

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Critical Notice. Paul Horwich, *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*

Journal Item

How to cite:

Chappell, Timothy (2014). Critical Notice. Paul Horwich, Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy. *Philosophical Investigations*, 37(3) pp. 258–271.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 John Wiley Sons Ltd

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/phn.12051>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Paul Horwich, *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*. OUP 2012.

In the Preface to his fine book, Paul Horwich deplores the “polar split” that he sees in academic philosophy today between most philosophers, who don’t care about Wittgenstein, and the Wittgensteinian minority, who don’t care about much else, and are “engaged in feuds with one other that no one else cares about” (p.xiii). Whether or not this picture is entirely fair either to Wittgensteinians or to non-Wittgensteinians, it is certainly true, and unfortunate, that Wittgenstein has been normalised by the academic system. His work has been turned into just another specialisation within the philosophy curriculum that (it is imagined) no one who is not “taking the course”, or researching in the area, need pay any attention to. The irony, Horwich suggests, is that Wittgenstein, especially in Part One of *The Philosophical Investigations*, offers a revolutionary perspective on the whole question of how to do philosophy, which any philosopher, Wittgensteinian or not, can benefit from at least considering.

Horwich’s exegetical inclinations about the Wittgenstein canon are broadly unitarian; but he makes a persuasive case for his view that PI Part I is the one text apart from the *Tractatus* that we can reasonably treat as authoritative, given, for a start, that it is the only text that Wittgenstein more or less completed for publication. However, a well-known passage not of the *Investigations* but of *The Blue Book*, p.18, pretty exactly describes the revolutionary perspective that Horwich sees in PI I, and Horwich does not forbear to quote it (his p.20, fn.1):

Our craving for generality has [as one source] our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalisation. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really *is* ‘purely descriptive’.

Dummett, Kripke, Baker and Hacker, Pears, and others have in various ways taken the key to this revolutionary Wittgensteinian perspective to be a general view about meaning. On Horwich’s view, by contrast, Wittgenstein’s starting-point

is a common-sense critique... of the scientific aspirations and methodological assumptions that govern most of what has been done, and still is done, in the name of philosophy. His conclusion is that the problems addressed within this mainstream approach are pseudo-problems and the theories proposed to resolve them are irrational... [For] each problem calls for its own... diagnosis and treatment. And that sets the agenda for the positive therapeutic projects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. (p.x)

So far from being based upon any particular overall view about meaning, Horwich’s Wittgenstein’s “treatment of meaning is simply one application of the general therapeutic methodology that stems from”, or perhaps more exactly *is*, his conception of what philosophy should be (p.x). Philosophy—properly-conducted philosophy—is therapy, because it is a battle against “the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (*Philosophical*

Investigations I, 109). Wittgenstein's emphasis here is, perhaps, not fully brought out by Anscombe's translation: literally, *die Verhexung unsres Verstandes durch die Mittel unserer Sprache* is "the bewitchment of our understanding *through the medium* of our language". It is our *medium* that gets in the way of our correctly understanding so many of the concepts that philosophers typically seek to understand.

This is also why philosophy is a grammatical investigation, according to Wittgenstein in the same paragraph of the *Investigations*: because language ties us in knots which it is the philosopher's job to undo. The "pictures that hold us captive" lie in our language (PI I, 115). This is a view not so much about meaning as about misunderstanding, and the roots of our misunderstandings in language. Philosophy as therapy, then, is in the business of unpicking these language-based misunderstandings, of unravelling its knots.

Or perhaps we should call them *slip*-knots, since philosophy's tangles, intractable though they can look, are not on Wittgenstein's view genuine modifications of the topology of ordinary life. They are like the children's game—if it even counts as a game—of "thumb-catching", in which the player, putting his right thumb through the gap between his left hand's thumb and index-finger, tries to catch his right thumb in his right palm (RFM II app3, para12). Or they are like the question, which some people think genuinely puzzling, "Why does a mirror reverse left to right but not bottom to top?" (Horwich gives his own examples of such slip-knots on pp.6 ff.)

