture does fit. The picture of the cube did indeed *suggest* a certain use to us, but it was possible for me to use it differently" (§139). Developing the correct mental image of a cube does not necessitate that we point to a cube, or use the word in a certain way, any more than the sound "cube" itself. Positing a mental image as the source of meaning merely posits some inner, hidden, mental phenomena instead of an outer one. Each is as susceptible to error as the other.

Why, then, do we so resort to inner processes to explain outer phenomena? The reason, I take Wittgenstein to say, is that we are looking for something immune to skepticism which connects the word to its referent. The mere act of speaking is susceptible to skepticism, to misunderstanding, even when it seems, at first glance, to be successful. So we search for something deeper, something underlying our ordinary responses which establishes that we have *really* understood. But simply positing something deeper does not make that thing any less immune to skepticism. Neither a mental image nor my memory guarantees that when I hear the word "cube" I point to a cube and not a prism any more than the observable behavior that

we ordinarily associate with understanding.

We might be inclined to ask: What if there is an actual, physiological process going on beneath our skin every time we *really* understand something, a process which science has yet to discover? Why is Wittgenstein rejecting even the possibility of finding it? Wittgenstein's skeptic expresses precisely this point:

But isn't that only because of our too slight acquaintance with what goes on in the brain and the nervous system? If we had a more accurate knowledge of these things we should see what connections are established by the training, and then we should be able to say when we looked into his brain: "Now he has *read* this word, now the reading connection has been set up."

(§158)

This view is common today among scientists and philosophers. Aided by advancements in neuro-imaging, recent studies have shown that we can map linguistic ability to certain regions of the brain.²⁰ What if, using a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine that maps brain activity, we could show that, all other things being equal, every time adult native speakers of English use the word "cube" a certain region of the brain, perhaps even one particular neural pathway, shows a marked increase in activity. Imagine further that once this neural pathway is cut, the same adults lose the ability to understand the word "cube."

²⁰ Jeffrey R. Binder, Julie A. Frost, Thomas A. Hammeke, Robert W. Cox, Stephen M. Rao, and Thomas Prieto, "Human Brain Language Areas Identified by Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging." *Journal of Neuroscience*. Volume 17, Number 1, January 1997 pp. 353-362.

When asked to point to a cube, they point to a triangular prism or some other object. Would this not show that understanding the word “cube” is a function of this particular physical process? In this case, could we not determine whether a child understands an ostensive definition of “cube” by testing whether this same neural pathway shows the appropriate amount of increased activity?

There is no doubt that in order to understand language one needs to have certain physical processes in working order. But these physical processes are necessary, not sufficient, for understanding. We can imagine a scenario in which a child is told to point to a cube and the same neural pathway shows increased activity, but he points to a triangular prism instead. What this shows is that even if there is a particular mental process which occurs whenever someone understands a particular word, this process does not *constitute* what we call understanding. It is, at most, one aspect of it.

And this is what Wittgenstein is rejecting: not the possibility that a mental (or physical) process accompanies our various uses of language, but the implication that such a process *is* the understanding. “For even supposing I had found something that happened in all those cases of understanding,” Wittgenstein writes,

... why should *it* be the understanding? And how can the process of understanding have been hidden, when I said, “Now I understand” *because* I understood? And if I say it is hidden – then how do I know what I have to look for? (§158)

Wittgenstein is not rejecting the idea that there are mental processes at work. He is rejecting the picture of language, of ourselves, and of philosophy, through which we approach the question. This picture leads us to believe that there is something deeper, something underlying our ordinary expressions and practices, which guarantees their success; something which insures meaning and understanding and refutes skepticism.

“The essence is *hidden from us*”: this is the form our problem now assumes.

We ask: “What is language?”, “What is a proposition?” And the answer has to be given once and for all, independently of any future experience. (PI §92)

This picture leads us to locate everyday phenomena in hidden processes, or in mysterious “third realms,” or in Platonic objects, rather than simply describing what we see or feel when the phenomena in question occur. We are seduced into to this picture by the skeptic, who challenges us to find something irreducible to further interpretation, whether Platonic or mental.

Instead of positing something hidden as the source of what we are looking for, Wittgenstein suggests that we simply look closely at what happens on the surface. “Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all.... But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, ‘Now I know how to go on.’” (§154). Listing these various circumstances provides a picture of what counts as “understanding.” There are many different things we count as “having understood something,” none of which insure that the understanding in question is permanent. This picture is no more susceptible to skepticism than a

hidden mental process. To determine whether someone correctly understands something or not, we need to see what actually happens on the surface, as it were, when someone understands something. Perhaps he says, "Now I understand" and his actions conform to those we expect from someone who understands. This does not guarantee understanding (he might still think he understands when he actually does not) but neither does positing a hidden process.

My claim, in the previous paragraph, that "to determine whether someone correctly understands something we need to see what happens when something understands something," sounds circular. Don't we need to first establish what "understanding" is before we can say whether someone has understood or not? Otherwise, are we not simply adopting an uncritical, ordinary conception of understanding? Here we begin to see a key aspect of Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy, one which I explore in detail in the following chapter: Wittgenstein believes that our ordinary, uncritical uses of words and concepts are adequate. Such words and concepts do not first require philosophical justification in order to be meaningfully used. In order to even ask the question, "Does the child correctly understand the ostensive definition?" we need to already have some idea of what understanding means. This idea is simply the one that we use, unreflectively, in our daily lives.

In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein uses two examples to illustrate the superfluity of the idea that understanding is an inner process. His answer to the question of how we acquire language begins to emerge here.

Suppose I teach someone the use of the word “yellow” by repeatedly pointing to a yellow patch and pronouncing the word. On another occasion I make him apply what he has learnt by giving him the order, “choose a yellow ball out of this bag.” What was it that happened when he obeyed my order? I say “possibly just this: he heard my words and took a yellow ball from the bag.” Now you may be inclined to think that this couldn’t possibly have been all; and the *kind* of thing that you would suggest is that he imagined something yellow when he *understood* the order, and then chose a ball according to his image. To see that this is not *necessary* remember that I could have given him the order, “Imagine a yellow patch.” Would you still be inclined to assume that he first imagines a yellow patch, just *understanding* my order, and then imagines a yellow patch to match the first? (*Blue Book* 12)

And, similarly:

If I give someone the order “fetch me a red flower from that meadow,” how is he supposed to know what sort of flower to bring? Now the answer one might suggest first is that he went to look for a red flower carrying a red image in his mind, and comparing it with the flowers to see which of them had the color of that image. Now there is such a way of searching, and it is not at all essential that the image we use should be a mental one. In fact the process may be this: I carry a chart coordinating names and colored squares. When I hear the order “fetch me etc.” I draw my finger across the chart from the word “red” to a certain square, and I go and look for a flower which has the same color as the square. But this is not the only way of searching and it

is not the usual way. We go, look about us, walk up to a flower and pick it, without comparing it to anything. (*Blue Book 3*)

Wittgenstein is effectively asking: Why posit a mental process in the first place?

Why presume, when asked what happens when we are asked to fetch a red flower, that something inside us is responsible for fetching a red flower? Why not presume that the cause, the source, is the request to fetch the flower, and our willingness to abide by such a request?

The idea that our everyday use of language is the result of an inner process stems from our perception of ourselves as primarily rational, cognitive beings; as beings that think before they act. This is what distinguishes us from animals, who act instinctively, without foresight or reflection. Is Wittgenstein denying this? No. What he denies is that in all aspects of our lives, including the most fundamental aspects, we are primarily rational, cognitive beings. Indeed the lesson of Wittgenstein's criticism of the Augustinian picture is not just of the picture of language it offers, but also its picture of ourselves – of the kinds of beings we take ourselves to be. Implicit in the Augustinian picture is the idea that the human, particularly the human brain, is like a highly advanced machine that inputs various data (words corresponding to objects) as we move through the world, encountering sounds, objects, and circumstances. This machine then stores this data in our memory, and processes it as output (language) as we carry on in the world. Part of the appeal of this picture is that it explains how we handle the millions of possible permutations and combinations of words available in our language. On this picture, the fallibility of our language in the most quotidian circumstances (our slips of

tongue, our tendency to speak at cross-purposes, or to stumble over our words) are either instances which show that our brains are not advanced enough, that they require greater input or capacity, or moments where the complexity of the data has caused a momentary lapse, like when a computer stalls while processing a large download. On this picture, what we say when is merely a function of what has previously been inputted. The out-put is automatic.

This picture is appealing, but it still leaves open the question of what constitutes correct interpretation or understanding, and it does not explain how we interpret an ostensive definition one way rather than another. In place of this picture, Wittgenstein wants to conceive of the ability to communicate with each other as an ability borne out in practices rather than inner processes. The possibility of endless interpretations only appears to be a problem if we have a certain picture of what understanding something is – that is, if we think of understanding language as a cognitive achievement. The fact that we understand ostensive definitions, despite the threat of skepticism, shows “that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases” (§201). This does not refute skepticism. But it suggests that we have been pursuing the question in the wrong way. We have not just adopted a certain picture of language, but a certain picture of what it means for human beings to learn, understand, and speak.

Wittgenstein wants to impress on us that in most circumstances using language is not a cognitive achievement; it is part of what it means to be human. At

times he strikes a deeply naturalistic tone in describing this human capacity for language:

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

Words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences.

They teach the child new pain behavior. (*Investigations* §244)

In these quotations one detects both a naturalist (“words are connected with the primitive”) and a conventionalist strain (“adults... teach the child new pain behavior”), but neither encompasses what Wittgenstein is after.²¹ To call Wittgenstein a conventionalist is to suggest that he has a theory of language as conventional. But Wittgenstein rejects the conventionalist premise that we learn or tacitly agree that certain words will have certain meanings. New uses and meanings of words arise in all kinds of contexts, uses and meanings which we simply could not

²¹ For more on the difficulty of applying either of these labels to Wittgenstein, see Stanley Cavell’s chapter, “The Natural and the Conventional” in his *Claim of Reason*.

have learned or agreed upon beforehand, even tacitly.²² And yet Wittgenstein's focus on training and conditioning individuals into forms of life, and his openness to the possibility of skepticism, illustrate that he is not simply saying that humans have an innate capacity for language that guarantees meaning and understanding. There is still the question of what we do with this capacity in the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves.

It may seem here that in avoiding the twin poles of Platonism and skepticism – the Scylla and Charybdis of traditional philosophy – Wittgenstein has ended up in an even worse position: dogmatism. In responding to the question of how we learn ostensibly with the answer, “We simply do,” in suggesting that instead of searching for the source of understanding we simply look at the various things we count as understanding, and in insisting that we stay on the surface of things rather than plumb their depths, Wittgenstein seems to be rejecting philosophy in favor of common-sense. In the rest of this chapter and the next I try to show that this response is not dogmatic; that there is more depth to this response than it first implies. But first I want to examine one last attempt to resolve the paradox from within the Augustinian picture of language.

1.5. Conventionalism

²² I say more about conventionalism below.

Conventionalism seems like an ideal solution to the paradox of ostension.²³

Conventionalism avoids the mystifications of Platonism and mentalism while rebutting the skeptic: we are justified in using words as we do because we are trained to do so. If we did not adhere to this training we would not be able to communicate with others in the world, and this alone is sufficient to insure our adherence. On this view, the fact that we do not variously interpret ostensive definitions is not a function of a Platonic or mental connection between word and object, it is a function of the social necessity by which we are linked to others.

Conventionalism is appealing for many reasons. It stops the regress of interpretations without positing a mysterious Platonic fact or hidden process. It does not presuppose an ineffable, logical structure underlying language. And it appears to involve a less cognitive, more social and practical conception of language than Platonism or mentalism. Furthermore, Wittgenstein does not reject conventionalism, as he does Platonism and mentalism. It is unsurprising, then, that

²³ The linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure is one example of a conventionalist theory of language. According to Saussure, the connection between a word and a concept – what he calls the signifier and signified – is arbitrary. This is evident in the fact that different languages have different words for the same object. Members of a linguistic community tacitly agree to use certain sounds to refer to certain objects or ideas, and this tacit agreement functions as a kind of social contract, insuring that communication does not break down. For Saussure, learning a language is still a matter of learning names; the primary function of which is to refer to concepts; and once we learn a name, we learn how to use it. On this view of language, there is something common to all the various instantiations of a word: a meaning arbitrarily defined by the linguistic community. This account is susceptible to Wittgenstein's initial critique of the Augustinian picture. For Saussure, learning a language is still a matter of learning names, the primary function of which is to refer to concepts; and once we learn a name, we know how to use it.

several readers take Wittgenstein to advocate conventionalism.²⁴

The most prominent conventionalist reading of Wittgenstein is Saul Kripke's.²⁵ In the first half of his book Kripke presents the basic problem of the *Investigations*. The problem, for all relevant purposes, is the same problem that I have already presented: the skeptic has challenged us to explain how to interpret or understand a rule (an ostensive definition), and we cannot seem to provide an interpretation that precludes further interpretation. Kripke devotes the second half

²⁴ See for instance David Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983. Others attribute a related, nominalist view to Wittgenstein. This apparent nominalism is strongest in §57-59. There Wittgenstein uses the example of the color term "red" to highlight the temptation to confuse metaphysical questions about whether terms stand for objects existing *a priori* in the world with considerations that lie more with the nature of the language we use to express such inquiry. That is, he asks us to distinguish between "Red exists" as a statement about what "red" refers to, and a statement about how we use the term "red." Wittgenstein is appealing to a background of philosophical disagreement over the question of the reality of universals. For the realist, universals (like "red") exist independently of their various instantiations (that is, the possession of that property by an object). For the nominalist, there is nothing which can be said to exist over and above the objects that have the property. We should be wary of suggesting that Wittgenstein's apparent anti-realism amounts to more than a reminder of error: it is not an endorsement of nominalism.

Nevertheless, some scholars, namely Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright, have used Wittgenstein's arguments against realism as the basis of their own anti-realist philosophies. See Dummett's *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991, and Wright's *Rails to Infinity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001.

²⁵ *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982. Kripke writes that his book is not designed to give an accurate account of Wittgenstein's views, but rather an account of Wittgenstein's argument "as it struck [him], as it presented a problem for [him]" (5). However, Kripke does say that Wittgenstein believes that the paradox requires some kind of solution. See my footnote 28 below.

of his book to articulating what he calls Wittgenstein's "solution" to the problem.²⁶ The solution, Kripke says, lies in the distinction between the individual, considered in isolation, and the individual considered as part of a larger community. Kripke takes Wittgenstein to agree with the skeptic that there is no fact that makes one interpretation of the rule correct or incorrect. Considered in isolation – that is, not just being alone, but having never been socialized – the individual cannot appeal to any such fact to help her correctly follow a rule. "If so far we are right," Kripke writes, "a rule has no content/is non-binding for an isolated individual. But if we widen our gaze to the community, then there will be justification conditions" (89). As a member of a community with a relatively uniform practice of following rules, the individual can be trained to distinguish correct from incorrect applications. Instead of searching for an objective fact, immune to further interpretation, which gives our words a fixed meaning and necessitates some answers rather than others, we need only look around us at the community in which we live. Our practices are justified (or not) by the community in which they take place.

And for Kripke, herein lies the significance of Wittgenstein's concepts of agreement and forms of life. Wittgenstein invokes these concepts at various key

²⁶ As I mention in the introduction, Kripke assumes that Wittgenstein "does not wish to leave us with this problem, but to solve it," since "the skeptical conclusion is insane and intolerable" (60). This assumption is not obvious. In fact, this assumption renders Kripke's account of Wittgenstein's solution flawed. As I have suggested, Wittgenstein agrees with the skeptic that meaning and understanding are not immune to skepticism, but he rejects the further inference that we are not therefore justified in using language as we do.

points in the *Investigations* to explain how a child learns language. Kripke reads them as indications of Wittgenstein's conventionalism:

The set of responses in which we agree, and the way they interweave with our activities, is our *form of life*. Beings who agreed in consistently giving bizarre... responses would share a different form of life. By definition, such another form of life would be bizarre and incomprehensible to us. (Kripke 96)

For Kripke, Wittgenstein's appeal to forms of life and agreement are meant to show the centrality of the community in determining meaning and understanding. Agreement among members of a community provides the standard by which they can distinguish correct from incorrect interpretations of a rule. On this reading, what stops the regress of interpretations is the threat of not being able to communicate with the members of one's community.

However, Wittgenstein does not use the concepts of "agreement" or "forms of life" to indicate a tacit social contract among members of a linguistic community. He distinguishes between two kinds of agreement. The interlocutor of the *Investigations* espouses the first: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" (§241). This is the notion of agreement that Kripke uses. Wittgenstein responds with a different notion:

It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions, but in forms of life.

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. – It is one thing to describe methods of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement. (§241)

Wittgenstein distinguishes between two levels of agreement. The first, agreement in opinions, is a matter of convention: members of a particular society decide to agree on some things (to elect so and so; to build schools; to have a written constitution). The second, agreement in forms of life, is not conventional in the same way. We agree that certain activities count as “feeding” and others do not, that certain things count as “chairs” while others do not, but the nature of this agreement is different: it is not something we decided to agree on, nor is it something we can change. We do not decide on the meanings of our words any more than we decide where we are born or to whom. There is a possible world in which the word “feed” or “chair” refers to something other than it does for us, and while this shows that our language is contingent in one sense, it is not contingent in another.²⁷ Our language is conventional or arbitrary in the sense that it could have been otherwise;

²⁷ Talk of possible worlds raises the difficult question of whether we conceive of a world with radically different concepts than our own. Some, like Bernard Williams, argue that Wittgenstein aims to show that we cannot. “Wittgenstein and Idealism,” *Understanding Wittgenstein*. Ed. George Vesey. Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1976. Michael Forster challenges this reading in his *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004. I touch on this issue in chapter two section three.

in the sense that there is no permanent, logical structure keeping it as it is. But it is not arbitrary in the sense that it is capricious or easily changed.²⁸

And herein lies one problem with calling language “conventional’: it fails to account for the necessity inherent in our language. Wittgenstein alludes to this point when he writes that his notion of agreement “seems to abolish logic, but does not so.” This necessity is not the usual kind. It is not logical. Stanley Cavell illustrates the nature of this necessity in his essay “Must We Mean What We Say.”²⁹ To borrow his example: If a native speaker of English asks, without any special reason for doing so, “Do you dress that way voluntarily?” and if you are a native speaker of English, then you *will* be made to feel awkward or defensive, regardless of his intention (9). The grammar of the phrase necessitates a certain implication beyond the dictionary definition of the words in the sentence. To not feel this way is to not understand the question. It is to not know the meaning of the word

²⁸ Wittgenstein writes: “The rules of grammar may be called “arbitrary,” if that is to mean that the aim of the grammar is nothing but that of the language” (PI §497). “Grammar consists of conventions.” *Philosophical Grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press. §138. See also PG §133: “Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary.” And *Zettel* §331: “... saying that the rules of grammar are arbitrary is directed against the possibility of this justification, which is constructed on the model of justifying a sentence by what verifies it.”

²⁹ “Must We Mean What We Say?” *Must We Mean What We Say?* Second Edition. Cambridge UP, 2002, 1-43.

“voluntarily” as it is here used.³⁰ To learn a language means to learn what one’s words *must* mean in the particular circumstances in which they are uttered, and not just the dictionary definitions of words. This *must* is not the “hardness of the logical must” that Wittgenstein speaks of with respect to Platonism (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Book 6 §49). But it is also not merely a matter of convention.

So Wittgenstein does not believe that language is conventional in the usual sense. The usual notion of convention or agreement does not capture the necessity inherent in our language. But I have not shown that Wittgenstein’s notion of agreement, which does capture this necessity, is not a solution to the paradox we have been trying to solve. In fact, it seems to offer a solution. It seems that what Wittgenstein calls “agreement in forms of life” may be what enables the child to correctly interpret an ostensive definition.

There is something right about this response. As I will argue shortly, Wittgenstein’s notions of agreement and forms of life are central to understanding his conception of how we acquire language. But this notion of agreement does not simply solve the skeptical paradox. For one thing, this notion is still fuzzy. Invoking

³⁰ Wittgenstein was not always sensitive to the variety of meanings of our words. Fania Pascal, one of Wittgenstein’s (few) friends, recounts the following story from their time in Cambridge in the 1930s:

I had my tonsils out and was in the Evelyn Nursing Home feeling sorry for myself. Wittgenstein called. I croaked: "I feel just like a dog that has been run over." He was disgusted: "You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like." (quoted in Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2005, page 12).

it now is to simply stipulate that Wittgenstein's yet to be explained notion of agreement is immune to further interpretation and stops the regress of interpretations, without actually explaining how this occurs. In this respect it is not unlike resorting to Platonism or mentalism.

Indeed the reason why conventionalism, whether in the Kripkean or Wittgensteinian sense, is not a solution to the skeptical paradox is similar to the reason why Platonism and mentalism are not solutions. They all partake in the Augustinian picture of language. They all presume that there is something common to the various uses of a word, other than the word itself, that mandates that we use that word and not another in particular circumstances.³¹ For the Platonist, this something is the Platonic object, existing outside space and time. For the mentalist, it is an inner process, hidden inside our body. For the conventionalist, it is social convention, however so understood. Wittgenstein challenges this assumption. He argues that there is nothing common to the various uses of a word that makes us use that word as we do. This assumption is at the core of the Augustinian picture of language. To appreciate Wittgenstein's notions of agreement and forms of life, to resolve the skeptical paradox, we need to first examine Wittgenstein's criticism of this assumption.

The idea that there is something common to the various uses of a word (other than the word itself) that makes us use it in various circumstances seems

³¹ This caveat, "other than the word itself," is important to prevent a common misreading of the phrase. In what follows I will not always add it, but this is not an oversight but rather an attempt at (stylistic) clarity.

intuitive, even obvious. After all, it cannot be completely random that we call both football and solitaire “games,” for instance. We need not adopt the realist view of the *Tractatus*, according to which there is something fundamental that each game shares, or the belief in necessary and sufficient conditions, to believe that there is something common to each use of the word “game” which makes us use it as we do. This something may be conventional – a tacitly agreed upon definition of what counts as a “game,” for instance.

Wittgenstein insists otherwise. He claims that the various instantiations of a word have nothing in common that makes us call it what we do. He demonstrates this claim by asking what the various uses of the word “game” have in common other than that they are called “games.” He lists various games, from football, chess and tennis to solitaire, patience, and ring-a-ring-a-roses, and asks, what is common to all these activities? Football requires teams, while solitaire involves just one person; tennis requires physical activity, while patience does not; most games seem to involve winning or losing or getting better, but ring-a-ring-a-roses involves neither. In considering what is common to all the things we call “games,” we find that some features overlap, but any set of conditions we come up with fails to cover some cases that we happily call “games.” So what makes us call all these activities “games”? Wittgenstein’s answer is that there is no one thing, no single set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but that games relate to each other in the way members of a family have various degrees of similarities. Wittgenstein calls this group of similarities a “family resemblance” (§67). The phrase is not ideal, as

families have a shared genetic basis underpinning their shared features, while the idea of an essential substrate underpinning the various uses of a word is precisely what Wittgenstein wants to deny. Wittgenstein is referring only the external features of family members – the eyes, the facial expressions, the gait, the temperament – all of which vary across members of a family, but are nevertheless consistent enough to form a visible unity. The concept of family resemblances is apt to mislead if we take it as a substantive position or an alternative to the realism of the *Tractatus*.³² It is one of Wittgenstein’s “objects of comparison” (§129), designed to unfix an entrenched view of language.

Wittgenstein’s claim that there is nothing common to the various uses of a word other than the word itself is intended both empirically and methodologically.

³² Some read Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances as offering a substantive philosophical position, one that not only corrects but replaces the realism of the *Tractatus*. Renford Bambrough, for instance, argues that Wittgenstein “solved the problem of universals.” For Bambrough, Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances provides a justification for the use of terms which, while not sharing a common feature, have enough interconnected properties to warrant sharing the same name. But Wittgenstein is not trying to justify how we use words, but to show that the philosophical requirement of justification is not needed to explain how we use words as we do. Renford Bambrough, “Universals and Family Resemblances,” *Wittgenstein: The ‘Philosophical Investigations.’* Ed. George Pitcher. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 186-204. Colin McGinn reads the concept of family resemblances as advocating a biological determinist position. This reading does not account for the fact that Wittgenstein’s example includes traits that are learned as well as inborn. Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, NY: Blackwell, 1984, 108. Baker and Hacker argue that Wittgenstein is wrong to say that games have no common properties. But Baker and Hacker take Wittgenstein to write “games have no one thing in common” rather than “games have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all.” The qualifying clause is crucial. G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding*. NY: Blackwell, 1983, 192.

That is, he challenges both the belief that one common element underlies a word and the philosophical impulse to find one. He first makes the empirical claim:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language.” (§65)

And then he makes the methodological claim:

Don’t say: “There *must* be something in common... but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!” (§66)

The empirical claim insists that there is nothing common to the various activities we call a “game” other than the word “game.” The methodological claim implores us not to search for that which, according to Wittgenstein, does not exist. The sequence of the claims is important, as the second pre-empts a certain reading of the first. In claiming that there is nothing common to what we call language, Wittgenstein is not saying that while no one common element has been found, one *could* be found by a more subtle and probing analysis.³³ He is questioning the picture of philosophy that

³³ Hans-Johann Glock, for instance, writes that because Wittgenstein pokes holes in the explanations of others but does not provide an alternative theory, he is “open to the charge that, with persistence, a game can be analytically defined, for example, as a rule-guided activity with fixed objectives that are of little or no importance to the context of the game.” *Philosophical Investigations: Principles of Interpretation.*

leads us to search for this element, the picture that leads us to believe that there *must* be something in common – whether biological, conventional, or Platonic.

Why is Wittgenstein so confident that nothing common to all games will be discovered in the future? Why not let others investigate further? Thomas Hurka asks precisely these questions. He concludes that Wittgenstein's claim is not just unwarranted, it is intellectually irresponsible:

... an anti-theoretical position is properly open only to those who have made a serious effort to theorize a given domain and found that it cannot succeed. Anti-theorists who do not make this effort are simply being lazy, like Wittgenstein. His central example of a concept that cannot be given a unifying analysis was that of a game, but in one of the great under-appreciated books of the 20th century Bernard Suits gives perfectly persuasive necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being a game.³⁴

A look at Suits reveals a subtle and persuasive definition of a game:

Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.... To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules... where the rules prohibit the use of

Wittgenstein: Towards a Re-evaluation. Eds. Rudolf Haller and Johannes Brandl. Vienna: Holder-Pchler-Tempsky, 1996, 152-162.

³⁴ Thomas Hurka, "Normative Ethics: Back to the Future," *The Future of Philosophy*. Ed. Brian Leiter. Oxford UP, 2004, page 249.

more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.³⁵

In the game of golf, for example, one tries to get his ball in the hole in the fewest number of strokes (the “specific state of affairs”), but one is prohibited from picking up the ball and placing it in the hole (the “more efficient means” of doing this). If the golfer were to do so he would not be playing golf. This definition seems to hold for almost all things we consider games. Suits goes on to argue that playing games is part of leading an ethically valuable life.³⁶ He does not, then, just present a counter-example to Wittgenstein; he puts this counter-example to good use. He presents an enriching analysis of what games are and how they contribute to human flourishing; an analysis which would be unavailable had he heeded Wittgenstein’s empirical and methodological advice.