Is *all* properly-conducted philosophy therapy in this sense, the slipping of slip-knots in our notions? Wittgenstein's answer to that is "Yes". The remark just quoted from PI I, 109 is not a claim about *some* philosophy, but about what *philosophy* is as such. The same goes for the comments about the craving for generality that I quoted from *The Blue Book*. Other remarks from the same stretch of the *Investigations*—which is clearly Wittgenstein's own most sustained meditation on his metaphilosophy—have the same fully-general character. Evidently Wittgenstein takes *all* properly-conducted philosophy to be therapy—a therapy which is needed because of the prevalence of *misconducted* philosophy.

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of our language. These bumps make us see the value of this uncovering.¹

By contrast Horwich speaks only of "*most* of what has been done" in the name of philosophy, or of a "*mainstream* approach". Or again he speaks of "T-philosophy", so called (p.21) "to suggest both 'traditional' and 'theoretical'". "T-philosophy" is a category which apparently need not exactly coincide with philosophy itself. However, it is not altogether clear what Horwich thinks philosophy can be when it is *not* T-philosophy; unless non-T-philosophy is just therapy, in which case there is no gap here between Horwich and Wittgenstein after all.

On the T-philosophical conception, "the aim is construction and defence of important philosophical theories". Any such theory is "a non-obvious body of *a priori* principles—one that offers a complete, systematic, precise, and basic account of some pervasive yet puzzling phenomena". It counts as a *theory* because it "organises, unifies, and explains commonsense commitments, and has the potential to correct them"; the virtues of a theory include "internal

¹ PI I, 119. In this remark *Entdeckung* comes twice, and Anscombe oddly translates it first by "uncovering" and then by "discovery". I have altered "the discovery" to "this uncovering" to reflect the obviously intentional repetition in Wittgenstein's German.

coherence, compatibility with what is known, and explanatory power”. It counts as *philosophical* because it is *a priori* (it is what Williamson in *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (OUP 2007), p.169, calls “armchair knowledge”). And it counts as *important* because it focuses on “concepts and phenomena that strike [T-philosophers] as peculiarly pervasive, fundamental, rich, and idiosyncratic” (pp.21-2).

Horwich discerns a pattern in the rise—and the fall—of T-philosophical theories (pp.25-9). First there is an intuition, often close to a platitude: for instance, most true sentences in natural languages assign a *doing* to a *thing* (“Fido barks”, “Stilton smells”). Then this intuition is generalised (we decide that *all* true sentences assign doings to things) and its constituent notions are beefed up into technical concepts (we move from “thing” to “logical object” or “individual substance”; we move from “doing” to “Fregean concept” or “Aristotelian predicate”). But the generalisation leads to paradoxes: how can *numbers* be things in the same sense as chairs? How can *time*? What could it mean to say that numbers or time have *doings* assigned to them (being the square root of, passing) in the same way as dogs or types of cheese?

These paradoxes then seem to need resolving. Horwich (pp.29-33) counts four styles of theoretical resolution that T-philosophers commonly offer, applying these styles to the case of number as an example.

--*Sceptical*: we take the paradoxes to be evidence that the entities that generated them (e.g. numbers) do not exist; talk about them may be useful, but is strictly false.

--*Revisionist*: the paradoxes do not show that numbers do not exist at all; but they do show that large areas of our intuitive beliefs about them must be abandoned as false.

--*Mysterian*: what the paradoxes show is not that numbers are unreal, nor that they are real but many of our intuitions about them have to be given up; rather, it shows that numbers are real, are at least largely as our intuitions tell us, and so are baffling, bizarre, and mysterious entities.

--*Conservative systematising*: faced with a clash between our intuitions about number, we seek the theory that explains and accommodates as many of those intuitions as possible. Counter-examples, often fanciful in nature, are welcomed as test-cases for the theory; faced with such counter-examples, we can either modify the theory so that they no longer count against it, or alternatively see the theory as providing grounds to reject as misguided the intuitive reactions that those test-cases evoke.²

Much of Horwich’s book consists in tracing out the detail of this diagnostic account of “T-philosophy”. As detail is added, the pattern of the rise of a theory becomes (pp.50-55) an “eightfold schema”, under which the theoriser’s progress is a movement through seven stages that Horwich labels *scientific expectations*, *linguistic analogies*, *generalisation*, *linguistic idiosyncrasy*, *paradoxical tension*, *philosophical bewilderment*, and *philosophical theorisation*. (Horwich’s eighth stage, *therapeutic dissolution*, is presumably one that typical theorists do *not* reach.) Horwich takes a number of classic philosophical puzzles through these phases. In Chapter 2 he gives relatively brief and schematic accounts of number, time, goodness, and truth; in Chapters 3-5 he focuses at much greater length on the case of meaning; and in Chapter 6 he presents a Wittgensteinian account, along these lines of

² I wonder whether Horwich takes these four alternatives to be exclusive. Plainly the first excludes the other three, but those other three seem compatible with each other; theories could, and often do, combine elements of all three of Revisionism, Mysterianism, and Conservative Systematising.