What do we make of Wittgenstein’s claim in light of this counter-example? Is he “simply being lazy,” as Hurka suggests? Perhaps. Or perhaps he is not as perceptive as Suits. But while Suits has clearly undermined his empirical claim that there is no one thing common to all games, Wittgenstein’s methodological claim still

³⁵ Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. University of Toronto Press, 1978, page 41.

³⁶ Suits mentions Wittgenstein only in passing:
‘Don’t say,’ Wittgenstein admonishes us, ‘there must be something common or they would not be called games – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.’ This is unexceptionable advice. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein himself did not follow it. He looked, to be sure, but because he had decided beforehand that games are indefinable, his look was fleeting, and he saw very little. (x)

holds. Wittgenstein is not urging us not to look for a common element simply because he does not believe there is one. He is challenging the idea that *even if* there is one common element to all instantiations of a word, finding it gives us the best (most accurate) understanding of the concept in question. Suits has found a something common to all games. But this does not mean that this common element *is* the meaning of that word in all (or even most) of its instantiations, or that understanding what a game is involves recognizing this common element. I have used the concept “game” for most of my life without any difficulty even though I only recently learned of Suits’s definition. Does this mean that, unbeknownst to me, I had Suits’s definition lurking somewhere in the back of my mind? If not, does this mean that I did not *really* understand the concept of a game when I used it? Both suggestions are implausible. The first presumes the mentalist picture that we have already rejected, only it is even more questionable in that in this case I had, stored in my mind, a definition that I never in fact learned. The second entails the idea that everyone who uses or has used the word “game” but who is unaware of Suits’s definition does not *really* understand what a game is. To assert this is to sublime our concept of understanding beyond recognition.

So while Suits shows that Wittgenstein is wrong to claim that there is no one thing common to all instantiations of a word or concept, Wittgenstein’s general claim remains defensible. What Wittgenstein shows is that while one common element might be found, there is no reason to believe that this common element explains or underlies the particular instantiation in question. In arguing that there

is nothing common to the various uses of a word other than the word itself, Wittgenstein is making two points. First, as we have seen, he is questioning whether developing necessary and sufficient conditions for all the various instantiations of a word or concept really gives us the best insight into particular instantiations of that word or concept. The answer, he justifiably suggests, is “no.” Second, he is arguing that because of the variegated and open-ended nature of our words and concepts, no one set of conditions, no general theory, can anticipate the infinite number of imaginable contexts in which we might use a word. No theory can anticipate the shape that our concepts might take.

Stanley Cavell has drawn several vivid illustrations of just how complex and unpredictable our language is. These illustrations show that our words and concepts are open-ended; they contain layers of meaning and understanding, many of which are unpredictable, not all of which are contained in the initial association between word and object, and not all of which are reducible to a single common element. These illustrations show that even if we can develop rules for words prior to our actual use of them, such explanations fail to capture the subtlety and complexity with which we use these words in the course of our lives. Cavell begins by responding to the claim, from philosophers, that because our ordinary uses of words do not have clear rules for their use they are ambiguous, they lack the precision or stability of philosophical definitions:

But maybe the very ambiguity of ordinary language, though sometimes, some places, a liability, is just what gives it the power, of illumination, of enriching perception, its partisans are partial to. (*Claim of Reason* 180)

How can ambiguity enrich perception? Cavell offers the following example: we can project the word *feed* from the phrase “feed the animals” or “feed the baby” to a different language game and say “feed the meter.”³⁷ A philosophy that tries to reduce the meaning of words to one common element would consider the replacement of “put” with “feed” as either an equivalent substitution or a loss of precision. But the projection of “feed” is neither. “Feed” conveys shades of meaning that are lost with “put.” “Feed” accentuates the sense of obligation we experience with parking meters, and suggests that the relationship we share with them is not impersonal or unemotional. Indeed parking meters, as we relate to them, frequently evoke emotions ranging from bitterness – *Why do I have to feed you again? Did you not just eat?* – to hope – *Maybe if I don’t feed you no one will notice* – to excitement – *How fortunate I am to find a meter that has already been fed! I got away with not feeding you for two hours!* The ability to project words from one context to another illustrates how we communicate everyday experiences with subtlety and at times poetic language. It is because the meanings of words are not reducible to a common element, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, that we can project words in this way. To try to reduce our various uses of words to one common element merely obfuscates the variability and possibility of our words and concepts. Far

³⁷ Cf. Cavell, *Claim of Reason* 181-182.

from being a hindrance, this variability, this ambiguity, allows us to create shades of meaning that give color and texture to our everyday language.

Wittgenstein's criticism of the Augustinian picture is therefore stronger than it initially appears. At first glance his criticism of this picture seems to be that it does not account for the various ways we use language – indeed Wittgenstein acknowledges that Augustine “does describe a system of communication; only not everything we call language is this system” (§3). This suggests that this picture is partly correct, only limited. But if the critique of the Augustinian picture is simply that it is limited, then we might be tempted to think that some words, such as nouns, fit the Augustinian picture, while other words, such as prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives, etcetera, do not. This is not right. What fits the Augustinian picture are certain *uses* of words (such as naming an object), not certain *kinds* of words (such as nouns). This is the thrust of Wittgenstein's claim that “for a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word lies in its use in the language” (§43).³⁸ The caveat here – “for a large class of cases – though not for all” – is important. It is tempting to exempt nouns with clear referents from this class. But Wittgenstein says “a large class of cases,” not “a large class of words”; even nouns with apparently clear referents do not have a context-independent meaning. What gives the appearance that they do is

³⁸ Some take this claim to imply a “use-theory” of language. But Wittgenstein's notion that the meaning of a word is (often) its use is designed to attack the possibility of a theory of language, not advocate one. John Searle, for instance, reads Wittgenstein as suggesting such a theory in his *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge UP, 1969, 148.

their occasional use as names (in the context of telling someone, “This is called ‘slab,’” for instance).

The claim that the meaning of a word is (generally) its use is meant to bring our perception of language in line with how it actually works. It is meant to awaken us to the variety of ways we use words, and the failure of philosophical theories to account for this variety. The problem with the Augustinian picture of language is not just that it produces an unpalatable regress. It does not account for the various ways we use the *same* word – even the same noun.

In section 1.1 I suggested that Wittgenstein wants us to be weary of making too much of the initial association between a word and its meaning. It is natural for us to ask what this association consists in. This is the question we have been pursuing in the past few sections. And we have been pursuing it in the hope that it would lead to an answer to the question we’ve been asking: How does a child *first* learn language? Appreciating Wittgenstein’s claim that there is nothing common to the various instantiations of a word other than the word itself helps illustrate a key point: answering the first question – What is the nature of the initial association between word and object? – will not satisfactorily answer the second question – How does a child learn language? For understanding how we learn language involves much more than understanding this initial association.

1.6. The Paradox Dissolved

“The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice.... (The decisive move in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.)”

PI §308

We are now in a position to answer the question with which we began. I have already suggested what this answer might be. So how does a child first learn language? What does the child have to know in order to first learn language? The question, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, contains a mistake. It implies that learning a word, or using a word, requires a certain knowledge – where “knowledge” means something like, “information stored in our mind.” The thrust of Wittgenstein’s scenes of instruction, his discussion of the paradoxes of ostension, explanation, and rule-following, is to demonstrate that what we do everyday is not a function of knowledge in this sense. Our most quotidian actions are not the result of computation or ratiocination; they are not cognitive achievements.

The uncertainty brought on by skepticism does not require the positing of a hidden process, a mysterious third realm, a Platonic object, or even convention to explain how meaning and understanding happen. We need only describe what happens on the surface, as it were, in the various specific instances in which a child begins to use or understand a word. Observing these instances, one finds certain responses, reactions, and practices recurring depending on whether the child correctly or incorrectly uses or understands the word. Over time, such responses and practices become relatively uniform and increasingly match up with our own. The responses and practices help make up what Wittgenstein calls a “form of life”

(*Lebensform*). They include pointing, gesturing, expressing, and smiling, speaking and following with greater and lesser degrees of confidence, all fostered (or discouraged) by the behaviour of others. These practices and responses, this form of life, transcends linguistic and cultural difference.³⁹ They are part of the “common behavior of mankind” which makes it possible to communicate across difference in the first place (§206). Any form of communication, even skeptical doubt, only makes sense against a background of shared practices and judgments. This is what Wittgenstein means by agreement. “If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments.... That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life” (§206, 241-242). The concept “forms of life” is apt to mislead. A form of life is not a specific culture or a historical moment. The fact that we use and understand language without reflection and without rules to cover all cases, in spite of the possibility of various interpretations, applies to *anyone* who is master of a language. This is not a philosophical thesis but a constitutive fact of human history.

³⁹ ... if a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I shall teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *practice*. And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself. In the course of this teaching I shall show him the same colours, the same lengths, the same shapes, I shall make him find them and produce them, and so on. I shall, for instance, get him to continue an ornamental pattern uniformly when told to do so. – And also to continue progressions. And so, for example, when given: to go on:

I do it, he does it after me; and I influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement. I let him go his way, or hold him back, and so on. (PI §208)

If we think of using or understanding language as primarily a mental phenomenon, one in which one person somehow uses their voice to transfer a thought from their mind into the mind of another, then we will indeed wonder how this occurs, and we will need to develop a highly sophisticated explanation for how it happens. But this explanation will be no less susceptible to skepticism than our ordinary practices, and no more informative. In fact, Wittgenstein believes that it is likely to lead us farther away from the phenomenon we are trying to understand: our language, our concepts, and how they operate in the course of our daily lives.

To return then, to the question we asked earlier: How does the child acquire language? What does the child have to know in order to correctly interpret ostensive definitions? The answer, I take it, is the common-behavior of mankind. How does he learn this? Not by any process of ratiocination, but by observing, mimicking, following and responding to those around us; by being encouraged at some moments and discouraged at others. We learn words in different contexts and in different ways – sometimes by having them ostensively defined for us, sometimes by listening to adults or watching television, sometimes by doing exercises in school – and whether we have learned them or not is borne out in the uses we make of these words in subsequent contexts. Thus learning language cannot be reduced to a single moment, a particular action, or a method. The child can be said to have learned a word when she can use it in various contexts, and when she can follow along when someone else does the same. There is no one point in time when we can say this happens. Indeed in one sense we always remain students of language, for

new contexts, new possible uses of words are always emerging, requiring or inviting new uses of old words.

Returning to Wittgenstein's gloss of Augustine in §1, we can see that the first step that altogether escapes notice, "the decisive move in the conjuring trick" (§308), is the subtle shift from what Augustine actually says to the Augustinian picture of language. In making Augustine mean more than he does, in subliming his words, the Augustinian picture omitted crucial aspects of Augustine's description of how a child learns language: "the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something." Instead, the picture narrowly focuses on the association between a word and a thing, eliding the intangible elements of trust, disappointment, happiness, sadness, rejection and acceptance that initiate a child into a form of life. These aspects comprise "the common behavior of mankind." Nothing more or less is required in that particular case to establish an initial association between the word and a thing, and therefore nothing more or less is required to understand or explain the association. This does not mean that the association is pre-existing or that it will now be permanent. Other particular cases may be different (I may put a label on an object so that someone unfamiliar with its contents can identify them, for instance), but to explain how we first learn the meaning of a word, we need only recount what happened in the particular cases in which we first began to use and understand it.

I take Wittgenstein's answer to the question of what secures meaning and understanding to be: we do. Not "we" the community, but "we" as people, as any kind of people, regardless of what community we happen to be in. The idea that something other than ourselves is the source of meaning and understanding elides this irreducibly human aspect of language. The Augustinian picture takes language to consist of words on the one hand and meaning and understanding on the other, and asks what bridges the gap between them. The various candidates for this bridge, a Platonic object, a mental image, the community, all presume the initial picture that Wittgenstein rejects. They all overlook the inflection of the voice, the facial expression, the relationship between listener and speaker – those elements without which we could not have learned language in the first place. Wittgenstein wants to recuperate this human aspect of language because without it we can describe *a* language, but not *our* language – not the language we use everyday.

1.7. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to explain Wittgenstein's view that traditional philosophy fails to adequately account for how human beings use language in the course of their daily lives. This failure stems from three tendencies common to philosophers: the tendency to make our ordinary words mean more than they were intended to mean; the tendency to presume that things in the world must be arranged in a certain way (i.e. logical, rule-bound, systematic); and the tendency to search for hidden explanations in place of visible ones. These tendencies are inter-

related. We search for hidden processes because we believe that there must be something immune to skepticism underlying our words and actions, and what we see on the surface seems obviously susceptible to skepticism. And we leap from the particular to the general for the same reason. Taken together, these tendencies lead traditional philosophers into a distorted conception of our language. In the next chapter I explain how, for Wittgenstein, this distorted conception is the reason traditional philosophy so often fails to have any purchase over our everyday lives.

2. WITTGENSTEIN'S POSITIVE CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY

“What *we* do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”

PI §116

Understanding Wittgenstein's criticism of the Augustinian picture is necessary to understand both his criticism of traditional philosophy and the approach to philosophy he advocates in its place. This criticism and approach have been the source of much debate. Many interpret this criticism as evidence that Wittgenstein wants to abandon philosophy altogether; as evidence that he thinks that our ordinary, unreflective, non-philosophical modes of understanding provide a better picture of language and the world than philosophical ones.¹ At times Wittgenstein seems to suggest such a reading. He writes, for instance, that philosophy is “like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (PI §103). Wittgenstein does not say we need another, better pair of glasses; he suggests that our uncorrected way of

¹ This interpretation is common to both critics and admirers of Wittgenstein. A notable critic is Gilles Deleuze, who derisively calls Wittgenstein “the end of philosophy.” See his *abécédaire* with Claire Parnet. Accessed here <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=438091653681675611#docid=-9009902138061209670> on October 14th, 2009. Admirers include advocates of ordinary language philosophy, such as Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of the Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 2002. J.L. Austin's writing is also paradigmatic of the methods of this school, and many of his criticisms of traditional philosophy resemble those of Wittgenstein, though he did not write on Wittgenstein. See especially Austin's *Philosophical Papers*. Third edition. Edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock. Oxford University Press, 1979.

looking at things is all we need.² But Wittgenstein's practice is not always consistent with this and similar assertions, and he routinely uses the word "philosophy" in a positive sense, suggesting that he is not giving up on the enterprise altogether. In the *Blue Book*, for instance, he writes, "Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us" (25).³ These and similar remarks suggest that despite his criticism of traditional philosophy and suggestions like those in §103, Wittgenstein tries to recuperate a notion of philosophy – a practice of critical reflection on the world – that is at once sympathetic to yet distinct from everyday thought. This notion of philosophy, which Wittgenstein endorses, must be distinguished from the notion of philosophy which he criticizes.

My aim in this chapter is to mark this distinction, and to explain Wittgenstein's positive notion of philosophy. I begin by analyzing Wittgenstein's response to G.E. Moore's attempt to refute external world skepticism.⁴ Building on the account of language offered in the previous chapter, I show how Moore's failure to grasp what it means to use language leads him to make claims which do not have the force or implication he thinks they have. And I argue that Wittgenstein's

² Robert Fogelin argues that for Wittgenstein, our normal, uncorrected way of viewing language is adequate. "Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophy," *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*. ed. Hans Sluga and David Stern. Cambridge UP, 1996.

³ See also *Philosophical Investigations* §52, §109, §121, §124, §125, §127, and §129.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*. Ed. G.E.M Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. London: Blackwell, 1969.

response to Moore marks a novel contribution to the problem of skepticism. In the second section I examine the question, introduced in the previous chapter, of where and why justifications come to an end. Here I defend Wittgenstein against charges of dogmatism by explaining why we cannot be criticized for being certain of some things for which we lack philosophical justification. Taken together, these two sections illustrate the kind of philosophical practice Wittgenstein advocates in place of traditional philosophy. In the third section I elaborate and defend this practice from criticisms by both traditional and non-traditional philosophers. I argue that this practice does not entail a quietistic end to philosophy, as many have suggested. Rather, it offers a way of thinking philosophically that avoids the abstractions of traditional philosophy and is more attuned to our everyday lives.

2.1. Wittgenstein's Response to Moore

Wittgenstein's last writings, published posthumously as *On Certainty*, constitute a sustained response to two papers by G.E. Moore.⁵ In the first paper, "A Defense of Common Sense," Moore offers a list of truisms, each of which he claims "to know, with certainty, to be true."⁶ Such claims include, "There exists at present a

⁵ G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Philosophical Papers*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959, pp. 127-150. "A Defense of Common Sense," *Philosophical Papers*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959, pp. 32-59.

⁶ Note Moore's linking of knowledge and certainty. I will suggest, in the following section, that these are two distinct states (or dispositions).

living human body, which is my body” and “The earth has existed for many years before my body was born.”⁷ These sorts of claims are known as Moorean claims or Moorean propositions. In the second paper, “Proof of an External World,” Moore tries to prove the existence of the external world. He begins by defining an “external object” as an object whose existence is independent of our perception. He then offers the following proof: “I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right, ‘Here is one hand,’ and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ‘and here is another.’” Moore took this argument to refute external world skepticism.

At first glance, this hardly sounds convincing. But consider the argument more closely. The skeptic’s argument runs as follows:

- 1) If I cannot refute the skeptical challenge, I do not know that this is a hand
- 2) I cannot refute the skeptical challenge

Therefore,

- 3) I do not know that this is a hand

⁷ Moore’s precise argument in “A Defense of Common Sense” is not relevant to my discussion (or Wittgenstein’s). What matters is Moore’s claim to know, with certainty, the propositions he states. He also says that everyone else knows such things about themselves, and that he knows that they know such things. Given that we all know such things, these things constitute a common sense, and Moore defends this common sense against skepticism.

Moore does not attack either premise, nor does he question the validity of the argument. He simply denies the consequent of the first premise rather than affirm its antecedent. Moore's argument looks like this:

- 1) If I cannot refute the skeptical challenge, I do not know that this is a hand
- 2) I know that this is a hand

Therefore,

- 3) I can refute the skeptical challenge

Moore has shifted the argument from *modus ponens* to *modus tollens*. The result is a valid argument, but is it sound? Does Moore *know* that this is a hand?

Wittgenstein did not think so, though he admired Moore's effort.⁸ At the beginning of *On Certainty*, he writes: "Now, can one enumerate what one knows? Straight off like that, I believe not. For otherwise the expression 'I know' gets misused" (OC §6). This seems like an odd response. When Moore says "I know this is a hand," the meaning of the phrase seems clear. Surely we might question

⁸ According to the editors of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein told Moore that these were his two best papers. Moore agreed.

My discussion of Wittgenstein's response to Moore in this section is indebted to Stanley Cavell's discussion of traditional epistemology in part two of *The Claim of Reason*, as well as to James Conant's discussion of *On Certainty* in "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," *Philosophical Investigations*, Volume 21 (3), July 1998, 222-250. This is not to say, of course, that Cavell and Conant necessarily agree with my conclusions in this chapter. Cavell, for instance, does not discuss *On Certainty*. And Conant does not seem to distinguish between Moorean claims to knowledge and ordinary, ground level Moorean claims. His focus is more on Wittgenstein's conception of meaning.

Moore's argument, but not his use of the word "know." Why does Wittgenstein say otherwise? Consider a similar remark by Wittgenstein just a few paragraphs later:

I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face. – So I don't know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion make sense. Any more than the assertion "I am here," which I might yet use at any moment, if a suitable occasion presented itself.... It is only in use that the proposition has its sense. And "I know," used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it. (OC §10)

This passage has been read in different ways. According to Marie McGinn, Wittgenstein is saying that the phrase "I know there is a sick man lying here" makes sense on its own, but loses its sense when used in an unsuitable context.⁹ An unsuitable context is one in which, for instance, there is no sick man in sight, or when it is patently obvious that a sick man is lying there. If, for instance, I say "I know that a sick man is lying here" when you and I are sitting at the edge of our father's hospital bed, and I have no reason to point this out to you, then the phrase does not make sense. It is, as Wittgenstein says, "nonsense." But in other contexts the phrase may make perfect sense. On this reading, the phrase has a clear sense *unless* it is used in an unsuitable context.

⁹ Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Skepticism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. Conant offers a detailed critique of McGinn's reading in "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use."

The problem with this reading, however, is that presumes that words have meaning independent of their use in particular circumstances. This presumption is what Wittgenstein criticizes about the Augustinian picture. So unless he is contradicting himself, he must mean something else when he says that Moore's claim is nonsense. Sure enough, Wittgenstein does not say that the proposition "I know a sick man is lying here" makes sense *unless* is used in an unsuitable context. He says the proposition *only* makes sense if used in a suitable context: "it is only in use that the proposition has its sense" (OC §6). He repeats this point elsewhere in *On Certainty*:

Just as the words "I am here" have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, - and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination.
(OC §348)

He makes the same point in the *Investigations*:

If, for instance, someone says that the sentence "This is here" (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense. (PI §117)¹⁰

¹⁰ Conant discusses these two passages, and many others, in "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use" (see page 239 and following). See also OC §349, §350, §352, §393, and PI §514.

Again: the words “I am here” have meaning “only in certain contexts.” On their own, independently of any context, they have no meaning at all; their meaning “stands in need of determination.” Recall from the last chapter that for Wittgenstein the meaning of a word or phrase is (usually) determined by its use (Cf. §43). So in saying that the claim “I know a sick man is lying here” is nonsense, Wittgenstein is not saying that this phrase is so obvious that there is no reason to say it. He is saying that the phrase has no clear meaning.

This seems obviously false. When Moore gave his lecture to a room full of philosophers, none objected to Moore’s use of “I know.” None felt that his meaning was unclear. What meaning did they all seem to understand?¹¹ It is just not clear in what sense, if any, Moore’s claim shows that he is captive to a flawed picture of language.

To see what Wittgenstein is getting at, we need to distinguish three different levels of meaning for the phrase “I know this is a hand.” First is the dictionary definitions of the words in the phrase “I know this is a hand.” Second is the meaning these words have in the context in which they are uttered. Third is the meaning that Moore intends to convey with these words. The dictionary definitions of the words “I”, “know,” “this,” and “hand” are clear enough. We know what these definitions

¹¹ This is Richard Rorty’s objection to Wittgenstein. For Rorty, it is just not clear in what sense philosophical uses of language, like Moore’s, are nonsense: “Wittgenstein writes as if his readers will find it obvious that thinkers like Descartes, Locke, Hegel, and Heidegger were victims of ‘the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language,’ rather than original thinkers who, by using words in new ways, broke new paths of inquiry.” “Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn,” *Philosophy and Cultural Politics*. Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 167.

roughly are, and we can combine them to get a picture of what the phrase means. But this picture, these definitions, do not determine what these words mean in the particular circumstances in which they are uttered, or what Moore intends them to mean. Consider, for instance, a simple sentence such as, "The cows are in the barn." According to the Augustinian picture, we understand what this sentence means because we understand the dictionary definitions (the one common element) of each word: we know that a cow is a somewhat large mammal with four legs and a barn is a rectangular structure made of wood, and by putting the meanings of the words together we get the meaning of the sentence. But the meaning of the sentence is not always or even often reducible to the sum of the dictionary definitions of each word in the sentence. The meaning of the sentence changes according to the circumstances in which it appears. Perhaps I say "The cows are in the barn" as you are preparing to round up the cows from the field and herd them into the barn. In this case, the sentence is not merely a descriptive statement, it also means "you do not have to go bring the cows into the barn." It could even mean "sit down and relax, your work is finished for the day," and/or "those cows are well-trained: they know that at this hour they are usually herded into the barn, so this time they went on their own," and so on. The meaning of a sentence like "The cows are in the barn," varies depending on many factors, from the time of day to the relationship between the speaker and listener (amiable? spiteful?), the kind of work required, the intonation ("The cows are in the barn?" is obviously much different than "The cows are in the barn!!!"), and the words preceding the sentence. If "The

cows are in the barn” is preceded by you telling me “I better go outside and put the cows into the barn,” for instance, it takes on a different force.

So the second level of meaning is the meaning as determined by the context of the utterance. The third level of meaning is that intended by the speaker. This is not necessarily identical to either the dictionary definition or the meaning as determined by the context. I might ask, “Do you dress that way voluntarily?” not to suggest that your attire is poorly chosen, but intending to find out whether or not you exercised your free will in choosing your clothes. But regardless of my intention, if I ask this in ordinary circumstances, the implied meaning of the question holds. You *will* be offended by the question, and justifiably so.

When Wittgenstein says that Moore’s claim is “nonsense,” he means that Moore’s claim does not have the meaning that Moore thinks it has. The meaning of Moore’s words in the context in which he uses them does not match his intention in using these words. Indeed, Wittgenstein does not believe that Moore’s words have any clear meaning. To see this, we have to step back for a moment and consider the circumstances in which he is speaking. First, consider in what circumstances we might say, “I know such and such”: perhaps when I tell my fiancée, after having lost our way in a foreign city, “Now I know where we are!”, or when a scientist says, after debating the function of a particular protein with a colleague, “I just know that this is an enzyme!” The meanings of “I know” here are not identical. In the first instance “I know” signals a newfound awareness of something. In the second it expresses an emphasis of something already known (though perhaps recently discovered). But in

each case the speaker's intention in uttering this phrase fits seamlessly with the circumstances of his utterance. There is no question of the meaning or appropriateness of either utterance in these specific circumstances.

Now consider the circumstances in which Moore is speaking. He is responding to a skeptic. The skeptic, in turn, is responding to an everyday claim, such as the scientist's claim, "I know that this is an enzyme." The skeptic responds, "How do you know that is really an enzyme? How do you know that it is a *real* enzyme, and not some fake one made to look just like a real one? Unless you can refute this possibility, you don't really know that is an enzyme. You don't know what you claim to know." Notice the subtle shift from the scientist's use of "I know" to the skeptic's. When the scientist says, "I know that this is an enzyme", he means that he can provide evidence in support of his claim. He can show that this protein speeds up a certain chemical reaction, as only enzymes do. That is, he can provide evidence showing that the protein in question is an enzyme and not some other kind of protein, or that the object in question is a protein and not some other kind of cellular material.¹² But when the skeptic says, in response to the scientist, "You don't know that this is an enzyme," he does not mean to challenge the claim that this protein is an enzyme and not some other kind of protein. He means that the scientist does not know that this is even a real protein (as opposed to a fake one).

¹²Cf. Cavell's distinction between criteria for the existence of something and criteria for the identity of that thing. Cavell shows, following Austin, that there is not criteria for something's existence over and above the criteria for its identification. See the first two chapters of *The Claim of Reason*, especially "Austin and Examples."

So when the skeptic says to the scientist, “You don’t know that this is an enzyme” he means “know” in a different sense than the scientist means.¹³ He has sublimed the scientist’s conception of knowledge, and is now using a different conception. In this respect the skeptic and the scientist are speaking at cross-purposes, and the scientist need not acquiesce to the skeptic’s challenge. This difference gets lost if we focus simply on the fact that they both use the same word – “know” – and presume that it has the same meaning regardless of the circumstances of its use. In order to undermine the scientist’s claim to knowledge, the skeptic must use the same conception of knowledge that the scientist invokes when he says “I know.” He must mean “know” in the same sense as the scientist.

So why doesn’t the skeptic just use the same conception of knowledge as the scientist? Because in this case, as Stanley Cavell has shown, the skeptic faces a dilemma.¹⁴ If he uses the same conception of knowledge as the scientist, then he only challenges the scientist’s claim to know that this is an enzyme and not something else. This challenge is not general enough to lead the scientist to doubt the existence of the protein, and by extension the external world. If, on the other

¹³ By skeptic here I mean a philosophical skeptic. A non-philosophical skeptic might challenge the scientist’s claim and use “know” in the same sense as the scientist. A non-philosophical skeptic, say a colleague of the scientist, might simply want more evidence in support of the claim that the protein in question is an enzyme and not something else. In this case the scientist can respond by providing evidence in defense of his claim: an enzyme is a protein which speeds up chemical reactions, here is the micro-scopic and experimental data I have to show that this particular protein speeds up this particular reaction (i.e. when you remove the protein and keep all other things equal, this reaction occurs at a much slower rate).

¹⁴ “The Philosopher’s Projection Poses a Dilemma,” *The Claim of Reason*, page 199.

hand, the skeptic retains his sublimed sense of “know,” then his challenge misses the mark. In this case he is not challenging the scientist’s specific claim, he is challenging the scientist’s claim to know anything at all. To this charge the scientist might justifiably respond, “Maybe there is no external world. Maybe I am dreaming. Nevertheless, in this dream I know that this is an enzyme and not some other cellular material,” and then continue going on as usual. The skeptic’s challenge only has bite if the scientist claims that he does in fact know that there is an external world. But this is a different claim – and a different kind of knowledge – than the one the scientist makes when he claims to know that this particular protein is an enzyme.

Returning now to Moore: he uses “I know” in the same sense as the skeptic, not the scientist. When Moore says, in response to the skeptic, “I know that this is a hand,” he means to establish the existence of the hand, not merely that this is a hand and not something else. Moore’s use of “I know” constitutes a “misuse of language” because he uses a different conception of knowledge than the one he aims to defend (OC 6). Moore is confused as to what he is saying, even though neither he nor his audience members seem to realize it. As with the skeptic, Moore is faced with a dilemma: either he means “I know” in the same sense as the scientist, in which case his claim does not apply generally, or he means it in the skeptical sense, in which case it does not apply to the particular claim from which it arises. We have seen that the skeptic’s challenge to the scientist fails because the skeptic uses a different conception of knowledge. Moore’s attempt to refute the skeptic and affirm the

original claim to knowledge fails because he invokes the skeptic's conception of knowledge to establish the scientist's claim. The skeptic is speaking at cross-purposes with the scientist; Moore is speaking at cross-purposes with himself.

Wittgenstein believes that this confused way of speaking is characteristic of traditional philosophy. He believes that traditional philosophy leads us to use words in ways which drain them of the force or implication we want them to have. It leads us to speak outside of the specific circumstances in which everyday claims are made, and yet aims to pronounce on these everyday claims, either by criticizing them (as the skeptic does) or by affirming them (as Moore does). Traditional philosophy speaks outside the specific circumstances of everyday claims because it assumes that there is one true meaning (of "knowledge," or "game," or "understanding") which the philosopher must discover before he can be sure that he is dealing with a case of knowledge, or a game, or understanding. He assumes this because he is trying to show that his account (of "knowledge," or "game," or "understanding") applies in all circumstances in which the word or concept appears.

Wittgenstein's response to Moore's claim "to know, with certainty," the existence of the external world illustrates both why external world skepticism gets no grip with us and why we seem unable to refute it. Not because we simply decide, irrationally, to go about our daily lives despite the skeptic; not because we have a lower standard of rationality or justification than he does. But because his challenge has missed its target. His words are not doing the work he intends them to do. This is also why Moore's attempt to refute skepticism is both appealing and

unconvincing. Appealing because it seems to explain something we are right to believe: that the skeptic has gone wrong somewhere. Unconvincing because we sense, rightly, that the skeptic cannot be dismissed so easily.

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, “The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work” (PI §132), and, “philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*” (PI §38). Moorean claims are paradigmatic examples of language on holiday, of words idling. They are not doing the work that Moore intends them to do; they are not affirming our ordinary intuitions or refuting skepticism. Wittgenstein’s response is to remind us of the various circumstances in which we might use the words in question.¹⁵ He provides various circumstances in which we might use the phrase “I know,” and thereby provides Moore (and the skeptic) with various possibilities he might mean by his words. Unfortunately for Moore, as for the skeptic, none of these possibilities enable him to mean what he wants to mean.

To summarize: The problem with Moore’s use of “I know” is not simply that it is used in an unusual or uncommon sense. Some interpreters argue that Wittgenstein believes that only common uses of language make sense, while the rest are nonsense, but this is not the interpretation of Wittgenstein I am advancing. The reason why Wittgenstein calls Moore’s use of “I know” “nonsense” is because Moore is claiming to mean one thing when his words mean another. On Wittgenstein’s

¹⁵ “The work of the philosopher consists of assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (PI §127). I discuss this method in section 2.3 below.

view both common and uncommon uses of language can make perfect sense. What matters are the particular circumstances in which they are uttered. Uncommon circumstances not only allow but invite uncommon uses of words. Recall from the previous chapter that though we learn words in particular contexts, we use them in many contexts, not all of which are expected or predictable. Since we cannot predict in advance what circumstances we might find ourselves in, we cannot restrict our uses of words to only those circumstances which usually arise. Wittgenstein makes this point with respect to Moore's use of "I know":

But now it is also correct to use "I know" in the context which Moore mentioned, at least in particular circumstances. (Indeed, I do not know what "I know that I am a human being" means. But even that might be given a sense.) For each one of these sentences I can imagine circumstances that turn it into a move in one of our language-games, and by that it loses everything that is philosophically astonishing. (OC §622)

Imagine, for instance, that Moore is badly injured in a car accident. He is knocked unconscious, has lost feeling in his extremities, and his right hand is partially severed. Under anaesthetic, his right hand is surgically replaced with a synthetic one which looks and feels just like Moore's original. Imagine further that when Moore wakes up, his friend alerts him to what just happened. His friend says: "I'm sorry G.E., but that's not really a hand," to which Moore replies, looking down at his hand in disbelief, "I *know* that this is a hand!" In this case the phrase makes perfect sense.

It is crucial to understanding Wittgenstein's claim that Moore (and the skeptic) is speaking nonsense that the skeptic is responding to a specific claim made by a specific person in a specific context. This claim may be something like the scientist saying, in response to a challenge from a colleague, "I know that this is an enzyme." The skeptic strays from the sense in question when he expects his challenge to a particular claim to generalize to all claims. And Moore, in responding to the skeptic, adopts the skeptical sense rather than the ordinary sense. His mistake is to then use his own sense of "I know" as though it were the scientist's.

2.2. Where and Why Justifications Come to an End

You must bear in mind that the language game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life. (OC §559)

In the last section I tried to explain why, on Wittgenstein's view, external world skepticism has little if any purchase over our ordinary claims to knowledge. But questions remain. The skeptic is not always challenging specific claims. He also challenges whether we can know anything at all. For instance, right now I believe that there is a book on the coffee table, and this belief is a significant reason why I will walk over to the coffee table to collect the book. I also believe that I have two functioning hands, and this belief underlies the confidence with which I put my hands on the keyboard to type these words. These are not claims I make, they are simply things I take for granted. The skeptic argues that unless I can establish the truth of these beliefs to his satisfaction, I am not justified in holding them or acting

on them. Here there is no misuse of language, no speaking at cross purposes. What, if anything, justifies such beliefs? What, if anything, justifies our going on in the world as we ordinarily do?

The temptation is to say: at a certain point, justifications come to an end. In practice, we just do not go on debating for ever. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein seems to leave off here (Cf. PI §217). This response is what I would like to examine in this section. Where do justifications come to an end? And why? And does this constitute a valid response to the skeptic?

At issue is not whether we can rightly claim to *know* things, but whether we are justified in simply accepting them without further justification. At issue, in other words, is the nature of our certainty about ordinary, ground level beliefs, beliefs expressed by Moorean propositions like, “This is a hand” and “The earth has existed for a long time before my birth.” Certainty is different, though related, to knowledge.¹⁶ Having knowledge of a proposition entails the truth of that proposition.¹⁷ This is what distinguishes knowledge from mere belief. Being certain of a proposition, on the other hand, does not entail the truth of that thing. Certainty

¹⁶ Although Moore seems to link the two when he says that he “knows, with certainty,” that the earth has existed for a long time etcetera.

¹⁷ On the traditional analysis of (propositional) knowledge, S knows that P iff:

- 1) S believes that P
- 2) It is the case that P
- 3) S is justified in believing that P

Edmund Gettier famously provided counter-examples to this analysis in “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123, leading to reams of further analyses.

is rather a very strongly held belief. I can be certain that Arsenal won the match last night, given that they were up by two goals in the ninetieth minute, but since I turned off the television before the final whistle, I do not actually *know* that they won. Certainty is a subjective state of mind; knowledge is objective.¹⁸

So how do we justify our certainty about ordinary, ground level beliefs? Three responses present themselves. The first response is dogmatism. This is Moore's view. On this view we can and should just insist that the skeptic is wrong. Moore insists that here is a hand, that material objects exist, etcetera, and that is the end of the matter. He is right that we are certain of these things (though he is not right in using the word "know" as he does). He may be right that the skeptic does not deserve or cannot be given an answer, and that our inability to answer him should not worry us. But he has not shown *why* this is so. Hence his response leads merely to a standoff, and our questions (Why are we certain? What is the nature of this certainty?) remain unanswered.¹⁹

The second response is epistemological foundationalism. This is Descartes' view.²⁰ On this view, there is a way of apprehending beliefs which guarantees the truth of that belief. For Descartes, having "clear and distinct" ideas constitute such an apprehension. But this only raises further questions. How, for instance, do we

¹⁸ See OC §8 and §308.

¹⁹ This is also J.L. Austin's view in "Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford UP, 1961, 44-84.

²⁰ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. John Cottingham. Cambridge UP, 1996.

determine the criteria that constitutes such an apprehension? Far from rebutting the skeptic, this view only further invites skepticism.

A third response is pragmatism. This is Rorty's view.²¹ This view acknowledges that every position, taken individually, is dubitable, but maintains that unless we take something for granted we shall never settle any question, theoretical or practical, since any determination of one question presupposes some premises in light of which it is settled. Unless we agree to act as if certain things are in fact the case, we will never act at all. Since acting in the world is important, doing what is necessary for it is justified, and relying on some propositions is (practically) justified. The ones we should rely on are those for which we have the most evidence for and little or none against.

Pragmatism is perhaps the most tempting and intuitive philosophical response to the skeptic. Wittgenstein at times comes very close to this view. He writes,

One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt. But that does not mean that one takes certain presuppositions on trust... If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not about *that*..... That is to say,

²¹ Wittgenstein's influence on Rorty is most apparent in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton UP, 1979. Rorty's pragmatism is best expressed in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*: Cambridge UP, 1991.

it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted. (OC §337, §342)²²

But Wittgenstein does not, in the end, settle on this view.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumptions. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC §343)

So I am trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism. Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*. (OC §422)

Why isn't the situation just like this? Pragmatism suggests that we have options, that we *choose* what to accept without justification. This is false. We do not choose or decide that we will believe in an external world, we simply accept that there is one. Furthermore, pragmatism does not explain the certainty we feel with respect to Moorean propositions; it only explains why we behave as if they are correct.

So what is Wittgenstein's view? How does he justify our certainty about ordinary beliefs? As usual, Wittgenstein does not state his view outright. He believes that the problem arises from a flawed picture of how we think and act in the world. He begins to unravel this picture by reminding us that justification comes to an end in acting, not thinking. Wittgenstein:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a

²² See also PI §241.

kind of seeing on our part; it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language game. (OC §204)

As we saw in the last chapter, a central theme of the *Investigations* is that having a thought – grasping a meaning, for instance – does not consist in having a distinct mental state. It consists in exercising an ability to do certain things, to respond appropriately (pick a red flower, follow a signpost, continue a series, etcetera).

These responses are spontaneous and unhesitating. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein talks of responses being “blind” (§217). The point is not that individuals acting in the world do not understand what they are doing, but that one need not have cognitive awareness of what one is doing at each moment in order to be said to be competently doing things, or in order to be said to adequately possess the concept in question. Understanding an ostensive definition does not require first having the concept “understanding”; sitting on a chair does not require having the concept “chair” in one’s mind. Nor are these ordinary actions foundational events that can be thought of atomistically. They are not the equivalent, in action terms, of the supposedly indubitable judgments of foundationalist epistemology. They are rather part of a large stream of life (What led me to want that book in the first place? Who asked the question and why am I answering it? Who gave the order and why?).

Moore believes that his claims refute skepticism; they show that our ordinary, ground level beliefs are justified. Wittgenstein argues otherwise. The reason they do not refute skepticism, he shows, is that Moore partakes in the same flawed picture of human action and justification as the skeptic. Both presume that

what is needed to justify our certainty about ordinary, ground level beliefs is the recognition of some truths about the world. This presumption is false. If we think of action as grounded in or preceded by certain truths, set out as statements of the kind Moore advances (“This is a hand,” “There is my book,” “The earth has existed for a long time before my birth”), then we will think that reasoning requires first registering certain truths about the world. This is the picture of human thought and action that we challenged in the previous chapter. As we saw in the case of language acquisition, there is a way of acting that does not first require an interpretation. It is not thinking but acting that is the primary phenomena.

But while Wittgenstein does not believe that Moorean claims refute skepticism, he does believe that they are nonetheless philosophically significant. He argues that such claims are not empirical discoveries which underlie our subsequent actions, as Moore suggests. They rather articulate and reveal our ability to act in the world, to respond appropriately. Wittgenstein:

The existence of the earth is rather part of the whole *picture* which forms the starting point of belief for me. (OC §209)

Now it gives us our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form.

Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the *scaffolding* of our thoughts. (OC §211)

On this view, Moorean claims are not discoveries about the world; they articulate things we must know in order to make any judgments at all. They are not judgments we make using our rational capacities; they articulate our capacity to

make judgments. The state we come to be in, of having mature understanding, may naturally give rise to certain claims which look like ordinary, empirical claims, but these claims are different than those which express the results of particular investigations. As Wittgenstein writes, "I am inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is* one... rule and proposition merge into one another" (OC §308-9). Moorean claims look like ordinary empirical claims, but they actually articulate the rules under which ordinary empirical claims can be made.

Why is this distinction important? For Wittgenstein, being certain about Moorean claims is not a matter of believing something to be true or false; it is part of having the concepts with which we can make empirical claims in the first place. Being certain of a specific Moorean claim like "This is a hand" demonstrates that one has the concept (of "handedness") in question. A skeptic can always test whether one has the concepts one thinks one has. But if he does there are limits to how far one can defend one's claim to actually have such concepts. If I question whether I have the concepts I think I have, I could, presumably, go through the motions of checking, but the only way I could prove that I have the concept in question is by showing the skeptic how I use it. This is unlikely to satisfy him. He is looking for something underlying my everyday use of concepts. Wittgenstein admits that we cannot always provide such grounds: "And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, have no doubt about it, I can still give no *grounds* for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as

certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for” (OC §307).²³ If, under ordinary circumstances, someone questions some things (i.e. whether I have the concept of “handedness”), then there is little I can do or say to communicate with them. Even the skeptic, in expressing doubts about some empirical proposition (“This is a hand”), takes for granted in discussing that doubt that he possesses the concept in question (the concept of “hand”).

This raises the difficult question of whether and how we can change the concepts which we have. At times Wittgenstein seems to suggest that we cannot. In the *Investigations*, recall, he writes, “If 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). When faced with the skeptic, at a certain point we cannot appeal to anything other than “the common behaviour of mankind” (§208) and the concepts we have inherited. These form the bedrock of our beliefs and judgments. Since we do not know how to think outside of these concepts, this is where justifications come to an end.

But this does not mean that our bedrock is the only possible one. The idea that there is one and only one underlying reality is part of the metaphysical picture of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein rejects in his later writings. Not only are other conceptual worlds possible, our concepts are subject to change. This follows from

²³ See also, OC §340: “We know, with the same certainty with which we believe any mathematical proposition, how the letters A and B are pronounced, what the colour of human blood is called, that other human beings have blood and call it ‘blood.’”

his claim that our words and our concepts are not everywhere bound by rules.

Accordingly, in *On Certainty* he replaces the image of bedrock with the image of a river bed with shifting sands. He writes,

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (OC §96)

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (OC §97)

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place in another gets washed away, or deposited. (OC §99)

Wittgenstein here entertains the idea that our inherited framework of concepts is not fixed; it consists of geological-like layers of sediment which may shift over time.¹

This image is rife with potential lines of inquiry: How does this change occur? Can we initiate it or help it along? What would an alternative form of life look like?¹ I

explore some of these questions in following section, as well as in the conclusion to this dissertation.²⁴

For now I want to return to Wittgenstein's reading of Moore. If this reading is right, then there are propositions from which we cannot sensibly dissent, propositions which we rely on as premises in all our arguments and reasoning, but which we cannot substantiate or prove. As Wittgenstein writes,

It may be for example that all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route traveled by enquiry.... Everything speaks for it and nothing against it. (OC §88-89).

It is because Moorean propositions articulate aspects of the conceptual framework which we use to investigate claims, not the results of such investigations, that we simply have to accept them. We could not go on in the world without having first assumed them to be true. But this does not mean that such propositions are truths discovered in the same way logical or scientific truths are discovered – that is, through a process of reasoning.

So the answer to our question about Moorean claims – “How can we be so certain of them? Is this certainty justified?” – is this: getting on in the world requires acting with confidence, and these propositions articulate some aspects of that ability to act. Hence we cannot be criticized for this certainty. So while Moore is wrong to think that his claims are empirical propositions which can refute skepticism, his

²⁴ Michael Forster explores these difficult issues with remarkable clarity in *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar*. Princeton UP, 2004.

error is instructive. His claims reveal part of the conceptual apparatus which makes up our form of life. They illustrate the contours, the limits, of our thought.

In the previous section I tried to explain why, on Wittgenstein's view, Moore is not justified in claiming to "know" the existence of the external world. In this section I have tried to explain why, on Wittgenstein's view, we are justified in being certain of Moorean propositions. These two explanations seem to contradict each other. Surely, it would seem, if we are justified in being certain of something, then we can claim to know it. But Wittgenstein insists otherwise.

The queer thing is that even though I find it quite correct for someone to say "Rubbish!" and so brush aside the attempt to confuse him with doubts at bedrock, - nevertheless I hold it to be incorrect if he seeks to defend himself (using, e.g. the words "I know"). (OC §498)

I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry. (OC §151)

I want to say: my not having been on the moon is as sure a thing for me as any grounds I could give for it.... And isn't that what Moore wants to say, when he says he *knows* all these things? - But is his knowing it really what is in question, and not rather that some of these propositions must be solid for us? (OC §111-112)

One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming he is convinced of it. But if what he

believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes. (OC §243)

What is wrong about using “know” in connection with Moorean claims is that these claims cannot be investigated. Using the concept of “knowledge” in relation to Moorean claims tempts us to see them as more similar to other claims than they are. It leads us to assume that Moorean claims are the result of our judgment-making capacities rather than reflections of these capacities. This leads us to assume that there ought to be some way of testing whether we have really achieved what we claim, and it may tempt us into actually testing it, in which case we worry we when we can’t find it, which leads us back down the path to skepticism. Or, we are tempted to postulate mental states which guarantee the truth of their content, which leads us towards a foundationalism which, again, leads us back down the path to skepticism. Reams of complicated and inconclusive philosophy arise from these uses of “know.”

In the past two sections I have tried to explain Wittgenstein’s response to external world skepticism. It should now be clear that this response is not a straightforward solution to the problem. Rather, on Wittgenstein’s view, the skeptic is right in some respects and wrong in others. The skeptic is right in thinking:

- 1) That claims to knowledge can be justifiably questioned.
- 2) That our certainty about ordinary beliefs can be justifiably questioned.
- 3) That we cannot always answer questions about knowledge or provide further justifications for our certainty.

- 4) That since we cannot always answer questions or provide justifications, there are things we take on faith, at the bottom of our lives, including our intellectual lives.

The skeptic is wrong, however, in thinking:

- 1) That the certainty we feel with regard to Moorean claims is helpfully expressed by "I know."
- 2) That our commitment to Moorean claims are the result of some exercise of our cognitive faculty in forming judgments rather than an articulation of our ability to form such judgments.
- 3) That it is sensible to question any claim whatsoever.
- 4) That we could achieve the kind of total self-justification he seeks and hence that there is something to be regretted or criticized in not having it.

In sum, Wittgenstein neither provides the justification that the skeptic seeks nor acquiesces to him. He instead challenges the skeptic's (and Moore's) conception of how human beings act in and relate to the world. This relation is not always or often one of knowledge, and to think of it in that way obscures important features about ourselves and our relation to the world.²⁵

2.3. The Significance of Everyday Words and Concepts

²⁵ This is a major theme of Cavell's work. For Cavell, skepticism is not, as it is traditionally understood, a stance which questions whether we know what we claim to know. It is any stance which takes our relation to the world to be one of knowledge. On this account, Moore is no less skeptical than the skeptic.

So far in this chapter I have tried to show Wittgenstein's philosophical practice at work; how he responds to traditional philosophers doing what traditional philosophers do. In this section I want to elaborate and defend this practice.

Recall that, for Wittgenstein, traditional philosophical problems emerge from misunderstanding, from having a false picture of language and ourselves. These problems can therefore be dissolved, rather than solved, by clarifying the initial misunderstanding. This process of dissolution constitutes Wittgenstein's positive conception of philosophy. It consists in reminding us of what, in the philosophical search for depth and certainty, we have overlooked. "The work of the philosopher," he writes, "consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (PI §127). What we need to be reminded of depends on the particular problem we are dealing with. In the case of Moore's claim to know the existence of the external world, Wittgenstein reminds Moore what he might mean by "know," and then demonstrates that none of these meanings accomplishes Moore's aim. In the case of skepticism about our ordinary, ground level beliefs, Wittgenstein reminds us of how these beliefs operate for us. Once we see this, we see we that these beliefs have a different status than ordinary empirical claims, and that we cannot question or justify them in the same way we can question or justify ordinary empirical claims.

Wittgenstein writes, "There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (PI §133). What he means, I take it, is that since the method or therapy needed depends on the particular problem at hand,

there is no general formula for how to dissolve all philosophical problems. This is only partly true. Stepping back from the particular problems Wittgenstein addresses, we can see that his procedure is roughly the same in each case: he provides a specific context in which we use the words or concepts in question. This is the function of his language-games: they are, he says, “objects of comparison,” designed to “throw light on the facts of our language” (PI §130). Language games imagine in what circumstances, and to what end, one might use the words or concepts in question. The purpose of the language game of PI §2, for instance, is to imagine what a language modeled on the Augustinian picture of language would look like. When considered in light of the language game of the builders, we quickly see the limitations of the Augustinian picture. Wittgenstein uses this same method in dealing with the paradoxes of ostension, explanation, and rule-following, as well as with Moore’s infelicitous use of “I know.” In each case he shows that the phenomenon in question only seems problematic because we have adopted a philosophical picture of it, because we have considered it outside of its particular instantiations. Once we recognize this, the problem fades away.²⁶

Wittgenstein summarizes this method in PI §116:

When philosophers use a word – “knowledge,” “being,” “object,” “I,”
“proposition,” “name,” – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must

²⁶ “For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.” (PI §133)

always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?—

What *we* do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.

What Wittgenstein means by the “everyday use” of words is deceptively simple. It means all the various words and expressions that human beings use in the course of their lives, whether they are buying groceries or plotting a revolution, gossiping with friends or researching quantum physics. It is not reducible to common sense or the dominant ideology. It includes nearly all the things that human beings say in the course of their daily lives. The only thing it excludes are philosophical uses of language (such as Moore’s use of “I know”).

Why privilege everyday uses of words over philosophical uses? Is not philosophy its own language game, with its own internal set of rules, with meanings which are clear to those who are specialists in the game? Consider what a philosophical language game would look like. Imagine we develop the necessary and sufficient conditions for various concepts (“game” or “knowledge” or “understanding”), and then stipulate that, when doing philosophy, one means by “game” “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles,” by “knowledge” “justified true belief” (or some variant thereof), and so on. One could do that. And in this case such concepts would not be nonsense. Nonsense arises when we conflate the philosophical concept with our everyday use. This occurs when we think that the philosophical concept is the *real* one while the everyday use is merely

a poor copy of this real concept, and then impose the former on the latter. In the case of the philosophical language described here, we are not confused as to what we are saying (like Moore). But we have cut ourselves off from the words, concepts, thoughts and feelings that we use and experience in the course of our daily lives.²⁷ This philosophical language is not nonsense. It simply has no bearing over any of our ordinary, non-philosophical claims.²⁸

In PI §106 Wittgenstein writes,

²⁷ Cavell puts the point nicely:

“The meaning is the use” calls attention to the fact that what an expression means is a function of what it is used to mean or to say on specific occasions by human beings. That such an obvious fact should assume the importance it does is itself surprising. And to trace the intellectual history of philosophy’s concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses would be a worthwhile undertaking. It is a concentration one of whose consequence is the traditional search for the meaning of a word in various realms of objects, another of which is the idea of perfect language. A fitting title for this history would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human.

Wittgenstein’s motive... is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy.... What is left out of an expression if it is used “outside language games” is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.... What we lose is not the meaning of our words.... What we lose is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what we mean. (*Claim* 206-207)

²⁸ As Rorty says: “Wittgenstein did not show metaphysics to be nonsense, he showed it to be a waste of time.... It would have been better for Wittgenstein to have criticized the kind of philosophy he disliked on the grounds of uselessness rather than nonsense” (“Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn,” 163, 166). Note that while I agree with Rorty on this particular point, I do not subscribe to his general reading of Wittgenstein, as this chapter makes clear.

Here it is difficult as it were to keep our heads up, -- to see that we must stick to the subjects of our everyday thinking, and not go astray and imagine that we have to describe extreme subtleties, which in turn we are after all quite unable to describe with the means at our disposal.

The key phrase here is “means at our disposal” – which is to say, the words and concepts we already have. Many philosophers, traditional and non-traditional, see these means as inadequate, perhaps even corrupt. We have already seen why traditional philosophers are suspicious of everyday concepts: because such concepts are susceptible to skepticism. Traditionally, philosophy has viewed ordinary forms of expression as poor copies of more perfect concepts. It has therefore set itself to discovering the supposedly true nature of the concepts that already exist, isolated and purified from their particular instantiations in the messy world of everyday life. Wittgenstein shows that this effort distorts more than it reveals. He shows that the nature or essence of our concepts lies *in* our everyday uses of language, not above or beneath it. This is what he means when he writes, “Essence is expressed by grammar” (PI §371). Concepts like “knowledge,” “hand,” and “kitty” are not distinct from the words we use to express them; they exist only insofar as they are used by human beings. And how they are used in concrete circumstances gives them their shape and content. To see the essence of these concepts we need only remind ourselves of when and how we use them.