“therapeutic dissolution”, of “the problem” (including “the hard problem”) of consciousness. His last words on that problem, and the last words of the book, are these (pp.210-11):

By paying closer attention to the *actual* use and function of sensation terms we can learn to appreciate the incorrectness of this stretched analogy [between observation reports and first-person sensation reports] and can thereby unravel the perplexities of consciousness. There turns out to be absolutely no need for a scientific revolution; indeed, no need—at least as far as these pseudo-problems are concerned—for any sort of *theory* of mind.

What sort of progress is this? The fascinating mystery has been removed—yet no depths have been plumbed in consolation; nothing has been explained or discovered or reconceived. How tame and uninspiring, one might think. But perhaps, as Wittgenstein suggests, the virtues of clarity, demystification, and truth should be found satisfying enough.

The key to the method of therapeutic dissolution is, in Wittgenstein’s famous Shakespearean phrase, “I’ll teach you differences”: it is attention to detail, refusal to iron away differences between cases, rejection of false analogies, and caution about generalisations. In the case of sensation, as Horwich is suggesting here, it is indeed tempting to treat our awarenesses of things-with-properties as if those awarenesses were *themselves* things with properties. Perhaps philosophers have slid too easily into using this “false analogy”. Which is certainly to be avoided—provided the analogy *is* false, and provided exposing its falsehood is the key to escaping from our muddles. (I’ll come back to these provisos below.)

No doubt “I’ll teach you differences” is good methodological advice; platitudinous even. Which is not to say that there are no philosophers who need to hear it. Perhaps Wittgensteinians themselves need to hear it. Perhaps—and recall here Horwich’s own remark that “each problem calls for its own diagnosis and treatment”—they should pause in particular over “caution about generalisations”. Why should we think that being taught differences, being careful and cautious with the data in the ways that Wittgensteinians uncontroversially advocate, will always tend, as Horwich predicts, to *dissolve* philosophical problems—rather than, for instance, making them more acute, as Hume predicted? And even if we can find a way of applying this Wittgensteinian methodology such that every philosophical problem is dissolved by it rather than exacerbated, how can we know that our solvent methodology is taking us in the right direction? Why should it be so obvious *a priori* that philosophical problems (*all* of them?) are caused (*only* caused?) by the bewitchment of language, and so that dissolution, rather than solution in some constructive sense, is what they need?

The irony here is that acceptance or rejection of this *a priori* assumption gives us an entry-criterion for a philosophical school of precisely the sort that, as we saw, Horwich decries. The Wittgensteinians will just be the ones who accept the assumption; everyone else, rejecting it, *will* then have the right to more or less ignore whatever Wittgensteinians get up to by following it through. That seems a sorry state of affairs; even if it is our state of affairs.

In any case the assumption looks too far-fetched to be made into anyone’s article of faith. It is hard to believe that the entire mainstream of western philosophy has been kept in flow by nothing better than carelessness and inattention. Or if that sounds too much like an argument from authority, still surely the wisest course is indicated by Wittgenstein’s own “Well, let’s

see”. The wisest course is to examine each philosophical problem on its own merits, without any advance presumption at all about whether or not therapeutic dissolution will work on it.

So, for example, is it *right* to say that our awarenesses of things-with-properties are not themselves things with properties? Obviously we shouldn’t say that just to maintain a—Wittgensteinian—thesis about the falsity of this analogy; obviously we should say it only if it seems right given the evidence. (And does it? I’m not sure. Certainly my awareness of a chair isn’t the same *sort* of thing as a chair. *Pace* PI I, 304—“not a thing, but not a nothing either”—that doesn’t imply that it is *no* sort of thing, or that it can’t have *any* sort of properties.)