Consider again the concept of knowledge. For years philosophers have been trying to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as

“knowing” a given proposition.²⁹ The assumption underlying this effort is that there is one set of conditions that covers all instances of knowledge, and that set of conditions is what knowledge *really* consists in. In uncovering these conditions, we figure out what knowledge *really* is. And unless we uncover these conditions, we do not *really* know what knowledge is.³⁰ Wittgenstein’s approach is much different. To find out what our concept of knowledge consists in, we need only develop a sketch of the various ways we use the word and its cognates (“know,” “knew,” etcetera). This sketch may not be as neat or organized as a traditional philosophical analysis, but this is because our concept of knowledge is not so neat or organized. It is malleable and open-ended, subject to unusual and unexpected uses depending on the circumstances in which we might find ourselves. Our sketch will therefore have various degrees of shading, some lines will be more prominent than others, and this is because our various uses of the concept have various degrees of prominence. In this respect our sketch will more accurately reflect how we use the concept in question than a traditional philosophical analysis.

Non-traditional philosophers, particularly from the Continental tradition, are no less suspicious of everyday concepts, but for different reasons: they believe that these concepts prevent us from apprehending our situation in new and potentially liberating ways. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for instance, argue that the aim of

²⁹ See footnote 19 above.

³⁰ Recent frustrations with this effort have led one prominent philosopher to declare that knowledge is “unanalyzable.” Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford UP, 2001.

philosophy should be to “create new concepts,” and Deleuze chastises Wittgenstein as marking “the end of philosophy.”³¹ But Wittgenstein does not believe that we are stuck with the concepts we have, regardless of what happens in the world around us. Since our language and our concepts are malleable and open-ended, since they are not everywhere bound by rules, they can adapt to changing social or historical circumstances. The only caveat is that *we* cannot simply change our language, or our concepts, in any way we like and still expect them to make sense. Nothing prevents us from using the words and concepts we have to develop uncommon beliefs or make radical claims. The only restriction implied by Wittgenstein is that if these claims are to make sense, if they are to have the force and implication we want them to have, then they must proceed from our shared meanings. Otherwise they will, like the skeptic’s challenge, simply miss the mark. They will have no purchase over the world they are meant to criticize.

Wittgenstein’s defense of the everyday uses of words has been read as claiming that we can only meaningfully say what has already been said, and that this amounts to a defense of common sense.³² This reading misunderstands what

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari get this idea from Nietzsche, as I discuss in more detail in chapter four. See their *What is Philosophy*. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. The quotation (from Nietzsche) about creating new concepts is on page 5 of the preface. Deleuze’s criticisms of Wittgenstein are made in his *abecedaire* with Claire Parnet (see footnote 1 of this chapter).

³² On this interpretation, the idea that forms of life are “given,” that they must simply be “accepted,” implies that they are immune not only from skepticism, but also from rational criticism. This implication has been used by both critics and admirers of Wittgenstein as evidence of his relativism and/or conservatism. Richard Rorty

Wittgenstein means by “the everyday use of words.” This “everyday use” is not the same as common-sense. Common-sense consists of beliefs which are commonly held. Wittgenstein believes that we are justified in holding some beliefs even if we cannot justify them in the way the skeptic wants. But these include beliefs like “the earth has existed for a long time before I was born” and “I have a hand,” not “capitalism is the ideal form of social and economic organization” and “representational democracy is the best system of governance.” What Wittgenstein defends, what he insists on, is not common sense but the shared meanings of our words and our shared concepts: the fact that when I say, “Do you dress that way voluntarily?” I mean to imply that you should dress differently; or the fact that when the scientist says “I know this is an enzyme” in ordinary circumstances he means that he knows this is an enzyme and not some other cellular material. These shared

draws this conclusion but points out that we can still use non-rational means to persuade individuals to adopt one form of life rather than another. See Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge UP, 1993. Similar readings are advanced by David Bloor in *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983. James Klagge, “When Are Ideologies Irreconcilable? Case Studies in Diachronic Anthropology,” *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (3), July 1998 and Stephen Hilmy, *The Later Wittgenstein: The Emergence of a New Philosophical Method*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987. Alice Crary challenges this reading in “Wittgenstein’s Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought,” *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read. London: Routledge, 2000, 118-146.

There is no necessary link between Wittgenstein’s apparent relativism and his apparent conservatism, though some draw the connection. C.J. Nyiri defends this relativist and conservative reading in “Wittgenstein’s Later Work in Relation to Conservatism,” *Wittgenstein and His Times*. Ed. Brian McGuinness. Oxford: Blackwell, 1982. 44-68. For criticisms of Wittgenstein’s supposed conservatism, see: Ernst Gellner, *Words and Things: An Examination of, and Attack On, Linguistic Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1959 and Onora O’Neill, “The Power of Example,” *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge UP, 1989, 165-186.

meanings are not things that we decide on or things that we can ignore. They are the basis for any kind of sense, common or uncommon.

Others read Wittgenstein as advocating philosophical quietism, as giving up on the problems of philosophy altogether³³ Sometimes Wittgenstein seems to suggest just this.³⁴ He writes, for instance, that his positive conception of philosophy simply “leaves everything as it is” (PI §124). It does not teach us anything new. In this case it seems that we are better off avoiding philosophical questions in the first place. Then we will not become captive to philosophical pictures and there will be no need to be reminded of anything. Other times, however, Wittgenstein suggests an ongoing need for the kind of philosophical practice he advocates. His competing remarks on the subject suggest that he was unsure of what direction he wanted philosophy to take. Regardless of his precise feelings on the subject, there are several reasons why we cannot simply avoid traditional philosophy, and hence why there is an ongoing need for the kind of philosophy he advocates.

³³ Simon Blackburn introduced this now popular characterization of Wittgenstein’s philosophy to describe “the belief... that problems require therapy rather than solution.” *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, 146. Blackburn’s definition of quietism includes many prominent Wittgensteinians today, including Stanley Cavell, few of whom embrace this characterization.

³⁴ As I mention on page 1 above, Wittgenstein writes that philosophy is “like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (PI §103). He does not say we need another, better pair of glasses; he suggests that our uncorrected way of looking at things is all we need.

The first reason is that philosophical problems arise organically in the course of our ordinary lives.³⁵ Consider again the Augustinian picture. This picture, once formed, can be undone through careful analysis, but the picture itself arises easily enough when we consider how a child learns language. Subtle shifts in perspective or emphasis, like those from Augustine's words to the Augustinian picture, occur in all kinds of circumstances. Our ordinary, unreflective ways of thinking are no less susceptible to the pitfalls of traditional philosophy I described in the first chapter: the privileging of abstract generalizations rather than focusing on particular cases; mistaking how things actually are with how we think they must be; and positing hidden processes to explain visible phenomena (God, genetics, brain waves, etcetera). The assumptions underlying the Augustinian picture, for instance, are perfectly ordinary and intuitive, as their recurrence over two millennia indicates.

The second reason why there is an ongoing need for the kind of philosophy Wittgenstein advocates is that there is something about our language itself which seduces us into a confused understanding of it. As Wittgenstein writes,

Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us. (*Blue Book 25*)

³⁵ Cavell suggests that the reason why there will always be a need for the kind of philosophy Wittgenstein is because there it is natural for human beings to want to know more than our concepts and language allow us to know. For Cavell there is "a natural disappointment with the conditions of human knowledge" (quoted in Rorty 173).

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

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity” (PI §122).

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language” (PI §109).

“Our forms of expression exert a fascination on us”; “language bewitches our intelligence”: Wittgenstein’s phrasing implies that the fault lies partly in the nature of our language. Indeed the uniform appearance of words and the fact that each appears to have a limited function makes it seem as though language is systematic, logical, rule-bound when it is not. And this appearance seduces us into trying to uncover its supposed underlying structure.

But the fault also lies in us, in our failure to get a clear view of our language. This failure stems from our impulse to search for something universal, something immune to skepticism which underlies our ordinary expressions. And this impulse is tied up with our belief of what philosophy is or should be. We tend to believe that philosophy should discover things (underlying structures, for instance). It should increase our knowledge of the world.³⁶ That is, we tend to think of philosophy as

³⁶ “It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically ‘that, contrary to our

like science. This conception of philosophy leads to the tendencies I discussed in the previous chapter: the tendency to consider words independently of the circumstances of their use stems from the belief that philosophy, like science, should produce objective knowledge of the world, independent of human influence, and applicable to all possible circumstances. The tendency to conceive of words and actions atomistically, apart from their interconnections with other things, is also similar to scientific analysis. Traditional philosophers have adopted these tendencies as they have sought to increase our knowledge of the language and the world.

Wittgenstein does not aim to increase our knowledge of the world, he aims to augment our understanding of it. And in this respect he succeeds. As I have tried to show in this chapter, he provides a better understanding of how our language works; of why the problem of skepticism gets no grip with us, even though we cannot seem to refute it; of the nature and limits of the concepts which we use to navigate through the world; of why and where justifications must come to an end; and of the fact that our relation to the world is not primarily one of knowledge. In short, we learn a lot about ourselves and our place in the world through Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy. This demonstrates that although traditional philosophy often leads us into confusion, the voyage into philosophical confusion

preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such' – whatever that may mean. (The conception of thought as a gaseous medium.)" (PI §109)

Wittgenstein's criticism of the scientific pretensions of philosophy provides some insight into the often overlooked epigraph to the *Investigations*, a quote by the Austrian playwright Nestroy: "Anyway, the thing about progress is that it looks much greater than it really is."

and back does not leave us where we began. Returning to everyday concepts is different than having never left them. In this respect, Wittgenstein's positive conception of philosophy is not quietistic. It does not simply "leave everything as it is" (PI §124).

2.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate Wittgenstein's positive conception of philosophy. Wittgenstein's method of "assembling reminders" is not a defense of common-sense or a return to ordinary, unreflective thought, nor is it a quietistic abandonment of critical thought. Rather, it makes important conceptual distinctions and enables us to see traditional philosophical problems in a new light. In the process, it helps us better understand our language, our concepts, ourselves, and our place in the world.

PART TWO

NIETZSCHE

3. NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY

"So let us be cautious for once, let us be *unphilosophical*."

BGE 19

Like Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, uses the word "philosophy" and its cognates in different ways. Sometimes he uses them in a positive sense, as when he writes, "My kind of philosopher is one for whom a *creative* mode of thought dominates."¹ Other times he uses them in a negative sense, as in the epigraph to this chapter, or when he writes,

What provokes us to look at all philosophers with a mixture of distrust and contempt is not that we are always uncovering how guileless they are – how often and easily they lose their grasp or their way, in short how childish and childlike they are. It is rather that they are not honest enough.... (BGE 5)

In the first instance, Nietzsche uses "philosopher" as an honorific for those who challenge the established hierarchy of values and create new ones. These "philosophers of the future" or "free spirits" are rare, and Nietzsche aims to inspire more of them. In the second instance, Nietzsche uses "philosopher" contemptuously to refer to those, like Plato, Descartes, and Kant, who seek a rational, objective understanding of the world. These "traditional" philosophers are a frequent target

¹ *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1968, §464. (Hereafter WP)

of Nietzsche's writings. My aim in this chapter is to explain why he is critical of these philosophers, and to see how far this criticism extends.

I begin, in the first section, by explaining Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics. My account of Nietzsche in this section is relatively straightforward and, I believe, uncontroversial. It is designed to provide a general overview of why Nietzsche is critical of traditional philosophers like Plato, Descartes, and Kant. In the next two sections I deepen this account by considering two recent, prominent interpretations of Nietzsche: the post-structuralist interpretation and the naturalist one. These interpretations account for Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics, but I argue that they do not capture the extent of Nietzsche's criticism of philosophy. Weaving our way through these interpretations, showing what is wrong with each, demonstrates the problems with the current interpretive paradigms and fills out the initial account of Nietzsche's criticism of philosophy. It shows that this criticism extends beyond Nietzsche's immediate target to include both metaphysical and non-metaphysical, traditional and non-traditional branches of philosophy.

3.1. Nietzsche and Metaphysics

In the *Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche calls metaphysics one of "the most vicious errors that has ever existed" (3). In *Twilight of the Idols*, he calls the distinction between appearance and the thing in itself, the distinction on which all metaphysics relies, "the longest error" (50). The opening chapter of *Human, All Too Human* is devoted

to an attack on the metaphysical philosophies of Plato, Kant and Schopenhauer. The opening chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* challenges, among other things, the Cartesian subject and the idea of free will. The fifth chapter of *The Gay Science* seeks to root out remnants of Christian metaphysics in modern science. *On the Genealogy of Morality* aims to demystify all contemporary metaphysical ideals, both religious and secular, by uncovering their origins in concrete social practices. In short, Nietzsche's mature writings constitute a sustained attack on metaphysics.² My aim in this section is to try to understand this attack. I proceed by answering two basic questions: What is metaphysics, for Nietzsche? And why does he criticize it?

Answering the first question is easy enough. For Nietzsche, an explanation is metaphysical if it assumes or appeals to a transcendent realm, outside space and time, to explain and justify the temporal, phenomenal world.³ On this account

² By "mature writings" I mean the writings from of *Human, All Too Human* (1878) onwards. These writings break from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and the *Untimely Meditations* (1874), which uncritically adopt Schopenhauer's metaphysical picture of the world.

³ If metaphysics is taken to mean not an appeal to a transcendent realm but rather the study of the essence or being underlying all things (that is, ontology), then it can be argued that Nietzsche is a metaphysician. Heidegger offers one such interpretation, famously calling Nietzsche "the last great metaphysician of the West." *Nietzsche*. Volume 3. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperOne, 1991. Heidegger's reading, however, is undermined by his over-reliance on Nietzsche's *Nachlass*. This leads him to claim, for instance, that Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return is a metaphysical notion. I argue in the following chapter that it is best read as a test of one's perspective on life, one which need not imply any metaphysics.

Jason Richardson, avoiding the various pitfalls of Heidegger's reading, argues that Nietzsche is a metaphysician insofar as he locates the will to power as the essence of all things (*Nietzsche's System*. Oxford UP, 1996). On Richardson's interpretation, Nietzsche's claim that the will to power is the essence of all things

Platonic forms, the Cartesian subject, an immaterial soul, the Christian God, Kantian noumena, Schopenhauer's will, and Fregean sense are all metaphysical. They appeal to something outside the natural world to explain what happens within it.

Answering the second question is more difficult. We have seen that Nietzsche calls metaphysics an "error," but it is unclear what he means by this. "Error" implies that metaphysical realms do not actually exist, or that the arguments for their existence are unsound. But Nietzsche does not seem to mean "error" in either of these senses. At times he challenges the reasoning behind metaphysical beliefs, as in his criticism of the Cartesian "I." Other times he asks why we are

constitutes a metaphysical claim, even though will to power remains immanent in this world.

My own view is that Nietzsche is critical of *transcendent* metaphysics. That is, he is critical of the idea that there is an ideal world which acts on and informs the phenomenal one. It seems clear that this is what Nietzsche means by "metaphysics" when he actually uses the term, and that Richardson is using a different sense of the term than Nietzsche uses. (See, for instance, the famous passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the Real World at Last Became a Myth.") Indeed Richardson acknowledges that his interpretation goes "beyond what can be found in Nietzsche's words" (6). In this respect his argument is not inconsistent with mine.

My account of what Nietzsche means by metaphysics is similar to Maudemarie Clark's account, though my interpretation of Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics (and philosophy) differs from hers (see the introduction and section three of this chapter). Clark argues that by metaphysics Nietzsche means Kantian noumena, and then argues that Nietzsche advocates neo-Kantian empiricism in its place. Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Cambridge UP, 1990.

Though it is uncontroversial to say that Nietzsche wants to reject transcendent metaphysics, whether or not he is successful is another matter. In addition to Heidegger, Michael Haar and Arthur Danto question whether Nietzsche simply replaces previous metaphysical philosophies with his own. Michael Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*. Trans. Michael Gendre. Buffalo: SUNY Press, 1996. Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. New York: Columbia UP, 1965. Peter Poellner analyzes Nietzsche's position on various metaphysical issues (substance, being, causality, etcetera) in his *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*. Oxford UP, 1995. His otherwise careful study overlooks the fact that Nietzsche wanted to discard these kinds of metaphysical debates altogether.

disposed to adopt metaphysical beliefs in the first place, as in *On the Genealogy of Morality*.⁴ And still other times he questions the utility of metaphysics, as when he writes,

It is true, there might be a metaphysical world; one can hardly dispute the absolute possibility of it.... No matter how well proven the existence of such a world might be, it would still hold true that the knowledge of it would be the most inconsequential of all knowledge, even more inconsequential than the knowledge of the chemical analysis of water must be to the boatman facing a storm. (HAH 1.9)

The first sentence of this quotation indicates that Nietzsche does not have a knock-down argument against metaphysics. He does not compel us, on pain of contradiction, to reject it. Instead he casts doubt on some metaphysical arguments, questions why we are disposed to believe them, and provides pragmatic reasons for rejecting them. Let us look at these three strategies more closely.

In the opening chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*, entitled "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," Nietzsche challenges the reasoning underlying perhaps the most pervasive metaphysical belief: the belief that there is a subject independent of the body responsible for its thoughts and actions. This belief, he argues, stems from

⁴ And also in *Daybreak (D)*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Gay Science (GS)*, and *Human, All Too Human (HAH)*. In the latter, he writes: "To feel less responsible, and at the same time to find things more interesting: that is the twofold benefit [man] owes to metaphysics." *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, 1.17.

mistaking the grammatical distinction between subject and predicate for an actual distinction, based in reality. That is, we are led by the grammar of the phrase “I think” to believe that the “I” refers to an actual existing thing, separate from but somehow willing the thought. Nietzsche shows that this inference is unwarranted. The grammatical distinction between subject and predicate may just as well serve a pragmatic, not descriptive purpose: it distinguishes the thought that arises in my body rather than yours.⁵ It does not necessarily mean that there is an “I” distinct from the act of thinking.

Nietzsche presents a different picture of this same phenomena. “A thought,” he writes, “comes when it wants to, not when ‘I’ want it to.” He continues,

There is thinking, but to assert that “there” is the same thing as that famous old “I” is, to put it mildly, only an assumption, a hypothesis, and certainly not an immediate certainty. (BGE 17)⁶

⁵ In “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1873), Nietzsche argues that words do not reflect an already existing reality but rather serve a pragmatic, social purpose. We refer to roughly similar things (i.e. different kinds of trees) by the same concept (i.e. “tree”) in order to develop a certain reliability in our relations with others. From this pragmatic purpose a conceptual edifice develops. Over time we wrongly come to think that this conceptual edifice reflects actual distinctions in the world, rather than distinctions that we impose on the world (i.e. that there is some necessary distinction between trees and bushes, for instance). I discuss this essay in section three of this chapter.

⁶ See also the famous passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

A quantum of force is simply such a quantum of drive, will, action—rather, it is nothing but this very driving, willing, acting itself—and it cannot appear as anything else except through the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified in it), which understands and misunderstands all

Nietzsche's method of criticism here is worth noting, as it anticipates Wittgenstein's method in the *Investigations* (a method Hume perfected in his discussion of causation). There is an observable phenomenon: the act of thinking. This thinking occurs within the body of an individual. So far there is no difficulty. But then there is, in the philosopher as well as in the ordinary, relatively unreflective individual, a subtle leap from the observation that thinking occurs to the belief that there is a subject who wills the thought. This leap is unwarranted. It has no empirical or logical basis. Yet it underlies our most fundamental understanding of ourselves.

A similar combination of grammatical and logical error leads to the belief that we have free will. The "act of willing," Nietzsche writes, "only has unity as a word" (BGE 19). It is really a "multifarious thing" consisting of three components: a feeling of moving away from one thing and towards another; a "commanding thought" that is not prior to or distinct from the process of willing, but part of it; and the feeling of pleasure at the success of the action that we believe arises from our command. The idea that we freely will thoughts and actions stems from thinking that these three components are causally related: that the commanding thought produces the feeling of moving from one thing towards another:

action as conditioned by something which causes actions, by a "Subject." For, in just the same way as people separate lightning from its flash and take the latter as an *action*, as the effect of a subject, which is called lightning, so popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as if behind the strong person there were an indifferent substrate, which is *free* to express strength or not. But there is no such substrate; there is no "being" behind the doing, acting, becoming. "The doer" is merely made up and added into the action—the act is everything. (GM 1.13)

Freedom of the will – that is the word for that complete pleasurable condition experienced by the person willing who commands and simultaneously identifies himself with the one who executes the command – as such he can share in enjoying a triumph over resistance, while secretly judging that it was actually his will that overcame that resistance. (BGE 19).

The only evidence for this supposed causal relation is that we observe these three components occurring around the same time. This observation alone does not warrant the inference that these components are causally related. For all we know, they occur at the same time because there is another cause underlying them. In short, the belief that our actions are freely willed stems from the classical flaw of mistaking correlation for causation.

These flaws are so subtle, our understanding of ourselves as conscious, agential beings so deeply entrenched, that the concept “I” may not seem metaphysical. But keep in mind that for Nietzsche, as for Wittgenstein, ordinary beliefs are not necessarily distinct from metaphysical ones. Something is metaphysical if it cannot be explained by or is not continuous with the natural world. Our ordinary beliefs in the Cartesian subject and free will are metaphysical for precisely this reason.

Indeed many beliefs underlying the academic discipline of philosophy, beliefs that Nietzsche criticizes as metaphysical, are also constitutive of ordinary, everyday thinking. It is commonly assumed, not just by philosophers, that truth is preferable to untruth, objective knowledge preferable to subjective knowledge, and that

reasoned argumentation is a good thing.⁷ What, then, is distinctive about philosophy? Nietzsche believes that philosophers appropriate and exaggerate these “common prejudices” as they develop their theories (BGE 19). Philosophers thereby help justify and entrench these beliefs. Descartes, for instance, justifies the common belief that there is a soul inside the body which is our “true” self. Kant justifies the common belief that temporal actions and thoughts are informed by an unknowable world beyond our own. Nietzsche’s target is both these common prejudices and their appropriation by philosophers. He singles out philosophers because they, of all people, should not be susceptible to prejudice given their claims to investigate everything. Hence the tongue-in-cheek claim which serves as the epigraph to this chapter: Nietzsche wants to be “cautious for once... unphilosophical” so as to avoid the unwarranted assumptions and inferences that plague philosophers.

Note that Nietzsche has not shown that there is no Cartesian subject or free will. He has only shown that our belief in them is unjustified. In this respect, his arguments against these beliefs resemble that of philosophical skepticism.⁸ This

⁷ Nietzsche calls the assumption that truth is preferable to untruth “the most poorly proven assumption in the world” (BGE 34). See also BGE 2: “However much value we may ascribe to truth, truthfulness, or altruism, it may be that we need to attribute a higher and more fundamental value to appearance, to the will to illusion, to egoism and desire.”

⁸ Though the form of these particular arguments resemble that of skepticism, Nietzsche is not a skeptic *tout court*, as he makes clear in BGE 208: “skepticism is the most spiritual expression of a certain complex physiology condition that in common parlance is called bad nerves or sickness.” The problem with the skeptic is that he only says “no,” and does not affirm anything. Still, Nietzsche acknowledges that the skeptic, with his nay-saying, can play a useful, preliminary function in clearing the air of bad arguments, as Nietzsche does here.

differs from his usual form of argument, which is less to show that metaphysical beliefs are unjustified than to question the motivation which leads to them in the first place. That is, Nietzsche is usually less interested in the philosophical question, What chain of reasoning leads to the belief that there is a subject independent of the body?, than in the psychological and historical question, What leads us to *want* to believe this (and hence to happily overlook the unwarranted inference) in the first place? What kind of disposition must one have to value the notion of oneself as freely willing subject, and where does this disposition, this valuation, come from?

Nietzsche provides his fullest answer to this question in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. There he traces the ancestry of our contemporary metaphysical beliefs (in God and free will) back to moral feelings (namely guilt), and traces the origins of these moral feelings back to our most basic, psychological needs (such as the need to make sense of our suffering). The story he tells is complex, compelling, and now familiar. Still, I will sketch the relevant parts here.

The story begins with Nietzsche's account of ancient nobles and slaves.⁹ Nobles and slaves, according to Nietzsche, are particular *kinds* of people: they have particular (i.e. different) psychological and physiological constitutions, and these

⁹ My discussion of nobles and slaves follows Jason Richardson's discussion in chapter one of *Nietzsche's System*, Oxford UP, 1996. Richardson was the first to show that nobles and slaves are certain *kinds* of people (that is, people with particular psychological and physiological constitutions). I am not sure, though, that Nietzsche restricts his typology to just the noble, slave, and Übermensch, as Richardson suggests. It seems rather that Nietzsche's account of these types would allow for other kinds as well.

constitutions determine their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The reason why some individuals are nobles is because they have had to struggle for their survival against external threats to their existence.¹⁰ Individuals who face such challenges become singularly focused. They also tend to have a certain physiological constitution: they have relatively fewer drives and instincts, making it easier for their drives and instincts to work together.¹¹ And since such external challenges tend to threaten groups of individuals, such groups unite towards the singular goal of overcoming these threats.¹² Thus nobles value strength, survival and dominance, and because they have a simple, easily organized set of instincts and drives they are conditioned to achieve these values. They are not torn between competing impulses. This holds for both noble individuals and the caste as a whole.

¹⁰ "A *species* comes into being, a type grows strong and fixed, by struggling for a long time with essentially similar *unfavorable* conditions.... Consider an aristocratic community, such as the ancient Greek *polis*, or Venice, an organization whose voluntary or involuntary purpose is to *breed*: there are people coexisting in it, relying on one another, who want to further their species, chiefly because they *must* further it or run some risk of extermination. In such a case, good will, excess, and protection, those conditions that favour variation, are missing; the species needs to remain a species, something that by virtue of its very harshness, symmetry, and simplicity of form, can be furthered and and in general endure...." (BGE 262)

¹¹ "A type like this, with few but very strong characteristics..." (BGE 262). "If someone acts from a few motives which are always the same, his actions take on great energy.... Few motives, energetic action, and good conscience constitute what is called strength of character. The man of strong character lacks knowledge of the many possibilities and direction of action." (HAH 228).

¹² "As a good man, one belongs to the "good," a community that has a communal feeling, because all individuals are entwined together by their feeling for requital." (HAH 46). "From its most diverse experience the species learns which qualities have particularly contributed to its survival... these qualities it calls virtues, and these are the only virtues that it cultivates." (BGE 262)

Slaves are not unified in the same way, either as individuals or as a group. They have not had to face any existential threats, and therefore have not had to struggle for their existence. They have lived comfortably off the work of their ancestors, who established a successful society in which their descendants can pursue various interests in relative peace and security.¹³ They are “weaker, more civilized, more peaceful” than the nobles (BGE 257). Nietzsche believes that this diversity of interests, both within each individual and within the society at large, makes the slaves more complex and interesting than the nobles (GM 1.6, 2.16). The slaves have a “greater, more differentiated life” (BGE 262). But it also renders them less focused and less capable of organizing around a single goal. Their various instincts pull them in various directions. They are “a multitude, like particles of dust.” (HAH 45). And this makes them easy prey for the nobles:

... a conqueror and master race, which, organized on a war footing, and with the power to organize, unscrupulously lays its dreadful paws on a populace which, though it might be vastly greater in number, is still shapeless and shifting. (GM 2.17)

Each member of the noble caste has developed, out of necessity, instincts towards strength, survival, and dominance. He or she is not torn between competing instincts, and the caste as a whole is unified since each member has had to cultivate

¹³ “... as we know from the experiences of stock-breeders, a species that is overabundant in nourishment and extra protection and care generally shows an immediate and very pronounced tendency to variations in type, and is rich in marvels and monstrosities (and in monstrous vices too).” (BGE 262)

the same instincts. As Nietzsche writes, their “dominance was not due to its physical strength primarily, but to its spiritual [strength]– these were the *more complete* human beings” (BGE 257). The slave caste, conversely, is “shapeless and shifting.” (“Woe betide it when it comes to war!” (GM 1.7)). They are unfocused and divided. When the two meet, the result is a hierarchical society in which nobles rule over slaves.

Slave and nobles are alike in one respect: both have a natural desire to release their strength.¹⁴ But the slaves, weakened first by their own decadence and now by their subjugation by the nobles, are unable to do so. Their efforts at self-exertion, and self-expression, are continually frustrated. And this frustration leads them to revolt. The slave revolt describes the process by which the slaves develop the moral concepts “good” and “evil” to replace the nobles’s concepts of “good” and “bad.” The concepts “good” and “bad” were descriptive: they entailed no implication that one could have acted differently. When Homer describes Achilles running across the battlefield killing Trojans, there is no suggestion that Achilles decided in advance to do this, or that he could have done otherwise. Achilles acted this way simply because it was in his nature as Achilles to do so. And his actions were considered “good” because “good” simply denoted whatever the nobles were (stronger, faster, dominant), while “bad” simply denoted whatever the nobles were not (weaker, slower, subordinate).

¹⁴ “A living being wants above all else to *release* its strength; life itself is the will to power, and self-preservation is only one of its indirect and most frequent consequences.” (BGE 13)

The slaves reversed this valuation. They began to consider themselves “good” for not exerting power over the nobles (even though, according to Nietzsche, their restraint was the result of weakness, not choice), and called the nobles “evil” for exerting their dominance over the slaves (even though their dominance was instinctive, not chosen). In doing so, the slaves created a new realm of meaning, a new set of values, to justify their inferior status and check the power of the nobles. But this reversal came at a cost to the slaves as well: it made them repress their natural desire to release their strength, since doing so is, on their own interpretation, evil. This repression leads to a painful psychological split: on one hand they have an inborn desire to exert themselves, on the other hand they have convinced themselves that exerting oneself is evil.

So the development of the concept of evil did not alleviate the slaves of their suffering. It brought about a new form of suffering: the painful psychological split described above. Nietzsche also suggests that the slaves suffer because they inflict pain on themselves, and they do so because everyone (according to Nietzsche) enjoys inflicting pain, and they are too weak to inflict it on others.¹⁵ At this point in the story Nietzsche adds a key premise, one on which his whole argument depends: suffering is intolerable, he says, unless those suffering can give it some meaning (GM

¹⁵For Nietzsche the pleasure the slaves receive from this self-infliction is not from receiving pain but from inflicting of it. They are sadists, not masochists, on Nietzsche’s view of things (GM 2.16; BGE 78; D 113). Nietzsche argues that this sadism is rooted in human nature and overdetermined (i.e. there are many different reasons why we punish ourselves and others), and that we come to interpret punishment as serving some socially useful purpose after the fact.

2.7; 3.28).¹⁶ On Nietzsche's account, the slaves justify their suffering by coming to believe that they suffer because they are indebted (*Schulden*) to their ancestors for establishing the society in which they live.¹⁷ They also come to believe that they can relieve their suffering by repaying their ancestors, and they can repay their ancestors by obeying the social customs they inherited from them.

So the slaves learn to value adherence to social customs. Not adhering to custom amounts to "evil." This justification makes their suffering more tolerable, but it does not alleviate it entirely. The slaves continue to suffer because of their weak constitutions, their repressed physical and psychological state, and the punishment they inflict on themselves. So they seek a further justification. Enter the priests: a faction of the slaves disposed to education and interpretation. The priests develop the idea that the slaves can never adequately repay the benefactors of their society, since their true ancestors are not the human beings who founded their society, but rather the God who created them in the first place. According to the priests, the slaves are inherently guilty, or evil, for not adequately subordinating themselves to the will of their creator. Nietzsche traces the Christian notion of guilt (*Schuld*) from the pre-modern notion of debt (*Schulden*). The slaves are indebted to

¹⁶ For Nietzsche to give something meaning is to connect it with some project of the will (GM 2.12, 13)

¹⁷ According to Nietzsche, in pre-modern societies commercial transactions were regulated by enforcing an equivance between creditor and debtor: the creditor was allowed to make up for his losses by inflicting suffering on defaulting debtors. Through this practice, Nietzsche argues, an association of ideas emerged (*Ideen-Verhakelung* GM 2.6) between "debt" and possible suffering.

Him, and this debt can never adequately be repaid. On this view the slaves suffer not because they are weak, but because they are inherently guilty, and they are inherently guilty because they are always already indebted to a God that is responsible for their very existence.¹⁸

The slave revolt is complete when slave values become dominant; when even the nobles adopt them. This occurs gradually following the development of the slave society. In this society the slaves can no longer pursue their various interests. Their previously decadent lives become hardened by suffering, and they unite, individually and collectively, against the nobles. The nobles, meanwhile, become comfortable in their position of power. No longer faced with an external threat, they are free to pursue their various interests. They become decadent. This leads to a reversal.¹⁹ The slaves impose their values onto the nobles. The nobles, they argue, are no less the children of God and hence no less indebted to Him for their existence. Weakened by decadence, the nobles give in. They repress their natural instincts in an attempt to be “good.” The reversal is complete. The slave morality reigns.

¹⁸ As Nietzsche writes, the Christian God fulfills “the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to the point that it cannot be atoned for; his will to imagine himself punished without the possibility of the punishment ever becoming equivalent to the guilt” (GM 2.22). See also GM 3.11, 3.15, 3.16, 3.19.

¹⁹ Speaking of the nobles, Nietzsche writes: “Eventually, however, it arrives at a period of good fortune, the tremendous tension relaxes; perhaps there are no longer any enemies among its neighbours and its means of living, even for enjoying life, are plentiful. At one single stroke the coercing bond of the old discipline is torn apart: it is no longer felt to be essential, critical for existence.... Variation, whether as deviance... or as degeneration and monstrosity is suddenly on the scene.” (BGE 262)

Let me summarize the process by which, according to Nietzsche, the metaphysical ideal of a maximal, Christian God emerged:

- 1) A noble caste, strengthened and unified through struggle, subjugates a slave caste that has become decadent through generations of comfort and peace
- 2) A hierarchical society results in which the noble caste rules over the slave caste
- 3) The slaves, unable to express their desires, repress them. They call the nobles “evil” for not doing so, and themselves “good” for doing so.
- 4) The slaves suffer due to their subordination and self-repression (self-punishment)
- 5) Senseless suffering is intolerable
- 6) The slaves rationalize their suffering by considering themselves indebted
- 7) This notion of indebtedness (*Schulden*) takes the form of guilt (*Schuld*)
- 8) The slaves come to believe that their guilt cannot be overcome
- 9) To maintain this notion, they posit a metaphysical ideal (a maximal God) which they will inevitably transgress

This account reverses the traditional, Christian account of God. On that account, there exists, somewhere beyond the temporal world, an absolute being to whom we owe our existence, and to whom we always therefore feel guilty.²⁰

²⁰ My interpretation here is helped by Janaway’s discussion of GM 2 in *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*. Oxford UP, 2007, 147-148. I differ from Janaway in that I do not think Nietzsche’s assumption that cruelty is rooted in human nature is the primary source of the development of the metaphysical ideal of God. Janaway writes that for Nietzsche, “cruelty is the base: the rest is

So it is not that individuals have free will and that when when they exercise this free will incorrectly they are “guilty” in some moral sense and deserve punishment.²¹ Originally people did not punish because some made poor use of their free will and thus were “guilty.” Rather, the whole psychological, moral apparatus of “guilt,” “conscience”, and “free will” arises out of a practice of punishment that has completely different roots. This is the reverse of Dostoyevsky’s view that the guilty conscience cries out for punishment.²² On Nietzsche’s account forms of thought arise out of concrete social practices, rather than the other way around.²³

interpretation in the service of giving meaning to the suffering we cannot help giving ourselves once society boxes us in” (147). As an interpretation of Nietzsche, Janaway seems to be on solid ground. In BGE 229 Nietzsche writes: “Almost everything we call ‘high culture’ is based on the deepening and spiritualizing of *cruelty* – this is my tenet.” (See also my footnote 11 above). However, I think that Nietzsche’s argument is stronger without this controversial premise. The reconstruction I offer here relies more on just one controversial premise: that suffering is intolerable unless it can be justified.

²¹ The traditional notions of free will and responsibility are casualties of Nietzsche’s account. We can only be responsible for actions if we freely choose them. If, as Nietzsche believes, our actions are the result of instincts over which we have little if any control, then our notions of responsibility, and morality no longer apply. This raises serious questions about our most basic intuitions about morality. Some of these issues are raised in Harry Frankfurt’s, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*. Edited by Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau. California: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008, 486-492. Nietzsche has a different account of responsibility, which I discuss later in this chapter and the next.

²² The Dostoevsky of *Crime and Punishment*, at least.

²³ Note that this is not a kind of philosophical materialism. The claim is not that social practices are prior to any thought whatsoever, just that the thought prior to

We can now sketch a preliminary answer to the question we started with: What does Nietzsche mean when he says that metaphysics is “an error”? Metaphysics is an “error” insofar as it takes something to be ideal and transcendent when it is rooted in the material world. What we think of as metaphysical ideals, things existing outside the temporal world, are simply human interpretations of concrete social practices whose origins have been forgotten.

This answer, however, is only preliminary. Further clarifications are needed. For instance, on this account it might seem that modern science is the opposite of metaphysics.²⁴ Science, it seems, is concerned with the natural, not the supernatural world, and it is characterized by objective, empirical knowledge, not faulty inferences or false beliefs. But while Nietzsche acknowledges that metaphysics and science are distinct, he believes that our belief in both of them are symptomatic of slave morality. “Science,” he writes, “is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather the latter’s own most recent and noble manifestation” (GM 3.23); “I will tell them [i.e. scientists] what they themselves cannot see, because they are standing too close to themselves: this ideal is simply their ideal as well” (GM 3.24); “science represents the driving force of the inner evolution of that ideal” (GM 3.25); science and the ascetic ideal “are on the same foundation” (GM 3.25). Nietzsche believes that science is part of the ascetic ideal insofar as it entails subordinating one’s

the practice is much different from the thought that comes after. Nietzsche is clearest about this in GM 2.14-15.

²⁴ Nietzsche uses *Wissenschaft*, but it should be reminded that this does strictly refer to the physical sciences. In German *Wissenschaft* includes the human sciences (philosophy, history, social studies) as well as the physical sciences.

natural instincts and perspective to a higher authority – not God but Truth. In this respect it proceeds from the same values – of selflessness, for instance – inaugurated by the slave revolt.²⁵

This raises an important point. Something's being false is not, for Nietzsche, reason enough to reject it. The relevant distinction is not whether something is true or false, but whether it affirms life or not.²⁶ Nietzsche is consistent about this throughout his writings: "We do not object to a judgment just because it is false," he writes, "The question is rather to what extent the judgment furthers life, preserves life.... to give up false judgments would be to give up life, to deny life" (BGE 4).²⁷ For Nietzsche, "untruth is a condition of life": illusion, dream, and art are not only necessary to make our often miserable lives palatable, they are the source of inspiration and creativity. This fact, which philosophers since Plato have failed to appreciate, is a key reason why Nietzsche privileges art over philosophy and

²⁵ I discuss Nietzsche's views on science in more detail in section three of this chapter.

²⁶ For more on this topic, see Ken Gemes, "Nietzsche's Critique of Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (1992), 47-65.

²⁷ See also *Ecce Homo, Ecce Homo: How to Become What One is*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Ed. Michael Tanner. London: Penguin, 1992. "Why I am Destiny" 7: "It is not error as error that horrifies me," and *Antichrist* 56: "Ultimately the point is to what *end* a lie is told."

science.²⁸ For Nietzsche, the philosophical and scientific desire to escape illusion is a desire to escape life. It is part of the ascetic ideal.

Indeed Nietzsche acknowledges that metaphysical beliefs have had positive effects, and he insists that a proper refutation of metaphysics requires such an acknowledgment. Referring to the man on the cusp of rejecting metaphysics, he writes,

Once he at this level of liberation, he must still make a last intense effort to overcome metaphysics. *Then, however, a retrograde movement* is necessary: he must understand both the historical and the psychological justification in metaphysical ideas. He must recognize how mankind's greatest advancement came from them and how, if one did not take this retrograde step, one would rob himself of mankind's finest accomplishments to date.

(HAH 1.20)²⁹

Nietzsche admires the slaves for developing new concepts, and for the strength, creativity, and ingenuity required to enact and sustain these concepts. He derides the slaves for acting out of *ressentiment*, and the nobles for adopting a morality which suppresses their natural instincts, but he is not advocating a return to the

²⁸ GM 3.25: "Art, let me say at the outset, since I shall deal with this at length someday, -- art, in which lying sanctifies itself and the will to deception has good conscience on its side, is much more fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal than science is."

²⁹ See also the beginning of GM 3, where Nietzsche reverses his earlier criticism of Christianity and shows how it can be used to affirm life.

period before the slave revolt. Without their belief in something greater than themselves, the slaves would have remained subordinate to the nobles. And thanks to the slaves we have a conception of ourselves as having an inner life, and the promise of self-overcoming (GM 2.16).³⁰ Nietzsche believes that we are deeper, more complex people because of the slave revolt.³¹ And Christian metaphysics has inspired great music, art, literature, architecture, even war and conquest – some of Nietzsche’s favorite things. Nietzsche rejects metaphysics not because it is false, or because it has not had good effects, but for two reasons: first, because slave values are reactive and involve a repression of our natural instincts. And second, because these values have stultified the development of human excellence. This is why a second re-valuation of values is needed. Nietzsche’s rejection of metaphysics has this aim in mind.

Nietzsche’s primary argument against metaphysics, then, is that believing in metaphysical ideals entails subordinating our natural instincts to an authority other than ourselves. As long as we rely on an authority other than ourselves to regulate and justify our thoughts and actions, we will not act spontaneously on our natural instincts, and our strength, creativity, and individuality will be inhibited. This is true not just of God, but of all metaphysical ideals, as Nietzsche’s parable of the madman in the marketplace reminds us:

³⁰ I discuss this issue in greater detail in the following chapter.

³¹ Only with the slave revolt did man “first become an interesting animal” (GM 1.6); “The history of mankind would be far too stupid a thing if it had not had the intellect of the powerless injected into it” (GM 1.7). See also HAH 1.136.

Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!" Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us?... Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other..... Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke into pieces and went out. "I come too early," he then said, "my time is not yet."³²

The modern, "enlightened" men in the marketplace mock the madman for not yet realizing that God is dead, that the medieval, Christian belief in God has been replaced by a modern, secular belief in science and truth. But it is the onlookers, not the madman, who fail to realize the full implications of the death of God. In replacing their belief in God with a belief in Truth, they have simply replaced one external authority for another. What Nietzsche wants is for us to become our own authorities, our own Gods.

With this clarification in mind, we can now answer the question with which we began. Nietzsche's *reason* for rejecting metaphysics is that he believes it devalues, or in his words "slanders" earthly life. His *method* is to weaken our allegiance to metaphysical beliefs by demystifying them, by bringing them down to

³² *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. New York: Vintage, 1974. §125.

earth. We should not confuse the reason with the method. It would be misleading to say that Nietzsche rejects metaphysical beliefs because they are false, or because we are mistaken as to their true origins. The latter commits the naturalistic fallacy of believing that something is false because it does not have the origin we thought it has. Nietzsche is not trying to prove, once and for all, that metaphysical ideals are false. He wants to show that what we think of as the most elevated, high-minded concepts are really grounded in bodily instincts and concrete social practices – that is to say, in human, all too human stuff.

3.2. Nietzsche and Post-Structuralism

So far I have provided an initial overview of Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics. This account is, I think, relatively uncontroversial. I now want to deepen this account by considering two recent, prominent interpretations of Nietzsche: the post-structuralist and naturalist interpretations. I will argue that both of these interpretations are flawed; both wrongly emphasize certain aspects of Nietzsche's thought and thereby distort the force and extent of his critique of philosophy. These flaws, however, are instructive. My own reading of Nietzsche emerges from my disagreement with these two interpretations.

In the previous section we saw that Nietzsche does not believe that our thoughts emerge from a subject hidden inside our body, nor does he think that our

actions are freely willed. This leads to an obvious question: Where then do thinking and willing come from?

Nietzsche's answer is that our thoughts and actions arise from psychological and physiological drives or instincts within each of us, drives which we are only dimly aware of and over which we have little control. "However far a man may go in self-knowledge," he writes, "nothing can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being" (D 119).³³ These drives, and not our free will, are the source of our feelings, thoughts, and actions. They are the hidden causes underlying the various components of the will (the commanding thought, the feeling of pleasure), causing them to occur simultaneously. "The largest part of conscious thinking," Nietzsche writes, has to be considered an instinctual activity" (BGE 3). "Our thoughts, values, every 'yes', 'no', 'if' and 'but' grow from us with the same inevitability as fruits borne on the tree" (GM Prologue 2).³⁴ And:

But at the bottom of everyone, of course, way "down there," there is something obstinately unteachable, a granite-like spiritual *Fatum*, predetermined decisions and answers to selected, predetermined questions. In addressing any significant problem an unchangeable "That-is-I" has its say; for example, a thinker cannot learn to change his ideas about man and

³³ See also BGE 6, 10, 12. Paul Katsafanas provides an analysis of Nietzschean drives in "Nietzsche's Philosophical Psychology," forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*. Ed. Ken Gemes and Jason Richardson. Oxford UP, 2010

³⁴ See also: "*ressentiment* has an "actual physiological cause" (GM 1.15); sympathy is "just another expression of... physiological over-excitability" (TI 37).

woman, but can only learn his way through to the end, only discover to the limit what is firmly “established” in his mind about them... his *unteachable* essence. (BGE 231)

Nietzsche believes that the idea that we are free-thinking, rational beings, that we come to conclusions by objectively considering available evidence, is a myth. Our thoughts, as well as our feelings and actions, are governed by underlying drives and instincts. These drives and instincts may conflict within the body of a single individual, but together they make each individual prone to feel, think, and act one way rather than another. Those individuals that Nietzsche calls “slaves,” for instance, are pre-disposed to meekness and *ressentiment*. Those whom Nietzsche calls “nobles” are predisposed to activity and self-exertion. These character traits do not stem from choices freely made, but from psychological and physiological mechanisms beyond our control.

Since we are not, and cannot, ever be fully aware of just how these drives produce our thoughts and feelings, we do not have the kind of transparent window into our minds that traditional philosophers presume we have. “Our so called consciousness,” Nietzsche writes, is simply “a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text” (D 119). Our intellect, he says, is “only the blind instrument of another drive which is the rival of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us” (D 109). “Man, like every living creature, thinks unceasingly, but does not know it; the thinking which is becoming conscious of itself is only the smallest part thereof, we may say, the most superficial part, the worst

part” (GS 354). “Actions are *never* what they appear to be... all actions are essentially unknown” (D 116). And finally, “our moral judgments and evaluations... are only images and fantasies based on a physiological process unknown to us” (D 119). Nietzsche believes that the philosophical search for a transparent, rational picture of ourselves and the world is a futile attempt to overcome these processes. We are, at bottom, instinctive beings.

Nietzsche’s emphasis on the physiological basis of thought, action, and character is clearly expressed in his story of Cornaro in *Twilight of the Idols*:

Everybody knows the book of the famous Cornaro in which he recommends his slender diet as a recipe for a long and happy life.... The worthy Italian thought his diet was the *cause* of his long life, whereas the precondition for his long life, the extraordinary slowness of his metabolism, the consumption of so little, was the cause of his slender diet. He was not free to eat little *or* much; his frugality was not a matter of “free will”; he became sick when he ate more. (6.1)³⁵

³⁵ That this story appears so late in Nietzsche’s oeuvre illustrates that his emphasis on the instincts is not restricted to his middle period. It suggests rather that the pervasiveness of physiological explanations in the middle works (especially *Human, All Too Human* and *Daybreak*) relative to the later works is best understood as a shift in emphasis rather than a change in outlook. In his middle period Nietzsche was trying to distance himself from the Schopenhauerian, metaphysical world-view of his early works. This distancing became increasingly less necessary as his career went on.

Cornaro believes that his long life is caused by his slender diet, and he believes that he freely controls his diet. Nietzsche claims that Cornaro's diet results from a slow metabolism – a physiological process over which he has no control – and that his dietary prescription is therefore not applicable to everyone. The same criticism applies to advocates of morality, who falsely presume that everyone is free to act as they choose and then prescribe a uniform set of rules for everyone to follow.³⁶ Like Cornaro, they fail to recognize that each person is pre-disposed to act in some ways and not others.

So to the question, "Where do thinking and willing come from?", I imagine Nietzsche would respond, "Where does hunger come from? Or thirst? Or sexual desire?" We do not feel the need to resort to mysterious or metaphysical entities to explain these phenomena. Why do so to explain thought and action?

This account of Nietzsche's conception of human thought and action is at odds not only with traditional philosophy. It also differs sharply from the post-structuralist interpretation of Nietzsche. On this interpretation, found in different forms in the writings of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, Nietzsche is fundamentally an anti-essentialist thinker, one who privileges

³⁶ BGE 221: "In a person created and destined to command, for example, self-denial or humble retreat would not be a virtue, but rather the waste of a virtue: so it seems to me. Any altruistic moral code that takes itself unconditionally and addresses itself to everyone is not only sinning against taste: it is inciting to sins of omission, one *more* temptation beneath a mass of philanthropy." And also: "A well turned out human being, a 'happy one'," Nietzsche writes, "*must* perform certain actions and shrinks instinctively from other actions; he carries the order, which he represents physiologically, into his relations with other human beings and things" (TI 7.2.).

contingency, multiplicity, and difference.³⁷ His criticism of the Cartesian subject, for instance, amounts to a rejection of the idea of a unified self. And his account of how seemingly fixed, timeless aspects of our lives (such as morality) are in fact historically contingent shows that we should be suspicious of any claims to underlying essences. On this reading, Nietzsche teaches us to see the various contingent forces that make up what we think is fixed or eternal. Thus for Deleuze, “The sense of Nietzsche’s philosophy is that multiplicity, becoming, and chance are objects of pure affirmation” (197).³⁸ For Foucault, the lesson of Nietzsche’s writing is that we should look for “not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they have no essence” (147). This interpretation has also become prominent on this side of the Atlantic. Alexander Nehemas writes that “Nietzsche seems intent on undermining precisely the idea that there are antecedently existing possibilities grounded in [our] nature” (*Life as Literature* 175). And he claims that for Nietzsche,

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by H. Tomlinson. Columbia University Press, 1983. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs, Nietzsche’s Styles*. Translated by B. Harlow. University of Chicago Press, 1978. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 139-164. Ed. Daniel Bouchard. Ithica: Cornell UP, 1977. See also Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990. The French title for this book is *La volonté de savoir* (the will to knowledge); a clear play on Nietzsche’s will to truth/will to power. Similar views are expressed by Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge UP, 1989 and Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985.

³⁸ In the following chapter I argue that though Deleuze mischaracterizes Nietzsche’s critical project, he rightly grasps Nietzsche’s positive conception of philosophy. This conception is aptly summarized in Deleuze’s claim that Nietzsche “turns philosophy into an art” (197).

“there is nothing there to be repressed or liberated.”³⁹ Richard Rorty writes of “the pre-Nietzschean assumption that man has a true self which... exists prior to being shaped by power.”⁴⁰ Nehemas and Rorty follow Foucault in interpreting Nietzsche’s rejection of the Cartesian self, his claim that there is no doer behind the deed, to mean that for Nietzsche there is *nothing* underlying human thought, feeling, and action prior to its creation by external, contingent forces.⁴¹

What the post-structuralist interpretation emphasizes, then, is Nietzsche’s account of how contingent factors determine how we think, feel, and act. This is indeed a significant aspect of Nietzsche’s thought. Nietzsche believes that the innate drives which govern our thoughts and actions are activated (or not) by the social, historical, and geographical environment in which we live. These factors work in concert with our psycho-physiological constitutions by stimulating some drives at the expense of others. As Nietzsche writes,

However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing can be more incomplete than his image of the *drives* which constitute his being... and above all the laws of the their *nutriment* remain wholly unknown to him.

This nutriment is therefore a work of chance: our daily experiences throw

³⁹ “How One Becomes What One Is,” *Nietzsche: Oxford Readings in Philosophy*. Ed. Brian Leiter and Jason Richardson. Oxford UP, 2001, pp. 255-280, pp. 260. I discuss the issue of repression/liberation in Nietzsche in the following chapter.

⁴⁰ “Beyond Nietzsche and Marx,” *London Review of Books*. February 19, 1981.

⁴¹ Brian Leiter criticizes Nehemas and Rorty on this score in “The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche,” in *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*. Ed. Chris Janaway. Oxford UP, 1998, 217-255.

some prey in the way of now this, now that drive, and the drive seizes it eagerly; but the coming and going of these events as a whole stands in no rational relationship to the nutritional requirements of the totality of the drives: so that the outcome will always be twofold – the starvation and stunting of some and the overfeeding of others. Every moment of our lives sees some of the polyp-arms of our being grown and others of them wither, all according to the nutriment which the moment does or does not bear with it. (D 119)

Certain instincts are activated while others wither away, all depending on the social, historical, and geographical circumstances in which we find ourselves. This explains how those with more “noble” psycho-physiological constitutions have come to feel, think, and act in accordance with the values of the slave revolt. The near universality of slave values in modern society is only possible if contingent factors have as much or more influence on our thoughts and actions as natural, physiological factors. But while the post-structuralist interpretation is right to highlight the importance of contingent factors in Nietzsche’s thought, Nietzsche is not “intent on undermining the idea that there antecedently existing possibilities grounded in [our] nature” (Nehemas), nor does he think that “nothing exists prior to being shaped by power” (Rorty), or that there is “no essence” (Foucault). Nietzsche says explicitly that each individual has an “unteachable essence” which “predetermines” both the questions that individual will ask and the answers he will provide (BGE 231). As I have tried to show, the textual evidence for this aspect of

Nietzsche's thought is overwhelming,⁴²

The post-structuralist interpretation also elides another important aspect of Nietzsche's project.⁴³ I discuss this further in the following chapter, but mention it briefly here. Nietzsche does not straightforwardly affirm contingency and multiplicity, as Deleuze and Foucault suggest. Rather, his criticism of the Cartesian subject is preliminary to his ultimate aim, which is his positive, prescriptive notion of the kind of self he wants us to become. Nietzsche does not reject all notions of the self, or even of the unified self. Nor does he reject that idea that certain aspects of our selves are pre-given. What he rejects is the idea that the *unified self is pre-given*. This idea, exemplified by the Cartesian "I," underlies the slave morality which he wants to overcome. For Nietzsche, the unified self is something that must be achieved: "The self does not exist; he needs to be created" (TSZ 120).⁴⁴

⁴² It might be asked why, given the textual evidence to the contrary, post-structuralist interpreters of Nietzsche have overlooked his claim that there is a fixed essence within each individual and his notion of the ideal self as one that must be achieved. Ken Gemes suggests that Nietzsche's calls for a unity of will and motivation echoes the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche, which post-war philosophers in Europe were justifiably weary of. Brian Leiter argues that Derrida's and Nehemas's emphases on Nietzsche's comments about the importance of the notion of "interpretation" rests on a misunderstanding of what "interpretation" meant for Nietzsche. "Nietzsche and Aestheticism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30, 1992, pp. 275-290.