It is wise also, when a therapeutic dissolution is offered, to raise the question whether it actually does dissolve the problem for which it is offered; whether, for instance, Horwich offers a successful therapeutic strategy when he suggests, in the case of consciousness, that the problem is dissolved by declining to think of our awarenesses as things with properties. (And does he? I doubt it: whatever else we say about the exact status of the “hard problem” of consciousness, it surely is not a problem that we face only if we think of awarenesses as things-with-properties. It is a problem about how there can be awarenesses *at all*.³)

Again, Wittgensteinians like Horwich are rightly critical of philosophers who are “in the grip of a theory”, or “crave generality”, or are in such a hurry to reach some particular conclusion that they move too quickly over the philosophical terrain towards it. As Wittgenstein nicely says in *Culture and Value* (p.40), “in philosophy the race is won by the runner who runs slowest.” But there is at any rate room for the suspicion—which I air with reference to Wittgensteinians in general, not specifically to Horwich—that Wittgensteinians too can come to philosophical questions not with open minds, but with strong, perhaps overpowering, presumptions about how in broad terms they would like to see those questions addressed. When this happens, Wittgensteinians can be as guilty as anyone of imposing global patterns at the price of local accuracy.

They also, despite their aim of remaining in some sense above the fray, get drawn in to defending particular views at the level of theory-based philosophical controversy. So, in the quotation above, Horwich takes sides on the question whether first-person sensation reports are in any philosophically interesting sense analogous to reports of observations of external reality. The point, now, is not whether he is right or wrong to answer No to this question of first-order theory. The point is that he has to answer it in order to pursue an agenda which is avowedly metaphilosophical. But Wittgenstein (at any rate) took it to be part of that metaphilosophical programme that there are no serious disagreements, only latent confusions, at the first-order level: “It would never be possible to advance theses in philosophy, for everyone would agree to them” (PI I, 128). Now it certainly *seems* that there is serious, and not merely confused, disagreement in first-order philosophy today about whether or not first-person sensation reports are analogous to observation reports; as I say above, I don’t myself regard this question as clearly answerable one way or the other. Which brings Horwich a further first-order commitment: he has to hold not only that the analogy is false, but also that it is in some sense *obviously* false—that no one could believe in such an analogy except

³ Here I am dealing very quickly with a central argument of Horwich’s Chapter 6. I am a little concerned that my quick treatment of it is unfair. But only a little. I have certainly not dealt with all the complexities of his discussion, but Horwich’s key move does seem to be that what makes consciousness puzzling is our conception of it as private, and that what makes us think of it as private is the allegedly false analogy between awareness and thing-with-properties. See, e.g., his pp.180-2.

through some confusion. But this commitment might lead him into first-order trouble too. After all, it doesn't seem *obvious* that it is obvious that the analogy is false; not at least in any obvious sense of "obvious".

At this point, I think, we may reasonably reach a conclusion that, of course, many Wittgensteinians have reached too (including Horwich himself, to judge by his back catalogue): that Wittgensteinians should invest less in grand claims about having a magic-bullet method of closing down every first-order philosophical debate, and more in first-order philosophical debate.

One last worry about the very idea of therapeutic dissolution. At PI I, 125, quoted and discussed by Horwich on p.42, Wittgenstein writes this:

The fundamental fact here [in philosophy, as opposed to mathematics or logic] is that we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, and then when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. That we are therefore as it were entangled in our rules. This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand (i.e. get a clear view of).

Thought through as a comment about the effects of philosophical therapy, this does have a disappointing air. When paradox or contradiction occurs in our theory of mathematics or logic, we may *begin* to respond to that paradox by tracing it back to its sources in our principles or assumptions about mathematics or logic. But we don't *stop* there. Having located how the paradox arises from those principles or assumptions, we (normally) take the appearance of the paradox to be a *reductio ad absurdum* either of the principles or of our method of inferring from those principles, and then aim to decide which principle(s) or rule(s) of inference we ought to be dropping or modifying to avert the paradox. It can sound as if Wittgenstein is saying in PI I, 125 that in philosophy we *do* just stop once we have traced out how the paradox arises. As if, since philosophical tangles are all slip-knots, no more *untying* of philosophical problems is necessary. Or as if, in essence, the Wittgensteinian therapist's response to a philosophical problem is merely to shrug and say "Well, you set the rules up for this game; and the rules have this consequence, that's all."