⁴³ Ken Gemes provides an overview of (and criticism of) this aspect of the postmodern appropriation of Nietzsche in "Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LXII, No. 2, March 2001. He shows that insofar as postmodernists overlook Nietzsche's call for unity and creation of the self, they are more like Nietzsche's "last man" than his ideal man.

⁴⁴ The idea that the self must be created or achieved is discussed in Nehemas (1985); Richardson (1996); and Gemes (2001). Nehemas does not acknowledge the

Compared to the metaphysical philosophy he criticizes, then, Nietzsche is a proponent of contingency and multiplicity. He rejects the idea of a pre-given, unified self responsible for our thoughts and actions, and he gives prominent place to the role of history and culture in determining human thought and action. But he does not privilege contingency and multiplicity for its own sake. Nor does he think that human beings do not have an underlying essence. He believes that each of us has a pre-given set of drives and instincts which dispose us to think, feel, and act one way or another. These drives are a limiting condition on what kind of individuals we might become. This conception of the self is incompatible with two fundamental tenets of traditional philosophy: that we have clear access to our thoughts, and that our thoughts are the product of rational reflection. It is equally incompatible with the post-structuralist interpretation of him as one who privileges multiplicity over unity, and contingency over essence.

3.3. Nietzsche and Naturalism

In recent years the post-structuralist interpretation of Nietzsche, predominant in the 1980s and early 1990s, has given way to a naturalist interpretation.⁴⁵ This naturalist interpretation emphasizes the essentialist strain of

naturalist aspect of Nietzsche's thought. Richardson's interpretation, by contrast, emphasizes this aspect. Gemes contrasts the Nietzschean ideal of unity with the postmodern interpretation of Nietzsche.

⁴⁵ It is perhaps misleading to speak of *a* or *the* naturalist reading, since there are different proponents of this reading and they emphasize different things. The most prominent is Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Naturalist readings are also evident in Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and*

Nietzsche's thought: his claim that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are governed by inborn drives and instincts. In this respect it serves as a useful corrective to the post-structuralist interpretation. In some cases, however, it goes further, arguing Nietzsche is a naturalist in the same way post-Quinean analytic philosophers are. Brian Leiter, for instance, argues that Nietzsche believes that "philosophical inquiry...should be continuous with empirical inquiry in the sciences."⁴⁶ Leiter's

Philosophy. Cambridge UP, 1990; Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy*. Oxford UP, 2007; John Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*. Oxford UP, 2004; Richard Schacht, "Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, or, How to Naturalize Cheerfully, *Reading Nietzsche*. Eds. Kathleen Higgins and R.C. Solomon. Oxford UP, 1988; Nadeem Hussain, "Nietzsche's Positivism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2002): 326-368.

⁴⁶ Leiter's most systematic articulation of this view is in his *Nietzsche on Morality*. (hereafter NM). He elaborates this view and responds to critics in "Nietzsche's Naturalism Re-Considered," forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*. Edited by Ken Gemes and Jason Richardson (hereafter NNR).

Critics of Leiter's naturalist reading include Christopher Janaway (independently and together with Ken Gemes) and Christa Acampora. In "Naturalism and Value in Nietzsche," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (2005), 729-740. Gemes and Janaway argue that Leiter's account of Nietzsche's naturalism is too weak to be philosophically significant. This criticism misses I think, the larger point which I explain below: namely, that while Nietzsche clearly admires science for its rigor and lack of metaphysical baggage, he is primarily critical of the *value* of scientific explanations. In her "Naturalism and Nietzsche's Moral Psychology," in *A Companion to Nietzsche*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, Acampora argues that Leiter does not recognize that Nietzsche is a skeptic about causation – a fundamental aspect of scientific (and hence naturalistic) explanation. But Acampora's argument mistakes Nietzsche's skepticism about the causal power of the freely willing subject with skepticism about causality *tout court*.

In chapter four of *Beyond Selflessness*, Janaway argues for a weaker naturalism than Leiter's. He argues that Nietzsche's primary method of argumentation is not to marshal causal or empirical evidence in defense of his claims, as Leiter's claims, but rather to use literary and rhetorical devices to move us towards accepting his claims. I think this is right, as the ensuing pages illustrate. In this section I critique Leiter's reading from a different angle: I question how much weight we should place on Nietzsche's positive remarks about science. Still, I hope

reading is subtle and compelling, and it has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Like the poststructuralist interpretation of Nietzsche, however, I believe it over-emphasizes certain Nietzschean claims at the expense of other, more central ones, and thereby obfuscates the extent of his critique of philosophy.

Naturalism encompasses a diversity of views, but they are united in that they seek to explain phenomena (such as language, consciousness, ethics) by appeal to the natural, causal world.⁴⁷ Naturalists take the empirical world as given and seek to further our understanding of it by developing theories and refining our concepts in light of empirical data. In this respect, naturalism rejects metaphysics and differs from foundationalism and conceptual analysis. Peter Strawson usefully divides naturalists into two main types.⁴⁸ “Hard” naturalists believe that philosophy should be continuous with the natural sciences. “Soft” naturalists believe that philosophy should simply clarify our concepts and understanding. “Hard” naturalism does not suppose that philosophers should uncritically accept the results of empirical

that this account provides further support for the weaker naturalist reading Janaway advocates.

⁴⁷ P.F. Strawson writes, “The term naturalism is elastic in its use. The fact that it has been applied to the work of philosophers having as little in common as Hume and Spinoza is enough to suggest that there is a distinction to be drawn between varieties of naturalism.” *Scepticism and Naturalism, Some Varieties*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. David Papineau: “The term ‘naturalism’ has no very precise meaning in contemporary philosophy.” “Naturalism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/>. And John Ritchie: “I doubt if there is any such definition for naturalism. Like most of the other -isms in philosophy, naturalism embraces many differing views.” *Understanding Naturalism*. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008, page 1.

⁴⁸ *Scepticism and Naturalism, Some Varieties*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.

research. It means that they should use the discoveries of science in their pursuit of knowledge while also criticizing science when its claims are ungrounded, confused, or inconsistent. Implied in this characterization is that the aim of philosophy is to increase our knowledge of the world, not through empirical discovery (the domain of science), but by reconciling our ordinary ways of thinking and talking with developments in the sciences (for instance, reconciling our idea of the mind with recent discoveries in neuroscience), and by revising the assumptions and theories guiding scientific research, thus leading to new approaches to science and hence new discoveries.⁴⁹

Leiter interprets Nietzsche as a hard naturalist, on Strawson's definition.⁵⁰

He argues that Nietzsche aims to "construct philosophical theories that are

⁴⁹ One thing naturalist philosophers do not aim to discover, which distinguishes them from other kinds of philosophers, is non-empirical or conceptual knowledge. Kripke's discovery that necessity and a priority are not the same thing, for instance, is the kind of knowledge that naturalists like Quine have difficulty explaining. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980. W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1953. Jerry Fodor offers an overview of the shift from conceptual analysis to Quinean naturalism in twentieth century philosophy in "Water's Water Everywhere," *London Review of Books*. Volume 26, Number 20-21, 2004.

⁵⁰ Leiter does not use the characterization "hard" and "soft" as Strawson (or I, following Strawson) do. But as the quotation in the following sentence (of the main text) indicates, Leiter believes that Nietzsche is a "hard" naturalist in this Strawsonian sense. Leiter uses a different distinction between hard and soft, which should not be confused with the one I use here. He distinguishes between "Hard M-Naturalists" and "Soft M-Naturalists": Hard M-Naturalists believe that philosophy should be continuous with "only the hard or physical sciences," while Soft M-Naturalists seek continuity with "any successful science, natural or social" (NM 3). Leiter argues that Nietzsche is a Soft M-Naturalist: he believes that philosophy

continuous with the sciences... in virtue of their employment of distinctively scientific ways of looking at and explaining things" (NM 7). Leiter calls this position "Methodological" or "M-Naturalism." He qualifies this position, however, by saying that Nietzsche is a "*speculative* M-Naturalist." That is, Nietzsche does not rely on actually existing scientific results to formulate his philosophical theories, he aims to develop "speculative theories of human nature informed by the sciences and a scientific picture of how things work" (NM 5). What does Leiter mean by "a scientific picture of how things work"? He means, simply, a philosophical approach that locates the causal determinants of the particular phenomena under investigation (NM 8). This definition of science includes both physical sciences, such as physiology, and human sciences such as history and psychology.

Leiter also argues that Nietzsche's philosophical method is scientific in a stricter sense. This is the second aspect of his reading of Nietzsche's naturalism. Leiter writes that Nietzsche's philosophical method "involves a certain type of results continuity [with the sciences], namely, continuity with the 'result' foremost in the mind of mid-19th century Germans: that man is not of a 'higher... [or] of a different origin' than the rest of nature" (NM 7). The reference here is to 19th century German materialists, namely Büchner and Lange. This second aspect of Nietzsche's supposed naturalism may seem to contradict the first: why insist that Nietzsche is a *speculative* naturalist and then emphasize his reliance on *actual* scientific results? As I read Leiter, the speculative causal explanations that

should be continuous with any science. The key point for my purposes is that what Leiter calls "Soft M-Naturalism" falls under what Strawson calls "hard" naturalism.

Nietzsche provides, though not necessarily confirmed by science, follow from what science has already discovered. In the same way, the theory of evolution by natural selection is based on empirical evidence, but it can also be used to explain and predict things for which empirical evidence has not been collected.

Leiter summarizes his reading as follows:

So Nietzsche, the philosophical naturalist, aims to offer theories that explain various important human phenomena (especially morality) and that do so in ways that both draw on actual scientific results..., but are also modeled on science in that they seek to reveal the causal determinants of these phenomena, typically in various psychological and physiological facts about persons. (NM 8)⁵¹

I agree that Nietzsche seeks to identify the causal determinants for phenomena such as morality, as long as we understand “causal determinants” loosely as including historical, and not simply psychological and physiological, facts about persons.⁵² My

⁵¹ There is an ambiguity in Leiter’s reading which is worth mentioning. Leiter writes that, for Nietzsche, “philosophical inquiry should be continuous with empirical inquiry in the sciences” (NM3). The “should” here is significant. This sounds as though Leiter is attributing a meta-philosophical claim to Nietzsche, rather than simply describing Nietzsche’s own practice. It is unclear whether Leiter means that Nietzsche’s philosophical arguments are continuous with the results of science, or that Nietzsche believes that all philosophical arguments should be continuous with the results of science. Leiter clearly implies the latter but only provides evidence for the former.

⁵² Leiter is not sufficiently careful about this qualification. While his argument about the physiological basis of action is a useful corrective to the post-structural interpretation of Nietzsche, it goes too far in the other direction: it does not

contention is with the first point. Whether Nietzsche draws on actual scientific results depends on whether we consider the conclusions of German materialist writers “actual scientific results.” I think this characterization is unwarranted. Even if it is warranted, requiring Nietzsche’s arguments to “draw on actual scientific results” conflicts with his suspicion of science and his criticism of the will to truth.

There is no question that German materialism exerted a profound and lasting influence on Nietzsche’s thought.⁵³ The question is whether this influence justifies

adequately account for the role of culture in developing human thought and action. In response to criticism on this score by Janaway, Leiter writes, “There is no reason to deny that Nietzsche the naturalist is interested in culture, but that should not lead us to lose sight of the role that psycho-physical causes plays in the explanation of morality he proffers” (NNR 19-20). This is a non-sequitur. Acknowledging the importance of cultural causes does not lead Janaway to lose sight of the importance of natural causes. An accurate reconstruction of Nietzsche’s philosophical practice must account, in proper proportion, for the relative influences of nature and culture on human thought and action.

⁵³ According to Richard Vitzhum, German Materialism “took the German intellectual world by storm during the 1850s.” *Materialism: An Affirmative History*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1995, 98. The materialists sought to unify the physical and human sciences in light of new developments in the burgeoning field of physiology. They did this by providing psychological and physiological explanations of human behaviour. Ludwig Büchner, a leading materialist, whose 1855 *Kraft und Stoff* (*Force and Matter*) was popular at the time, wrote that “the research and discoveries of modern times can no longer allow us to doubt that man, with all that he has and possesses, be it mental or corporeal, is a *natural product* like all other organic beings.” *Force and Matter*. Trans. J.G. Collingwood. London: Trubner, 1870, page lxxviii, quoted in Leiter, “Nietzsche’s Naturalism Re-considered.”

As Leiter indicates, Nietzsche was certainly aware of these developments. By 1866 Nietzsche he had read Friedrich Lange’s *History of Materialism*, which provided an overview of the movement. According to Nietzsche biographer Curt Janz Nietzsche viewed Lange’s book as “undoubtedly the most significant philosophical work to have appeared in decades.” *Friedrich Nietzsche: Biographie* (3 volumes). Munich: Hanser, 1978. That same year Nietzsche wrote to a friend, “Kant, Schopenhauer, this book by Lange – I don’t need anything else” (Janz volume 1;198, quoted in Leiter NNR 6).

the claim that, for Nietzsche, philosophical arguments should be “continuous with the results of science.” Much hinges on what is meant by “the results of science.” Presumably, it means something stronger than speculation as to the causal determinants of a given phenomena; that is, presumably it means established, empirically verifiable results. Were it to mean something weaker, then what Leiter calls “actual scientific results” would be no different, methodologically and epistemically, from the kind of speculative, causal explanations Nietzsche provides in his own writings. In this case it would not warrant any special status, and there would be nothing special about Nietzsche’s continuity with it. Leiter must therefore mean by “actual scientific results” the results of empirical science as we understand that discipline today.

But in that case the claim that Nietzsche’s arguments must be continuous with actual scientific results is unwarranted. The results in question, according to Leiter, are the conclusions drawn by contemporary German materialists, namely Büchner and Lange. Consider, for instance, Büchner’s *Force and Matter*, a major work of the materialist movement, familiar to Nietzsche. Büchner argues, against the idealism of Kant and Hegel, that force and matter are indestructible, that nature is purposeless and purely physical, that there are no supernatural entities, and therefore no transcendental moral (or other) laws.⁵⁴ It is clear why Nietzsche was interested in this and related works. It is equally unclear that these works

⁵⁴ Buchner, Ludwig, *Force and Matter*. Trans. J.G. Collingwood. London: Trubner, 1870. See also the previous footnote.

constitute “the results of science.” Büchner’s conclusions are not discoveries stemming from empirical research, nor have they been adopted or confirmed by contemporary science.⁵⁵ Indeed it is unclear whether they are assumptions made before the fact or conclusions reached by the kind of theoretical and observational analysis common to other writers of the period, like Feuerbach and Nietzsche.⁵⁶ Nietzsche’s writings are continuous with the works of Büchner, Lange, and others, but it is unsurprising, and philosophically uninteresting, that his writings should be continuous with those who inspired him. This continuity does not warrant the claim that Nietzsche’s philosophy draws on “actual existing scientific results.”

Leiter, however, does not just claim that Nietzsche draws on actual scientific results. He claims that Nietzsche believes that philosophy *should* draw on actual scientific results (NM 3). Here we get to the deeper problem with Leiter’s reading. Even if we grant that the work of the German materialists counts as “scientific” in

⁵⁵ Leiter claims Nietzsche’s views “fare rather well in light of the subsequent research in scientific psychology” (NNR 4). This suggestion, however, is misleading. The discipline of scientific (and especially experimental) psychology presumes, from the outset, that there are primarily physiological causes of our emotions and beliefs. It does not look for other, contingent factors with the same degree of interest. For this reason it has been the subject of criticism from other branches of psychology, as well as by scientists and philosophers. But this is tangential to the main argument. Leiter’s claim that Nietzsche’s philosophy requires “results continuity” with the empirical sciences does not depend on being continuous with recent research in scientific psychology (it only depends on not being discontinuous with it). It does, however, depend on *some* continuity with the sciences, and Leiter finds this continuity with the 19th century German materialists. By “continuity,” he means, “continuity with the ‘result’ foremost in the mind of mid-19th century Germans: that man is not of a ‘higher... [or] of a different origin’ than the rest of nature” (NM 7). I will therefore restrict my argument to this supposed continuity.

⁵⁶ A point made by Janaway in chapter four of *Beyond Selflessness*.

the relevant sense, the idea that philosophy should be scientific conflicts with Nietzsche's criticism of the value of science. As I explained in the first section of this chapter, Nietzsche believes that modern science is the latest manifestation of the ascetic ideal. "Science," he writes, "is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather the latter's own most recent and noble manifestation" (GM III 23). This is because science, insofar as it privileges truth above all, entails that we subordinate our instincts and perspective to an authority other than ourselves. Leiter sees things differently. He argues that Nietzsche "endorses a *scientific* perspective as the correct or true one" (NM 21). In support of this claim, he marshals three quotations from Nietzsche's published writings. According to Leiter,

Even in the often misunderstood Third Essay of the *Genealogy* – in which Nietzsche attacks on the *value* of truth, not its objectivity or our ability to know it – Nietzsche refers to "there being so much useful work to be done" in science and adds, regarding the "honest workers" in science, that "I delight in their work" (GM 3.23). In works from earlier in the 1880s, he still lauds science for the "severity of its service, its inexorability in small as in great matters..." (GS 293) and says that "the *ideal* scholar in whom the scientific instinct, after thousands of total semi-failures, for once blossoms and blooms to the end, is certainly one of the most precious instruments there are" (BGE 207).

These three quotations from Nietzsche are the only ones Leiter uses in support of his claim that Nietzsche endorses a scientific perspective above all others. Of these,

two are taken out of context of the specific numbered passage in which they appear, and distort Nietzsche's actual point in that passage (GM 3.23 and BGE 207). The third, from GS 293, is not taken out of the context, but its significance, when considered in the context of Nietzsche's oeuvre, is ambiguous.⁵⁷ Let us look at each carefully.

Consider first BGE 207. I quote at length. The part that Leiter cites is underlined:

The objective person, one who no longer curses and scolds like the pessimist, the *ideal* scholar in whom the scientific spirit, after thousands of total semi-failures, for once blossoms and blooms to the end, is certainly one of the most precious instruments there are: but he needs to be put into the hand of someone more powerful. He is only a tool; let's say that he is a *mirror*, not an "end unto himself.... His mirroring soul, ever smoothing itself out, no longer knows how to affirm, no longer how to deny; he does not command, neither does he destroy.... Nor is he a model human being; he neither precedes nor follows anyone; in general he puts himself at such a distance that he has no grounds on which to take a side between good and evil. If we have for so long mistaken him for a *philosopher*, for a dictatorial breeder and tyrant of

⁵⁷ Leiter's target in this section of his book is Richard Rorty's claim that for Nietzsche science is just one perspective on the world. My disagreement with Leiter here does not vindicate Rorty. As the ensuing discussion illustrates, Nietzsche admires science more than other disciplines (religion, for instance), but he nevertheless finds science to be overvalued.

culture, we have done him for too great an honour and overlooked the most essential thing about him: he is an instrument, a slave-like entity, if certainly the most sublime sort of slave, but in himself nothing – *presque rien!* (BGE 207)

The purpose of this passage is not, as Leiter argues, to show that the scientific perspective is “the correct or true one.” It is to show that despite his admiration for science, the scientist is not a “model human being” nor even a “philosopher,” but merely “an instrument... a slave like entity... in himself nothing.” The scientist, and the scientific perspective, is a source of contempt for Nietzsche. Qualified contempt, but contempt nevertheless.

Leiter’s use of the quotation from GM 3.23 is similarly misleading. Again, the overarching theme of the last few sections of the *Genealogy*, beginning with 3.23, is that science is the modern development of the ascetic ideal. As with the few lines Leiter quotes from BGE 207, the few lines he quotes from GM 3.23 are immediately followed by the word “but.” Once again, the lines Leiter quotes are underlined:

... science today has absolutely *no* faith in itself, let alone in an ideal *above* it, - and where it is still passion, love, fire, *suffering*, it is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather that latter’s own *most recent and noble manifestation*. Does that sound strange to you? There are enough worthy and modest workers even amongst the scholars of today, who like their little corner and therefore, because they like being there, are occasionally somewhat presumptuous in making their demand heard that people today *ought* to be

content in general, especially with science – there being so much useful work to be done. I do not deny it: I am the last to want to spoil the pleasure of these honest workers in their craft: for I delight in their work. But the fact that nowadays people are working hard in science, and that they are contented workmen, does *not* at all prove that today, science as whole has a goal, a will, an ideal, a passion of great faith. The opposite, as I said, is the case: where it is not the most recent manifestation of the ascetic ideal - there are too few noble, exceptional cases for the general judgment to be deflected – then science today is a *hiding place* for all kinds of ill-humour, unbelief, gnawing worms, contempt of self, bad conscience.... (GM 3.23)

Again, the point of this passage is not that Nietzsche “endorses a *scientific* perspective as the correct or true one.” The point is that science is the most recent manifestation of the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche’s claims that “there is so much useful work to be done” in science, that he “delight[s] in their work,” illustrates that Nietzsche has praise for the work of scientists, but this praise is qualified by his more general criticism of science. As I argued in the previous section, and as is evident in this passage, Nietzsche is thoroughly critical of science in the final sections of the *Genealogy*. He writes, “I will tell them [i.e. scientists] what they themselves cannot see, because they are standing too close to themselves: this ideal is simply their ideal as well” (GM III 24); “science represents the driving force of the inner evolution of that ideal” (GM III 25); science and the ascetic ideal “are on the same foundation” (GM III 25).

Leiter acknowledges that Nietzsche questions the value of truth and aligns science with the ascetic ideal, but he maintains that this is “a minor theme” in Nietzsche’s thought (NM 265). Leiter argues that Nietzsche’s criticism of the value of truth only applies at the limiting case in which a truth is so terrible that it threatens our ability to affirm life (NM 267). But Nietzsche’s criticism of the value of truth includes more than just these extreme cases. Even those truths which are not so terrible that they threaten life are, for Nietzsche, not necessarily to be privileged over other non-truths. This is why Nietzsche calls the assumption that truth is preferable to untruth “the most poorly proven assumption in the world” (BGE 34), and why he writes: “However much value we may ascribe to truth, truthfulness, or altruism, it may be that we need to attribute a higher and more fundamental value to appearance, to the will to illusion, to egoism and desire” (BGE 2). It is also why he privileges art over science:

Art, let me say at the outset, since I shall deal with this at length someday, -- art, in which lying sanctifies itself and the will to deception has good conscience on its side, is much more fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal than science is. (GM 3.25)

What matters for Nietzsche is not whether something is true or false, but to what end the truth (or falsity) is used: “Ultimately the point is to what *end* a lie is told” (*Antichrist* 56). And the end in question is the overcoming of the ascetic ideal.

Leiter also says that what Nietzsche criticizes about science is its “will to *non-perspectival* truth,” where this is taken to mean the will to know the world beyond

ours (NM 268).⁵⁸ For Leiter, Nietzsche is criticizing our desire to know the noumenal world: “the will to non-perspectival knowledge of truth is ascetic or life-denying because it demeans the actual world as mere appearance” (NM 278). On this reading, the problem with the will to truth is that it is based on an error, on the false belief that there is a distinction between a noumenal and phenomenal world. This reading again misplaces the thrust of Nietzsche’s attack. Nietzsche does not believe that such errors are significant in themselves: “It is not error as error that horrifies me,” he writes (*Ecce Homo*, “Why I am Destiny?” 7). What matters is the extent to which error, and truths, affirm life. If science and truth is used to further life (as it is in the case of uncovering the origins of morality) then that is commendable. If illusion is used to further life (as in Greek tragedy) then that is also commendable. What matters in each case is not primarily whether something is true or false, but whether it affirms life or not: whether it requires us to subordinate our instincts and perspective to something external to ourselves, whether a noumenal world or a scientific understanding of the phenomenal world.

Pointing out this misreading, however, only gets us so far. We need to get clearer on the role that science and truth play in Nietzsche’s thought. How can Nietzsche “delight” in the work of scientists, and yet call them “slave like” instruments? The following thought experiment might help. Imagine that Nietzsche’s claim that human beings have a fixed, psycho-physiological constitution, or his genealogical analysis of morality, turns out to be contradicted by scientific or

⁵⁸ In this respect he follows Clark (1990). See my introduction page 15.

historical research. Would this render his writings false? Would it mean that we can do without them? These are two separate questions. The distinction between them is instructive.

As I argued in the previous section, the relevant point for Nietzsche in his criticism of metaphysics is not that metaphysical beliefs are false, but that they are life-denying: they lead us to subordinate our instincts and perspective to an authority beyond ourselves. Something's being false is not, for Nietzsche, reason enough to reject it. For the same reason, something's being true, or continuous with science, is not reason enough to accept it. The relevant distinction for Nietzsche is not whether something is true or false, but whether it affirms life or not. Certainly, Nietzsche believes that his genealogical analysis of morality and his naturalist account of human thought and action are accurate representations of how things really are – that is, he believes them to be true. And certainly, he believes that the belief in a Christian God and a Cartesian subject are misrepresentations of how things really are – that is, he believes them to be false. But the fact that he believes the former to be true and the latter to be false does not, *in itself*, explain why he wants us to adopt the former and reject the latter. To suggest otherwise is to say that Nietzsche values truth over all other considerations. And to value truth over all other considerations is to partake in the ascetic ideal. It is to affirm the world-view that Nietzsche aims to subvert.

This is not to say that Nietzsche is entirely unconcerned with the truth or falsity of his arguments, or that their truth or falsity is irrelevant to our adjudication

of them. The success of Nietzsche's arguments against metaphysics depends on our tacit preference for truth over falsity.⁵⁹ There is an important distinction between our believing something to be true (that is, objectively true, in accordance with the methods and results of science) and our being compelled by something. To believe that a story or argument is true presumes a degree of rationality and objectivity in the accepting of that thing. To be compelled by a story or argument does not presume the same degree of rationality or objectivity. I might be compelled by a fictional portrayal of events more than by a purely factual account of those same events. I may even know that there are factual inaccuracies in the fictional portrayal, and yet still be more compelled (that is, more moved by it; more likely to act in response to it) by it than by a purely factual account.⁶⁰ We must balance the fact that Nietzsche presents arguments that he believes are true, and whose success or failure depends on us believing them to be true, with his view that the truth or falsity of his arguments are not the sole or primary reason for adopting or rejecting them. What matters for Nietzsche is how *compelling* an argument or story is, not how truthful it is. An argument or belief is more or less compelling depending on

⁵⁹ Here it is important to consider how difficult it would be to disprove Nietzsche's claims. What would it mean to show, empirically, that human beings do not need to justify their suffering in order for it to be tolerable, or that our belief in the Christian God does not, in fact, derive from an attempt to justify our suffering? What would it mean to show, empirically, that human thought and action is not, in fact, controlled at least in part by free will? These arguments are not ones which lend themselves to empirical confirmation.

⁶⁰ Film is a good example of this phenomenon. A recent example is the film *The Hurt Locker*, about an American bomb disposal unit in Iraq. The film has been criticized by veterans for its unrealistic portrayal, but praised by critics and audiences, at least in part for its "realism."

whether it is thought to be true or false, but truth or falsity alone does not determine its compellingness.

The problem with Leiter's naturalist reading, then, is that it makes Nietzsche out to be a philosopher in the traditional sense that Nietzsche criticizes: one who aims to develop objective, accurate representations of the world. It makes Nietzsche's arguments contingent on the scientific results of his contemporaries, and hostage to future discoveries in the empirical sciences. This fails to sufficiently account for Nietzsche's critique of the value of truth, and it partakes in the ascetic ideal that Nietzsche aims to subvert. The point of Nietzsche's positive account of human action as deriving from sub-conscious drives is not to develop "a scientific picture of how things work" but to undermine the metaphysical picture of ourselves as primarily conscious, agential beings and to inspire those of us with noble constitutions to break from the strictures of traditional morality. That is to say, Nietzsche is not just presenting a picture of how things really are, to be adjudicated as true or false, in the way that science is; he is trying to compel us towards a re-valuation of values.⁶¹

⁶¹ Leiter acknowledges that Nietzsche's naturalism is part of his larger aim to inspire a re-valuation of values. He writes that the "the bulk of [Nietzsche's] philosophical activity is devoted to variations on this naturalistic project" (NM 11), but acknowledges that "it is equally clear that Nietzsche's naturalism is enlisted on behalf of a revaluation of all values" (NNR 11). He specifies two respects in which Nietzsche's naturalist project is subordinate to his revaluation project. One case is when Nietzsche employs rhetorical or stylistic devices to unsettle his readers. The other is when he uses the term "philosopher" to refer to those who create new values. The point, however, is not simply that Nietzsche's naturalist project is

Christopher Janaway offers a weaker, and in my view more accurate characterization of Nietzsche's naturalism. Nietzsche is a naturalist, Janaway writes, in "a broad sense":

He opposes transcendent metaphysics, whether that of Plato or Christianity or Schopenhauer. He rejects notions of the immaterial soul, the absolutely free controlling will, or the self-transparent pure intellect, instead emphasizing the body, talking of the animal nature of human beings, and attempting to explain numerous phenomena by invoking drives, instincts, and affects which he locates in our physical, bodily existence. (*Selflessness* 34)

Leiter does not think this characterization goes far enough:

This is less a "broad sense" of naturalism, however, than it is "Laundry List Naturalism." Why are *these* a set of views a philosophical naturalist *ought* to hold? What is it that makes them the views of a philosophical naturalist at all? (NNR 2).

Janaway tells me that he thinks opposition to "transcendent metaphysics" is what unites the elements on the list.... [This] would simply push the question back one level: why is opposition to transcendent metaphysics the mark of naturalism? What motivates that opposition itself? (NNR fn. 3)

subordinate to his philosophical one, but that the naturalist project is only important insofar as it serves the philosophical project.

We have already seen the answer. Nietzsche's opposition to transcendent metaphysics is motivated by his belief that metaphysics contributes the levelling, and hence decay, of European culture. It imposes a uniformity of thought and action on everyone, even those with "noble" psycho-physiological constitutions, thereby inhibiting their expression of strength and creativity, and by extension the re-valuation of values which Nietzsche aims to inspire.⁶²

There is a further aspect of Nietzsche's criticism of science. Not only does science over-value truth, it also presumes that there is a single, objective, transparent window into reality. This presumption is a key target of Nietzsche's critique of philosophy. This criticism is most clearly articulated in an early, unpublished piece, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873). There Nietzsche argues that a scientific world-view limits the variety of perspectives that we might develop of the world, perspectives which would both increase our knowledge of and enrich our experience in the world.⁶³ He begins by investigating

⁶² Leiter's other two questions, "Why are *these* a set of views a philosophical naturalist *ought* to hold?" and "Why is opposition to transcendent metaphysics the mark of naturalism?" are misplaced. There is no established criteria for what views a naturalist ought to hold. Many philosophers who consider themselves naturalists hold a range of different views, as Strawson, Papineau and Ritchie have shown (see footnote 35), and there is no overriding need to define, once and for all, which set of views a naturalist ought to hold.

⁶³ This is Nietzsche's famous doctrine of perspectivism, articulated most clearly in GM 3.12: "we can use the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge. From now on, my philosophical colleagues, let us be more wary of the dangerous old conceptual fairy-tale which has set up a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge' There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival knowing; the *more* affects we are able to put into words about a thing,

the origins of our notions of truth and falsity. His account runs as follows:

- 1) We see something (a tree) and experience a nerve impulse
- 2) We form an image and a word to correspond with this impulse
- 3) We assimilate similar images/words together to form concepts. In doing so we overlook particularities and focus on similarities.
- 4) These concepts come to regulate what counts as truth and lying. If we use the concepts correctly (i.e. assimilate trees or tree-like objects under the concept "tree"), that counts as "true." If we do not use the concepts correctly (i.e. assimilate objects other than trees under the concept "tree"), that counts as "lies."

If we use the concepts correctly, we become reliable, social beings. If we do not, then we become unreliable, asocial beings. Nietzsche believes that in order to exist socially, in order to communicate at all, human beings need to devise concepts from the nerve impulses we experience, but we need not have developed the particular concepts we have. We might just as well have developed different concepts, grouped things differently than we do now. Had we done so, we would relate to the world and to each other differently than we do now.

The problem, according to Nietzsche, is not with the concepts we have developed but the fact that we have forgotten that it was us who developed them.

the *more* eyes, various eyes we are able to put into words about a thing, the more complete will be our 'concept' of the thing, our 'objectivity.'" Note that the point of this passage is not, as is often thought, that all perspectives are equal. The point is that the more perspectives one has of a thing, the more complete and objective our knowledge of it.

We have removed our conceptual edifice from its historical context and come to believe it offers a timeless, objective picture of the world. We have forgotten our role as developers of our own knowledge. Accordingly, we consider other ways of perceiving the world, particularly artistic ways, as false. This view of the matter keeps us locked into our current conceptual edifice, and it gets in the way of an aesthetic, instinctive, spontaneous experience with the world. Nietzsche wants us to develop new concepts, not be bound by the concepts we have inherited.⁶⁴

In this respect, Nietzsche is not trying to augment our knowledge of the world, as science tries to do. He is trying to unfix our established ways of looking at things. There is not one true or correct perspective which he wants us to adopt in place of the one we currently have. He wants to compel us to throw off the slave morality, to embrace our own instincts and perspective and the values which flow naturally from them. The only restriction Nietzsche seems to place on these new values is that they not be rooted in an authority other than ourselves, whether a transcendental deity or an empirical, objective way of looking at the world.

3.4. Conclusion

⁶⁴ Here, in this early essay, Nietzsche remains relatively descriptive, almost neutral. Though he compares the rational and the intuitive man, he does not explicitly privilege the latter. His aim seems to be to demystify the rational man and his conceptual edifice. He is less neutral when he returns to this theme in his later writings. See for instance BGE 34.

In this chapter I have tried to explain why Nietzsche is critical of metaphysics, and what this criticism does and does not entail. I have tried to show that it does not entail the claim that there is no essence underlying our thoughts, feelings, and actions, nor the claim that difference and multiplicity are objects of pure affirmation. It also does not entail the claim that philosophy should be continuous with the empirical sciences. The former set of claims fails to appreciate the essentialist strain in Nietzsche's thought, while the latter fails to appreciate his critique of the value of truth. Properly understood, Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics, slave morality, and the will to truth include not just Platonism, Cartesianism, and Kantianism, but also post-structuralism and naturalism.

Getting clear on these issues is needed to appreciate both Nietzsche's criticism of traditional philosophy and the kind of philosophy he advocates in its place. If, as Nietzsche argues, human beings do not have access to what is in their consciousness, and if their thoughts are not the result of rational processes but rather the secondary effect of underlying instincts and drives, then one of the most basic assumptions of traditional philosophy is flawed. In this case we cannot be confident that clear, rigorous, rational thought or logical argumentation will deliver the insights we hope. In the next chapter I examine the conception of philosophy he advocates, a conception which builds on and incorporates those aspects of his thought discussed here.

4. NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE FUTURE

"But true philosophers are commanders and law givers..... Do philosophers like these exist today? Have philosophers like these ever existed? Don't philosophers like these *have to exist*?..."

BGE 211

At the beginning of the previous chapter I outlined two ways in which Nietzsche uses the word "philosophy." In most cases he uses it disparagingly, and we have now seen why. But in other cases he uses it positively, as when he refers to "true philosophers" or "my kind of philosopher." What does he mean by this?

This question has received surprisingly little attention in the secondary literature. Discussions of "Nietzsche's philosophy" almost invariably focus on his critical practice – that is, the manner and method in which he debunks morality, metaphysics, and the will to truth. Two early classics of Nietzsche scholarship, Walter Kaufman's *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1950) and Arthur Danto's *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (1965) are cases in point. From the titles of these works one would expect some discussion of the kind of philosophical practice Nietzsche advocates. Instead one finds only a description of what, how, and why Nietzsche criticizes. The same is true of recent and current Nietzsche scholarship.¹

¹ Consider, for instance, the most well-received recent books on Nietzsche: Maudemarie Clark's *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (1990); Jason Richardson's *Nietzsche's System* (1996); Simon May's *Nietzsche's Ethics and His War on Morality* (1999); Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality* (2002); Christopher Janaway's *Beyond Selflessness: A Reading of Nietzsche's Genealogy* (2007). These books are overwhelmingly concerned with Nietzsche's critical practice. His positive conception of philosophy is not discussed in any detail.

The phrase “Nietzsche’s philosophy” is used to describe his psychological analyses of human behaviour, his skepticism about truth, his perspectivism, and so on. Little attention is paid to his positive notion of philosophy.²

This is in many ways understandable. Nietzsche’s criticisms of morality, Christianity, and the value of truth warrant more attention than his few remarks about an undetermined “philosophy of the future.” There are also several obstacles to explaining his positive conception of philosophy: Nietzsche does not discuss this conception systematically, so the most one can do is piece together various fragments of his writings; the best illustration of this philosophy is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a text replete with interpretive difficulties; and Nietzsche’s philosophy highlights the more unpalatable features of his thought, especially his unapologetic anti-egalitarianism. It is no wonder, then, that this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought has been largely ignored in the secondary literature.

My aim in this chapter is to piece together these fragments; to provide a sketch of Nietzsche’s “philosophy of the future.” This philosophy does not aim to

² Three notable exceptions are Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (1983) (the opening chapter); Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985); and Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche* (1987). Schacht opens with a clear and helpful overview of Nietzsche’s criticism of and his positive conception of philosophy. I aim to build on this overview here. Nehemas offers a more creative and controversial interpretation which seems right in some respects (Nietzsche’s new philosophy is highly aesthetic) but wrong in others (Nietzsche believes that “writing is the most important part of living” (109)). I discuss Nehemas later in this chapter. Tanner subtly explores the difficulties associated with Nietzsche’s positive conception of philosophy, though he finds the conception itself too slippery to properly characterize. See his chapter six, “Prophecy.”

analyze, understand, or ground the concepts and values we have (as traditional philosophy does). Nor does it aim to show that these concepts and values are ungrounded or unjustified (as Nietzsche's critical practice does). It aims, rather, to create new concepts and values. These new concepts are not the result of reasoning from established premises; they are more like aesthetic creations which seek to apprehend the world in new ways, ways which reflect the instincts and perspective of their creator.

This chapter proceeds in three movements, though for the sake of continuity they are not divided into discrete sections, as in the previous chapters. I begin by explaining Nietzsche's positive conception of philosophy and how it differs from Nietzsche's critical practice. I then explain how one becomes a philosopher of the future. And I conclude by examining one of Nietzsche's new philosophical creations: his concept of the eternal recurrence.

* * *

We have seen why Nietzsche is critical of traditional philosophy. Insofar as traditional philosophy privileges truth above all else, insofar as it seeks an impersonal, objective representation of things in the world, it requires us to subordinate our instincts and perspective to an authority other than ourselves. But we have also seen Nietzsche use philosophical techniques to undermine traditional philosophy: he skeptically challenges our assumptions and inferences, and he exposes the true origins of our false beliefs. In this respect he seems like a more strident, more perceptive philosopher than one who wants to abandon the

discipline altogether.³ He even describes the new philosophy in a way that sounds like the old one. He writes, quoting Stendhal:

Pour être bon philosophe, il faut être sec, clair, sans illusion. Un banquier, qui a fait fortune, a une partie du caractère requis pour faire des découvertes en philosophie, c'est à dire pour voir clair dans ce qui est. (BGE 39)

Few traditional philosophers would object to this description. They pride themselves on their ability to see clearly through illusion (even if, according to Nietzsche, they often fail in this regard). This begs the question: How can Nietzsche criticize philosophy yet rely on its methods for his own insights?

Nietzsche admires much of what philosophers do: their attempts to pierce through illusion, their (sometimes) rigorous methods. And he believes that their methods are useful in unmasking the values underlying their own discipline. He believes, for instance, that the will to truth will unmask its own origins and lead to its own demise. But Nietzsche believes that traditional philosophy, including those practices which he adopts, are valuable only as a preliminary step to the true task of philosophy, which is to *create* new concepts and values. He insists that “we must

³ Nietzsche is not unaware of this resemblance and is therefore careful to mark the distinction. He associates traditional philosophical skepticism with weakness and ill health. His skepticism, on the other hand, is a “new, harsher, more dangerous sort of skepticism” (BGE 209). This skepticism “withholds belief but does not lose itself in the process; to the spirit it gives a dangerous freedom, but the heart it keeps firmly in line” (BGE 209). It is not uncertain, nor does it not believe in anything (which would be nihilistic). It questions and challenges some beliefs while remaining certain in its own.

stop mistaking philosophical workers... for true philosophers” (BGE 211). Philosophical workers analyze and understand the concepts and values we have; true philosophers create new ones. Becoming a true philosopher “may require that one pass through all the stages which his servants, the learned workers of philosophy *must* remain,” but these stages, the skepticism and analysis, are simply precursors to the main task of creating (BGE 211). These true philosophers “deem it no little insult to philosophy to decree, as people nowadays like to do, that ‘Philosophy is criticism and critical science – and that is all it is!’” (BGE 210). “My kind of philosopher,” Nietzsche writes, is one for whom “a *creative* mode of thought dominates.”⁴ And elsewhere:

What dawns on philosophers last of all is that they must no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first *make* and *create* them, present them and make them convincing. (WP 409)⁵

The traditional philosopher assumes that there is one true way of apprehending the world, and sets out to find this way. He tries to “mirror” the world rather than shape it (BGE 207). The true philosopher does not assume that there is only one

⁴ *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1968, §464. (Hereafter WP)

⁵ BGE 211: “... all these are only the preconditions for his task: the task itself calls for something else – it calls for him to *create values*.” WP 605: “To introduce a meaning – this task still remains to be done.” It requires a “creative positing... a forming, shaping, overcoming, willing, such as is the essence of philosophy”; And WP 605, where he says that philosophers must engage in “active interpretation and not merely conceptual translation.” See also BGE 42, 43, 44, 204, 209, 210, 213, 289.

true way of apprehending the world, or that we have access to the world as it really is. He does not therefore try to grasp this supposed reality; he tries to shape reality according to his own image. As Zarathustra says to his disciples, “And what you have called world, that shall be created only by you: your reason, your image, your will, your love it shall itself become!” (TSZ 2.2).⁶

How does one create new concepts and values? How does one become a philosopher of the future? It is not as easy as it sounds. First, one must be a certain *kind* of person. “It is not easy to learn what a philosopher is,” Nietzsche writes, “because it cannot be taught” (BGE 213); “We have a right to philosophy (taking its word in its finest meaning) only because of our origins. Here too, ancestors’ bloodlines are decisive.”⁷ Recall from the previous chapter that what determines the kind of person one is is one’s psycho-physiological disposition (one’s set of drives and instincts) and the environment in which one lives. This environment includes the dominant set of values, the climate, nutrition, and so on. These factors determine which instincts will be stimulated and which will be repressed. They

⁶ Also in this section of TSZ: “Creating – that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s becoming lighter.” And elsewhere, invoking the distinction between philosophical workers and true philosophers: “Whoever learns much will unlearn all violent desiring” (TSZ 3.12.16). The suggestion is that we should not learn for its own sake, but rather learn “only for the sake of creating” (TSZ 3.12.16).

⁷ On the esotericism of Nietzsche’s philosophy of the future, see also BGE 30: “Whenever our loftiest insights inadvertently reach the ears of people who are not constituted or destined to hear them, they must – and should! – sound foolish,” BGE 32: “What serves to nourish or refresh the higher type of person must be almost poison to a very different and inferior type,” and BGE 228: “There is a hierarchy between human and human.” See also GS 381, BGE 43, EH Preface 3.

therefore determine which thoughts and feelings we will have. They determine, in other words, the kind of philosophy we will produce.

Nietzsche illustrates this point with reference to himself. In *Ecce Homo* he attributes his unique philosophical insights to his unique constitution. He has “nobles bloodlines” and instincts (“I am a pure-blooded Polish nobleman, in whom there is no drop of bad blood”) which have been shaped by unusual external conditions. These include his “place and climate” (“genius is conditioned by dry air, clear sky,” he says) and even the various illnesses he has endured.⁸ For instance, Nietzsche says that the ideas in *Daybreak* came to him as he suffered through a period of “extreme poverty of blood and muscle,” yet nevertheless managed to affirm life (EH “Why I am So Wise,” 1).⁹ It is because Nietzsche has both noble bloodlines and the experience of weakness and suffering that he has “the skill and knowledge to *invert perspectives*,” to see both the perspective of the strong and the weak (EH 1.1). This is why, he says, “a revaluation of values is perhaps possible in me alone” (EH 1.1).

⁸ Nietzsche contracted dysentery and diphtheria while serving as an orderly in the Franco-Prussian War. He is also thought to have contracted syphilis, which Walter Kaufman has speculated might be the source of his mental breakdown in 1889. Leonard Sax challenges this speculation in “What was the Cause of Nietzsche’s Dementia.” *Journal of Medical Biography*, 11 (1), February 2003, 47-54.

⁹ The immodest chapter titles of *Ecce Homo* (“Why I am So Wise,” “Why I am So Clever,” “Why I Write Such Good Books”) are best read as mocking the false modesty of those who write autobiographies without acknowledging the immodesty inherent in the genre. Immodesty, for Nietzsche, is preferable to false modesty.

The problem with traditional philosophers, on the other hand, is that they are not the right kind of people. They *need* to believe that their thoughts and actions are the result of their own free will, that there is something beyond our earthly existence, infusing it with meaning. This need runs deeper than and determines the content of their philosophical discoveries. This explains why they make assumptions and inferences which are, *on their own terms*, unjustified: because at bottom they need to believe some things rather than others: “That a certainty is worth more than uncertainty, for example, or that appearance is worth less than ‘truth’” (BGE 3). Thus Descartes and Kant, to take two famous examples, develop new concepts (the Cartesian subject and the categorical imperative), but these concepts simply affirm the existing hierarchy of values. This is because, on Nietzsche’s view, these concepts do not result from a disinterested process of reasoning. They are secondary effects of a certain disposition, and an accompanying valuation, of those who hold them.¹⁰ It is unsurprising, then, that they end of affirming the ascetic ideal.

The idea that philosophical concepts are simply conscious manifestations of unconscious drives seems relativistic. How can such concepts apply universally?

¹⁰ This is what he means when he says that “every great philosophy to date is the personal confession of its author” (BGE 6). He continues in the same passage: “About the philosopher... there is absolutely nothing that is impersonal; and it is above all his morality which proves decidedly and decisively *who he is* – that is, in what hierarchy the innermost drives of his nature are arranged. “The largest part of conscious thinking has to be considered an instinctual activity, even in the case of philosophical thinking” (BGE 3). “The concept ‘free will’ is invented so as to confuse the instincts, so as to make mistrust of the instincts second nature” EH “Destiny” 8. On the supremacy of the instincts, see also BGE 3,5,6,32,36,218,231

How might we convince others to adopt some concepts, some ways of perceiving the world, rather than others? We cannot, on Nietzsche's view of things. At least we cannot in the way we like to think we can. Philosophical discoveries, even if logically sound, cannot compel acceptance on their own. They can stir certain drives in us, but whether we accept them depends on the degree to which we are stirred by logic, and this is a purely contingent matter. It is not a matter of intellectual honesty or effort but of instinct. We believe things because, at bottom, we *need* to believe them, and not primarily because they are true.

The traditional philosopher recoils from this suggestion. Nietzsche's philosopher of the future embraces it. He recognizes that there is not one truth out there waiting to be discovered. There are as many truths as there are people and perspectives. Accordingly he aims to uncover not truths about the world but the truths within himself; what Nietzsche calls "my truths" (BGE 231). "Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good, and hang your will over yourself as a law?", Zarathustra asks his disciples. "Can you be your own judge and avenger of your law?" (2.16). Nietzsche's new philosophers will be open and honest about the fact that their new concepts are their own, would not exist without them, and therefore apply only to themselves. They will break from the belief that philosophical conclusions proceed from impersonal, dispassionate, objective reasoning and therefore apply universally.

So the first precondition of Nietzsche's philosophy of the future is that one must be a certain kind of person. The second is that one must, in Nietzsche's famous

phrase, “become what one is.”¹¹ This requires embracing one’s various instincts and drives rather than repressing them, and recognizing the value of one’s perspective rather than subordinating it to another. This is more difficult than it sounds. With the rise of slave values, our nobler instincts are unstimulated and suppressed. Our inborn instinct to release our strength has waned under the belief, now deeply ingrained, that passiveness is good.¹² We are therefore torn by conflicting instincts and impulses. We have become confused as to what we really want and who we really are. “We are,” as Nietzsche says, “unknown to ourselves” (GM P.1). In order to create new concepts which challenge the existing hierarchy of values, we must not only *be* a certain kind of person, we must act in accordance with our instincts, our “unteachable essence” (BGE 231). We must not subordinate them to other, supposedly more universal values or perspectives.¹³

¹¹ The subtitle of *Ecce Homo*: “How One Becomes What One Is.” The idea appears as early as “Schopenhauer as Educator,” the third of Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*: “The man who would not belong to the masses needs only to cease being comfortable with himself; he should follow his conscience which shouts: ‘Be yourself; you are not really all that which you do, think, and desire now.’” It also appears in the *Gay Science*: “What does your conscience say? – You must become who you are” (270). See also GS 335 and TSZ 4.1.

¹² Note that this idea affects our drives at an instinctive level, not a conscious or cognitive one. It is not the case, for Nietzsche, that we act in accordance with this idea because we are rationally “convinced” by it.

¹³ Alexander Nehemas’s discussion of this topic is the most widely known. “How One Becomes What One Is,” *Nietzsche: Oxford Readings in Philosophy*. Ed. Brian Leiter and Jason Richardson. Oxford UP, 2001, pp. 255-280. Brian Leiter offers a naturalist reading of this phenomenon which, to my mind, successfully improves upon Nehemas’s reading, in “The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche,” *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*. Ed. Chris Janaway. Oxford UP, 1998, 217-255.

Two caveats are needed here. First, the idea is not the standard one, attributed to Freud, that our “true” selves, located in our unconscious (and its associated drives and instincts) are repressed by society.¹⁴ Nietzsche does not simply value lack of repression over repression. He values an integrated self over a non-integrated self. For Nietzsche, repression is bad because it prevents our various drives from working together as an integrated unit. It splits our self into competing parts; different drives pull in different directions. Our inborn tendency to release our strength conflicts with the social demand to suppress our strength, and this social demand, over time, also becomes instinctive. The result is a self at odds with itself; a self that is halting and confused rather than focused and efficient. Such a self is incapable of creating and legislating. Indeed for Nietzsche, it is not even really a self. Zarathustra:

Verily, my friends, I walk among human beings as among fragments and severed limbs of human beings!

This to my eye is the most terrible thing: that I find human beings in ruins and scattered as if over a battle- and slaughter field.

And when my eye flees now to the past, it always finds the same thing: fragments and severed limbs and dreadful accidents – but no human beings!

(TSZ 2.20)

¹⁴ This is Freud’s thesis in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton. 1989.

Zarathustra, and in this case Nietzsche, wants to “compose into one and bring together what is fragment” (2.20; 3.12.4). He wants to create selves from the fragments that he finds. Only then can we command and legislate, as “true philosophers” do (BGE 231).¹⁵

The second caveat is also important. We might wonder: how do we become who we are if our actions are determined by drives and instincts beyond our control? Here we must be careful, as Nietzsche’s language is apt to confuse. Nietzsche cannot help but using our ordinary grammar, which distinguishes between subject and object (“I think,” “I will”) and therefore implies that we decide if and how to act. But he does not subscribe to the reality this distinction presupposes. To become who we are is to have our various drives working together rather than pulling in different directions. This is not the result of an act of volition. It is the result of the right kind of person having the right kind of conditioning. Nietzsche is clearest about this in *Daybreak* 109, where he discusses six ways of “combating the vehemence of a drive.”¹⁶ We might, he says, learn to associate certain drives with negative thoughts, or avoid activating a drive by controlling one’s surroundings. But even this learning or avoiding is simply the result of another, stronger drive:

¹⁵ This is one key aspect of Nietzsche’s thought that post-structuralist interpretations fail to appreciate. See chapter three section two above.

¹⁶ Leiter relies on this section in his “Paradox” to debunk Nehemas’s reading.

... that one *wants* to combat the vehemence of a drive at all, however, does not stand within our own power; nor does the choice of any particular method; nor does the success or failure of this method. What is clearly the case is that in this entire procedure our intellect is only the blind instrument of *another* drive, which is a rival of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us.... While “we” believe we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive *which is complaining about another*; that is to say: for us to become aware that we are suffering from the *vehemence* of a drive presupposes the existence of another equally vehement or even more vehement drive (D 109).

It is important to understand Nietzsche’s call to create or overcome oneself in light of his conception of human action. For Nietzsche there is no “I” over and above its actions. To become what one is is to have one’s various drives and instincts work as an integrated whole rather than as a jumbled mess of competing instincts. This integration does not occur by exercising some capacity of volition, but by having the right pre-disposition and being appropriately conditioned by external factors.¹⁷ Nietzsche’s writing is designed to be one such factor: to inspire, cajole, affect, and awaken our nobler instincts from years of hibernation.