This response to a philosophical perplexity really does look more than a little perfunctory. It also seems to misrepresent the experience of such perplexity. It doesn't usually *feel* as if the "rules for the game" have been set with the kind of conventionalist arbitrariness that Wittgenstein seems to suggest here. On the contrary (most practising philosophers will protest), the whole point about typical philosophical problems is that they are *unavoidable*. We get into them, not by carelessly making up for ourselves a batch of rules with quirky consequences, but by thinking thoughts *to which there is no serious alternative*. The later Wittgenstein simply seems to withdraw himself from all such predicaments. And we all know what Bertrand Russell had to say about that, eight years after Wittgenstein's death, in *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959):

I admired Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* but not his later work, which seemed to me to involve an abnegation of his own best talent very similar to those of Pascal and Tolstoy.... The later Wittgenstein... seems to have grown tired of serious thinking and to have invented a doctrine which would make such an activity unnecessary. I do not for one moment believe that the doctrine which has these lazy consequences is true. I realize, however, that I have an overpoweringly strong bias against it, for, if it is true,

philosophy is, at best, a slight help to lexicographers, and at worst, an idle tea-table amusement.

Now it is difficult to imagine less apposite words to use of Wittgenstein, at any time in his life, than “tired of serious thinking” or “lazy”. Given Russell’s own far laxer temperament, his long and busy career as a socialite, and the fact that Russell himself turned most of his attention away from hard formal work well before Wittgenstein did, this passage has something of the air of Talleyrand accusing St Dominic of a lack of Catholic fervour.

Yet there still seems to be *something* in what Russell says. The psychological comparison between Tolstoy’s ascetism and Wittgenstein’s is (as I have remarked elsewhere⁴) an apt one, even if delivered from an armchair. Wittgenstein, it might be said, will admit that philosophical puzzles can be, as he tends to put it, *deep*; but he will not admit that they are genuine puzzles rather than confusions—that the feeling of inescapability that they can give us can be justified. Is Wittgenstein right to refuse to admit this? In one case we have already looked at briefly, the case of the “inner”, that might be doubted. But in others? “Well, let’s see.” I suggest there are at least three cases where Wittgenstein’s dismissiveness about supposed philosophical problems seems better-grounded than it does in the case of the “inner”.

1. *Hume on causation.* Looking first at the history of philosophy, at least one classic puzzle, Hume’s about causation, is apt to seem all too easily dismissible, at least in the form in which Hume proposes it, by something distinctly like a therapeutic dissolution. Hume’s puzzle about causation is how there can be such a thing (and/ or how there can be intelligible thought about it), given that the idea of causation corresponds to no impression or set of impressions. So *this* puzzle is very simply dissolved indeed, just by the question why anyone should suppose that all veridical ideas have to correspond to the things that Hume calls “impressions”. Hume may of course reply that his theory of ideas and impressions is unavoidable. But this reply seems fully met by the point that most people other than Hume have found it anything but unavoidable; or by the point that, if Hume’s theory of ideas and impressions leads to scepticism about the notion of cause, then that is a reason to drop Hume’s theory, not the notion of cause; or by both points. (It seems unlikely that Hume had himself in his sights when he wrote, in his essay “The Sceptic”, that “When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phaenomenon, tho’ by the most violent and absurd reasoning.” Nonetheless, his criticism counts as a limiting case of friendly fire.)

2. *The ideology of naturalism.* As in history so in contemporary philosophy, there really are classic and enduring puzzles which, like Hume’s about causation, can’t even be set up without reliance on assumptions that are at best contestable, and more likely, perhaps, simply indefensible. Horwich’s own main case-studies for the method of therapeutic dissolution—number, time, truth, good, meaning, and consciousness—are relevant here. As Horwich’s discussion brings out, all of these cases except perhaps time have in common that they are widely supposed to face a challenge from *naturalism*. What is that challenge? Fairly standardly, it is formulated by saying, roughly, that the existence of entities in these categories has to be shown to be either a consequence of or at least compatible with whatever figures (or would figure) in a properly scientific ontology.

⁴ Timothy Chappell, *The Inescapable Self* (London: Orion 2005), pp.289-91.