If we are the right kind of person, and if our drives and instincts are fully integrated, then we can create new concepts and values. But how do we do *that*?

¹⁷ It is in this sense that the self is contingent, for Nietzsche. Not in the sense that there is no such thing as the self.

What will such concepts and values look like? Since creativity cannot be prescribed in advance, this is a difficult question to answer. Fortunately, we have two examples of what Nietzsche means by creating new concepts and values, and each one is instructive in its own way. The first is the slaves' creation of good and evil. This is a genuinely creative act that established a new hierarchy of values. But it is not the kind of creation that Nietzsche envisions for his philosophers for the future. Nietzsche admires the slaves for exercising their collective will in a creative, transformative way, but he derides them for being motivated by *ressentiment*, and for imposing their values on others under the auspices that these values are universal.¹⁸ This is a key difference between nobles and slaves. Nobles are active: they act in accordance with their natural drives and instincts. Slaves are reactive: their actions are motivated by their subordination to the masters, and directed at them:

The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied their proper response to action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying "yes" to itself, slave morality says "no" on principle to everything that

¹⁸ Bernard Reginster clarifies what exactly is wrong with actions motivated by *ressentiment* in "Nietzsche on *Ressentiment* and Valuation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), pp. 281-305. According to Reginster, the problem with *ressentiment* is that it involves self-deception – one thinks one is motivated by reasons other than one's actual reasons. For Nietzsche, such self-deception undermines the integrity of the self, and is therefore to be criticized.

is “outside,” “other,” “non-self”: and *this* “no” is its creative deed.... In order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, -- its action is basically a reaction. The opposite is the case with the noble method of valuation: this acts and grows spontaneously. (GM 1.10)

Slaves are not self-motivated; they require “external stimuli in order to act at all.” They did not simply develop new concepts for themselves; they tried to suppress their masters. It was not enough for them to conceive the world in their own image; they demanded that everyone else adopt this image too. And their creation, though it accorded them some leverage over their masters, was not fully in accordance with their own instincts. It therefore led to the psychological split we have already described, a split prevents them from becoming who they are. Nietzsche’s new philosophers will be active rather than reactive, self-motivated rather than other-directed, and the values and concepts they produce will apply to themselves and not everyone.¹⁹

Even if the slave revolt was exemplary of the kind of creativity Nietzsche envisions, the conditions are no longer in place for it. The slaves lived in an aristocratic, hierarchical society. In this society different groups were in constant

¹⁹ “But he has discovered himself who can say: ‘This is *my* good and evil’; with that he has struck dumb the mole and dwarf who says: ‘Good for all, evil for all.’” And also: “... not good, not bad, but *my* taste, about which I am no longer secretive or ashamed. This is just *my* way – where is yours. Thus I answered those who asked of me ‘the way.’ For *the* way – does not exist!” (TSZ 3.11.2).

tension with one another, and this tension is what inspired the slaves to revolt. Circumstances are different today. Now slave values are universal. The aristocracy has given way to democracy and egalitarianism, and everyone is considered equal before God.²⁰ There is no conflict between groups, no tension of the spirit, no “pathos of distance,” and hence no engine for creating new values. Complacency and decadence reign, and nihilism – the refusal to believe in anything – is not far off. Individuals live a life of bovine complacency. They no longer believe in anything greater than themselves, and hence they no longer strive for anything. Their various drives are not directed towards a single goal, but rather pull in different directions, pursuing various passing interests, but without commitment or purpose.²¹

Nihilism emerges when the will to truth, the most recent manifestation of the ascetic ideal, exposes the true origins of our metaphysical ideals. This is what Nietzsche calls the death of God. Nietzsche’s view of nihilism is complex.²² On one hand he worries that nihilism will mark the end of human achievement and excellence. “Beware!” Zarathustra warns, “The time approaches when human

²⁰ On Nietzsche’s privileging of aristocracy and his anti-egalitarianism, see BGE 257: “In the past, every elevation of the type ‘human being’ was achieved by an aristocratic society – and this will always be the case: by a society that believes in a ladder of hierarchy and value between people and that requires slavery in one sense or another.” TSZ 2.7: “For human beings are *not* equal: thus speaks justice. And what I want, *they* would have no right to want!”

²¹ “Motley, all ages and peoples look out of your veils; motley, all customs and faiths speak out of your gestures” (TSZ 2.14). See also BGE 200, 215, 224, 242.

²² On nihilism and the death of God see Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006.

beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whir!" (TSZ.P.5).²³ But Nietzsche also believes that nihilism presents an unprecedented opportunity for a new, higher kind of being: the "higher man" or *Übermensch*.²⁴ This higher man is higher because he can bear what Nietzsche calls "the greatest weight": he can will that every moment of his life is eternally repeated, in exactly the same sequence, *ad infinitum* (GS 341). This notion of the eternal return is for Nietzsche the ultimate sign of affirming life. It is also the second, positive example of Nietzsche's new concepts and values. Let us look at it closely.

²³ And GS 56: Moderns, Nietzsche says, are so complacent they have a "craving to suffer... to find in their suffering a probable reason for action, for deeds.... Neediness is needed!"

²⁴ "I want to teach humans the meaning of their Being: that is the *Übermensch*," Zarathustra says (TSZ.P.7). It is not obvious that Nietzsche's higher man and the *Übermensch* are the same person or concept. After all, the *Übermensch* appears only in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, while the higher man appears in Nietzsche's non-fictional late works. Furthermore, Nietzsche believes that the time is not yet ripe for the appearance of the *Übermensch*, he believes that there are and have been higher men already on earth (Goethe is his main example (TI 9.49); Beethoven another (BGE 245); Nietzsche himself is another (EH "Why I am So Wise.")).

But it strikes me as consistent with Nietzsche's writings to interpret the *Übermensch* as an idealized, metaphorical instance of the higher man. The idealized, metaphorical portrayal in *TSZ* fits with the idealized, metaphorical nature of the book as a whole. This would explain why the *Übermensch*, the central concept of what Nietzsche considered to be his most important work, does not appear in the later works (with the exception of a brief but inconsequential appearance in the *Anti-Christ*) but is rather replaced with discussion of the higher man. Further, the fact that there have been higher men does not necessarily conflict with the claim that the time of the *Übermensch* is not yet upon us, for, as Nietzsche reminds us, "some men are born posthumously."

I prefer to leave *Übermensch* untranslated, since I agree with Walter Kauffman's suggestion that the German *über* captures the various connotations that Nietzsche seems to be playing with in *TSZ*: across, over, beyond.

To understand Nietzsche's concepts of the higher man and eternal return we need to revisit our discussion, in the previous chapter, of the distinction between nobles and slaves. Slaves, recall, are a jumble of competing instincts and drives. Nobles have a more simple and therefore more easily unified set of drives and instincts. This enables them to conquer and rule over the slaves. Over time a reversal occurs: the unity of nobles weakens while the slaves become unified (both individually and collectively) against their masters. Slave values become dominant. These values, however, have a particular character: they split some instincts off from others. In a society ruled by slave values everyone – those who were once nobles and slaves – is torn between their competing instincts. In this society everyone is weak and decadent.

This is the circumstance in which Nietzsche is writing, and the circumstance he wants to change. But Nietzsche is not advocating a return to the period before the slave revolt. He is not calling for the return of the nobles. As we have seen, he believes that the slave revolt has made human beings deep, complex, "interesting" people (GM 1.6, 1.7). Nietzsche admires the nobles for their unified will, but this unity stems from their relatively simple set of drives and instincts. The nobles are active rather than reactive, free of *ressentiment*, but they are relatively simple in character. Achilles is a great warrior, but he is not a deep or complex person.

What Nietzsche advocates instead is the higher man. This higher man is not an otherworldly ideal, like the Christian deity, but rather a higher form of life on earth. This kind of person is only possible in an age of nihilism, an age in which our

various drives have been allowed to grow in various directions, like weeds overflowing a garden. What distinguishes the higher man from others is that he combines the variety and complexity of the slave with the unity of the nobles.²⁵

Nietzsche:

A person who lives in an age of disintegration that mixes all the races together will carry in his body the heritage of his multifarious origins, that is to say, contradictory and often more than merely contradictory standards and instincts that struggle with one another and seldom come to rest. Such a person, in the dimming light of a late culture, will generally be a weak person: his most heartfelt desire is that the war that he *embodies* come to an end.... But if someone with this kind of a nature experiences the warlike oppositions within him as one stimulant and incitement to life *the more*, and if on the other hand, along with his powerful and irreconcilable instincts, he has also inherited the true, inbred expertise and cunning in waging war with himself... then he may develop into one of those enchantingly and elusive and unfathomable men, those mysterious people who are destined for victory and for seduction, expressed most beautifully in Alcibiades and Caesar... and among artists, perhaps Leonardo da Vinci. They appear during just those epochs when that other weak type, with its desire for rest, comes to the

²⁵ I am here following John Richardson's suggestion that there is "a sort of dialectical progression from master to slave to overman," and that "the overman turns out to be a synthesis, in important ways, of the first two types" (*Nietzsche's System* 68).

foreground: both types belong to one another and arise from the same causes. (BGE 200)

The wisest human being would be the *richest in contradictions*, who has, as it were, antennae for all kinds of human beings – and in the midst of this his great moments of *grand harmony*. (WP 259)

The highest human being would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, and in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured. Indeed, where the plant human being shows itself strongest, one finds instincts that drive powerfully *against* one another. (WP 966)

Phrases like “richest in contradictions” and “instincts that drive against one another” seem to characterize the slave. And Nietzsche admits that someone with this composition “will generally be a weak person.” But in rare cases this person is not divided in himself, he is in “grand harmony.”²⁶ Such individuals come about in “an age of disintegration,” an age in which one set of values begins to replace another: the rise of Athens, the transition from medieval to modern, or the current age of nihilism. Such periods breed more complex characters, characters with “multifarious origins” and “contradictory standards and instincts.” This complexity can lead in two directions: to a jumbled mess of competing instincts lacking unity or purpose or an unparalleled tension and harmony of the spirit. It can lead to

²⁶ As Richardson points out, Nietzsche calls his ideal man “synthetic.” “The only issue is the occurrence of the synthetic human being” (WP 881). See also TSZ 3.12.3.

Zarathustra's "last man" or Nietzsche's higher man (TSZ P.5). The former is pulled apart by his competing drives; the latter "lead[s] them by the reins."²⁷

Because of his unique constitution, at once complex and unified, only the higher man can will the eternal return. Only he can will that everything that has happened and will happen in the universe will happen again and again, in exactly the same way and exactly the same order, *ad infinitum*. This is for Nietzsche the ultimate test of whether one can affirm life. Nietzsche first describes this idea in GS 341:

The greatest weight: What if, some day or night a demon were to steal after you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it, and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I

²⁷ "The higher type," according to Nietzsche, "represents an incomparably greater complexity," but his "greatness in character does not consist in possessing these affects... but in leading them by the reins" (WP 684, 928). Nietzsche suggests that only in such circumstances are insights like his possible: "For the task of a *revaluation of all values* more capacities may have been needed than have ever dwelt together in a single individual....I never even suspected what was growing in me — and one day all my capacities, suddenly ripe, *leaped forth* in their ultimate perfection." (EH 2.9)

myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS 341)²⁸

This idea has been the source of much debate among Nietzsche scholars, but I think the idea is straightforward: only one who says "yes" to life, who lives without regret, who commands rather than obeys, could possibly will the eternal recurrence.²⁹ And, according to Nietzsche, only the higher man can pass this test:

²⁸ In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche calls the idea of eternal recurrence "the basic idea of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*" (EH.TSZ.1). In TSZ, the eternal recurrence features prominently in the sections on "The Convalescent" (3.19) and "On the Vision and the Riddle" (3.2). See also EH 2.10 and EH.BT.3.

²⁹ In the *Nachlass* Nietzsche presents the idea of eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory of the universe. Many have taken up this suggestion and tried to determine whether it is feasible or not. Alexander Nehemas offers an extensive overview of the secondary literature on this issue in "The Eternal Recurrence," *Philosophical Review*, 89, 1990, 331-356. I fully agree with Nehemas's claim that the ethical and existential import of the concept does not presuppose the truth of the

... the most audacious, lively, and world-affirming human being, one who has learned not only to accept and bear that which has been and is, but who also wants to have it over again, *just as it was and is*, throughout all eternity. (BGE 56)

The noble does not have enough variety or complexity to want his life to recur, exactly as it is, eternally. He is active (like Achilles) but not creative (like da Vinci). For the slave, weak, repressed, and suffering, eternal return is unthinkable. But the higher man, because of his various instincts and interests, can appreciate the variety of experiences in the world. And since many of these instincts compete with one another, there is tension in his spirit. This tension enables him to create concepts and values on his own accord. He does not need *ressentiment* as an engine of creativity; he is “a self-propelling wheel” (TSZ. 2.15). He can shape the world according to his own image. He is therefore capable of affirming life in a way that others are not.³⁰

cosmological theory, as well as his claim that what is most important about the concept, for Nietzsche, is “the psychological use to which he puts it.” It seems quite clear from the quoted passage above, the first time Nietzsche presents the idea in publication, that the eternal recurrence is meant as a thought experiment. It begins with the question: “What if”?

³⁰ Some scholars have argued the idea of endless self-creation which characterizes the *Übermensch* conflicts with the idea of eternal return. Georg Simmel, for instance, argues that “the infinity of the overman’s task cannot be reconciled with the finitude of cosmic periods.” *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. Trans. H. Loisknott, Michael Weinstein, and Deena Weinstein. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986, page 174. Erich Heller writes that the two “are a paradigm of incompatibility.” *The Importance of Nietzsche*. University of Chicago Press, 1988, page 12. I think this criticism takes the concept of eternal return too literally. The

Nietzsche's concept of eternal return exemplifies his positive notion of philosophy. It does not abide by existing values, as traditional philosophical concepts do. It does not try to accurately represent the world, and is not therefore bound by the same standard of accuracy or correctness. It is not a deduction based on established premises or a clever insight into our underlying psychology. It is not even clear what it would mean to revise or improve upon this concept. It does, however, establish a new standard for humans to aspire to, a standard to which terms like "good" and "evil" do not apply. We can now see why philosophers so rarely discuss Nietzsche's positive conception of philosophy. Nietzsche's philosophy is meant to be felt rather than understood, lived rather than known. Its aim is to activate our nobler instincts after years of dormancy; to make our fragmented selves whole. It is therefore unrecognizable as anything we usually understand by the term "philosophy."

Indeed if the distinguishing feature of Nietzsche's new philosophy is that it creates new concepts and values, then it is not clear that one must even be a philosopher to be a philosopher of the future. Writers, artists, musicians and others can create new concepts and values. It is telling that of his examples of "higher men" (Goethe, Beethoven, da Vinci) the only one who is a philosopher is Nietzsche. We

concept must be thought of as a thought experiment, as a challenge. The conditional (*What if?*) is important. The claim is not: Your life will recur eternally, so be sure you are living an affirmative, higher life. The claim is: *What if* your life was to recur eternally? How would you react to this suggestion? Would you celebrate or would you be crushed? How one responds to the question reveals one's approach to life.

might therefore question what, if anything, is distinctive about philosophy on Nietzsche's account.

Nietzsche is certainly more interested in cultivating "higher men" than in advancing a certain idea of philosophy. But a certain idea of philosophy, distinct from other disciplines, nevertheless emerges from his writings. This philosophy combines the rigor and attentiveness of the skeptic, the insight of the psychologist, and the creativity of the artist. It questions and analyzes, not for its own sake, but for the sake of creating and advancing a particular set of values. This conception of philosophy differs from both traditional philosophy and his own skeptical and psychological analyses. The former is for Nietzsche merely symptomatic of the ascetic ideal. It reflects and affirms slave values. The latter are a first step towards undermining these values. But they do not, on their own, constitute Nietzsche's philosophy of the future. This philosophy of the future entails creating concepts and values, not just debunking them. It destroys, but only in order to create anew.

CONCLUSION

“Shouldn’t the philosopher be able to rise above a faith in grammar?”

BGE 34

So far I have tried to explain why Wittgenstein and Nietzsche are critical of philosophy, and what they propose in its place. I want to conclude by comparing these two criticisms and proposals.

Wittgenstein and Nietzsche have different accounts of what philosophy is and why it should be rejected. For Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are based a mistaken picture of how our language actually works. The mistake is to presume that the words and concepts we use in the course of our daily lives (“knowledge,” for instance, “or “game”) have a meaning independent of their particular instantiations. Wittgenstein shows that even if there is such a meaning, there is no reason to think that our everyday uses somehow invoke that meaning. The philosophical search for this meaning is therefore misguided; any meaning it discovers will merely distort the word or concept in question. In order to better understand a given word or concept, philosophers should simply describe the particular circumstances in which it appears: They “must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place” (PI § 109). This description will not produce a general theory, but it will dissolve the confusion that led us to inquire into that word or concept in the first place. It will give us a “clear view” of the phenomenon we were initially trying to understand.

Nietzsche also believes that philosophical investigations are based on a mistake, but this mistake has entirely different origins than the one Wittgenstein describes. Nietzsche believes that philosophical conclusions stem not from rational deliberation but from the particular instincts and drives of their author. And these instincts and drives are shaped by the dominant values of the author in question. Thus our belief metaphysical ideals, for instance, whether religious deities, Platonic concepts, the Cartesian ego, or Kantian noumena, stem not from careful reasoning but from attempts by weaker members of society to make sense of their suffering.¹ Traditional philosophy is therefore a way of recusing oneself from the difficulties of life on earth. The same criticism applies to non-metaphysical philosophers. Insofar as they privilege a supposedly objective, universal truth, they subordinate their instincts and perspective to an authority other than themselves: not God but (empirical) truth. In this respect they also partake in values which Nietzsche wants to overthrow.

Wittgenstein's criticism of philosophy, then, is that it is based on an error, one which leads to a confused picture of our language, our concepts, and our selves. Nietzsche's criticism of philosophy is not primarily that it is based on an error.

¹ TSZ 2.13: "Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who think themselves good merely because they have lame paws."

What bothers is that this error inhibits human flourishing and contributes to the decadence of our time.²

The difference between Wittgenstein and Nietzsche is starkest, however, when it comes to their positive conceptions of philosophy. Wittgenstein wants philosophy to remind us of how we ordinarily use particular words and concepts. Nietzsche wants philosophy to abandon these concepts and create new ones. Interestingly, both philosophers agree that since there is no underlying structure to our language, our grammar (and our concepts) does not necessarily reflect the only correct way of thinking about the world. But while Wittgenstein maintains that philosophers (and everyone else) must speak and think within the rules of this grammar, Nietzsche argues that philosophers should create new concepts, new grammars, rather than use the ones we already have.

These are two radically different ideas of what it means to do philosophy. Furthermore, it seems that we cannot accept both of them. It seems that if we are convinced by Wittgenstein's reasoning then we must reject Nietzsche's positive conception of philosophy, and *vice versa*. This is the conclusion that Meredith Williams draws in her article on Wittgenstein and Nietzsche.³ She writes:

² There is also an ethical component to Wittgenstein's criticism of philosophy, and an epistemological component to Nietzsche's, but these are not primary. I have not discussed the ethical aspect of Wittgenstein's thought (for reasons explained in the introduction). A helpful discussion is in the Afterword to Richard Fleming's *First Word Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Austin, Cavell*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2004.

... no individual can stand fully outside the form of life of which he is a part and generate afresh a new set of values. In this way, Wittgenstein would attack the Nietzschean hope of annihilating our form of life through the creation of a new set of values that would give birth to the age of the overman. In other words, the alleged creativity of the overman is founded on philosophical error: it is the creation of something radically new and in opposition to the norm. (415)

For Williams this error explains why Nietzsche's new philosophical concepts (the Übermensch and eternal return) seem so "thin" and "hollow": because we do not have established criteria for their use (416). Williams is not saying that Wittgenstein denies the possibility of new concepts. She is saying that, for Wittgenstein, in order for new concepts to be understood there must be some agreement as to their use. Since there is no agreement as to how to use new concepts, Nietzsche's positive conception of philosophy is "founded on philosophical error."

There is an obvious difficulty with this argument: it is just not clear that Nietzsche's new concepts are incoherent. Readers have grasped them for decades. In the previous chapter I tried to explain what they mean.⁴ Williams might respond: "Yes, but when we first heard Moore say 'I know this is a hand,' we thought

³ "Transcendence and Return: The Overcoming of Philosophy in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, no. 38, vol. 4, 1988: 403-419.

⁴ This is Rorty's criticism of Wittgenstein in "Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn."

we understood this too. But Wittgenstein has shown that Moore was in fact speaking nonsense. The situation is similar with respect to Nietzsche. His new concepts seem to make sense, but when we consider them more closely, we see that they are in fact 'hollow' (416); they do not really tell us much."

There is, however, an important difference between Moore's use of "know" – that is, between traditional philosophical concepts – and Nietzsche's new concepts. Recall that Wittgenstein calls Moore's claim to know that this is one hand "nonsense" because Moore does not know that this is a hand *in the same sense* that he knows other empirical propositions, and yet Moore is claiming to know this *in the same sense* that he knows other empirical propositions. Moore is using a different sense of "know" than he thinks he is using. When Nietzsche says that there is no doer behind the deed, or when he says that only the *Übermensch* is capable of willing eternal return, his words mean what he intends them to mean. He is not committing the same mistake as Moore.

The nonsense that Wittgenstein speaks of in relation to traditional philosophy arises when the traditional philosopher tries to say one thing but, because of the grammar of the words he uses, says another. The traditional philosopher confuses his philosophical concept (of "knowledge," say) with our ordinary one. Nietzsche does not confuse his new concepts (*Übermensch*, eternal return) with ordinary ones. He is perfectly aware that his concepts are radically different. He is therefore not vulnerable to Wittgenstein's criticism of traditional philosophy.

So it remains unclear how, if at all, Nietzsche's new concepts are founded on philosophical error. It seems that they are not. And if they are not, then they threaten to undermine Wittgenstein's claim that philosophers must speak in accordance with our grammar in order to make sense. That is, if Wittgenstein does not serve as a counter-example to Nietzsche, then it seems that Nietzsche serves as a counter-example to Wittgenstein.

But this is also not the case. Recall that at the end of chapter two I discussed an imagined challenge to Wittgenstein's positive conception of philosophy from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In response to Deleuze and Guattari's claim that philosophy should create new concepts (a claim they get from Nietzsche), I said that for Wittgenstein, the problem with new concepts is not that they are nonsense, but that they have no purchase over our everyday claims. Since these new concepts are (by design) distinct from our ordinary concepts, and since we use our ordinary concepts to think, speak, and act in the course of our daily lives, these new concepts simply will not have any purchase over how we think, speak and act in the course of our daily lives.

And this seems to be a valid criticism of Nietzsche: it is not clear how his new concepts can have the transformative force that he wants them to have. It seems that his new concepts would simply float harmlessly above the world in which we ordinarily think, speak, and act.

I do not think Nietzsche would dispute this characterization of his conception of philosophy. That there is no traction, so to speak, between his concepts and our

ordinary ones does not worry him as it worries Wittgenstein for one simple reason: because Nietzsche is not compelled by the same kinds of reasoning that compels Wittgenstein. Though Wittgenstein rejects the traditional approach to philosophy, he abides by its traditional standards. An equivocation between two uses of the word “know” is all he needs to charge Moore and the skeptic with nonsense. Nietzsche is not interested in such details. What matters to him is how compelled we are by what we hear. Whether what we hear is rational is a secondary consideration.

So this is one answer to the question of how Nietzsche’s new concepts might have transformative power: he is not appealing to our rational faculties. This marks a fundamental distinction with Wittgenstein. There is a further difficulty with Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy, one which also marks a key difference with Wittgenstein. Consider: what would our lives be like if we rejected our ordinary concepts and tried to apprehend the world according to our conceptual creations? It would presumably be a life like Zarathustra’s, marked by misunderstanding, isolation, and even solipsism. Zarathustra writes,

Far from the marketplace and fame happens all that is great: far from the market place and fame have the inventors of new values always lived. Flee, my friend, into your solitude! You have lived too close to the petty and wretched. Flee from their invisible revenge!

Flee, my friend, into your solitude and to where raw and bracing air blows.

It is not your lot to be a swatter of flies. (1.12)

O Solitude! You are my home, Solitude! How blissfully and tenderly your voice talks to me! (3.9)⁵

Even after ten years of solitude, once he descends from the mountain, Zarathustra remains misunderstood and alone. He is mocked by the men in the marketplace and retreats back to his cave. He cannot find people who believe in his teachings, and it is not even clear that he wants to find them. He may be a philosopher of the future, but he lives a confused, misunderstood, and isolated existence.

In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell explores what he calls the fantasy of privacy: the fantasy that our private thoughts and feelings are so unique that they cannot be captured by our shared language (354). Building on Wittgenstein's analysis of the possibility of a private language, Cavell explores the impulse to think of our thoughts as existing outside of our grammar, and the costs of indulging this impulse. The costs, he finds, are isolation, misunderstanding, and solipsism. There is something of this fantasy of privacy in Zarathustra's celebration of solitude, and in Nietzsche's philosophy of the future. In rejecting our ordinary concepts Nietzsche risks losing touch with the world in which we ordinarily live, think, and speak, the world in which we understand and empathize with others. This is a price he is

⁵ And elsewhere: "With your love go into your isolation, and with your creating, my brother: and only later will righteousness limp along after you. With my tears go into your isolation, my brother. I love him who wants to create beyond himself and thereby perishes." (1.17); "Do you want, my brother, to go into isolation? Do you want to seek the way to yourself?" (1.17); "Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good, and hang your will over yourself as a law? Can you be your own judge and avenger of your law?" (1.17).

willing to pay. It is a price he feels we must pay in order to overcome the nihilism of our time and achieve human excellence.

The difference between Wittgenstein and Nietzsche therefore stems from their different aims and motivations in pursuing philosophy. Nietzsche is concerned primarily with how to live a certain kind of life, a life he considers excellent. His criticism of philosophy is not that it misrepresents the world (though he believes it does) or that its claims are unjustified (though he believes they are), but that it emerges from and encourages values that he wants to overcome. Wittgenstein is concerned primarily with explaining how and why philosophical problems arise, why they grip us as they do yet have so little bearing over our everyday lives. Though he does not think that philosophical problems can or should be resolved, he takes these problems seriously: he aims to develop a better understanding of how they arise and how we should deal with them.

Logically speaking, then, Wittgenstein and Nietzsche's conceptions of philosophy are not incompatible, as Williams suggests. But they nevertheless entail two entirely different approaches to philosophy, and indeed to life. This is perhaps one reason why philosophers interested in Nietzsche, such as Deleuze and Guattari, seem to have little interest in Wittgenstein, and *vice versa*. But though one cannot reasonably hold Wittgenstein's and Nietzsche's approaches to philosophy at the same time, it is entirely possible to be compelled by both of them. Indeed I suspect that many, like myself, are so compelled. Their competing pictures of what philosophy can and should be reflect competing impulses of what many want

philosophy to be. Philosophy, we like to think, should both speak to our everyday concerns and transcend them. Whether and how this might be done remains an open question.

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