One thing that is never convincingly explained here is why the challenge runs in that direction: why cases like Horwich's five have always to be answerable to the tribunal of science, rather than *vice versa*. (Why, indeed, does either side have to be challenging the other's epistemic credentials at all?) Even if its motivation can be convincingly explained, the challenge itself remains ineliminably obscure at all three of its crucial points. In any sense that might make it sensible to suppose there is a problem with Horwich's five cases, we have no idea what a properly scientific ontology would be; we have no idea what entities would figure in it; and we have no idea what relations between "core science" and the presumably "outlying" areas of inquiry within which we find number, truth, good, meaning, and consciousness might be excluded on the grounds of consequence or compatibility. Hence we seem to be in a poor position to say that the existence of *anything* is naturalistically unacceptable. Truth to tell, we do not even know enough about the nature of matter to know for sure that there is anything strictly impossible about the existence of pixies or fairy dust. *A fortiori*, we do not know enough about the nature of matter to know for sure that there is anything really puzzling or mysterious—even if there is an *air* of mystery—about the evident facts that matter is sometimes minded, and that moral and aesthetic and mathematical and semantic properties can hold of it, or in close contextual proximity to specific bits of it. For sure, there are interesting tasks, scientific and philosophical, to engage with in trying to explain exactly *how* mind, meaning, the moral, the mathematical, and other sorts of non-obvious and non-basic properties connect up with the matter in the world, and how the corresponding levels of explanation connect up. But our situation is essentially that of the explorer, not of the reductionist or sceptic. And T-philosophy has done us no favours when (as is not always the case) it has made it seem otherwise.

3. *Ethics*. We may say that Wittgenstein had nothing to say about ethics: so, reportedly, Oswald Hanfling.⁵ Or we may say "that the best way to understand why the later Wittgenstein provided us only with very scattered and unsystematic remarks on ethics is not to assume that he... had neither the time nor the inclination to apply his general methods to [ethics], but rather to consider the possibility that he took any and every application of those methods—hence, every one of his philosophical remarks—to have an ethical point"; so Stephen Mulhall ("Ethics in the light of Wittgenstein", *Philosophical Papers* 2002: 31).

Or, indeed, we might say both these things, since one obvious sense in which a philosopher may have "nothing to say about ethics" is that his methodology (his tacit metaphilosophy) may be the only place in his philosophising where his practical and normative commitments show up: in his implicitly postulating (for instance) open-mindedness and curiosity as virtues for the philosophical inquirer to cultivate, and "Seek important truths" and "Don't settle for glib and lazy arguments" as rules for him to follow. In this sense, Wittgenstein's philosophy does indeed have, among other things, "an ethical point". But then, commitments of essentially the same kind will be shown (and perhaps not said) in how one investigates *any* philosophical question, or indeed any question at all.

To most philosophers, of course, "having something to say about ethics" means endorsing a normative moral theory. And if there is one area above all that is ripe for Wittgensteinian therapeutic dissolution, I suggest that normative moral theory is it. It may not be entirely fair to say that *other* areas of constructive philosophy involve us, as I described it above, in picking for ourselves a set of rules or general principles out of a wide and diverse and often

⁵ Oswald Hanfling, in conversation, as reported by Andrew Gleeson.

conflicting range of intuitions or “one-off” convictions—and then scratching our heads and clutching our brows when those principles come into conflict with each other, or with our earlier convictions. But this is more or less exactly what happens most of the time in constructive moral theory. And in this case the solution really is to recognise the origin of our perplexities in our own decisions about which intuitions to elevate to the status of “unavoidably” compelling principles (or rules, or general reasons, or whatever we call them) that “we have no alternative” but to hold as universal truths. In normative ethics if anywhere, it really is a good idea to give up on the attempt to construct a general explanatory theory in this style, and devote our energies, instead, to being more honest and more clear-minded about the data of moral conviction and commitment that those theories are supposed to explain.

...what we encounter in the literature is an expanding profusion of proposals, proofs, and formal pyrotechnics. But has anything worth discovering really been discovered? Have the paradoxes actually been solved? Have they almost been solved? Are we at least considerably closer to their solution? There is no basis for a positive answer to any of these questions. On the contrary... the explosion of alternative approaches provides evidence... that the available norms of theory choice are too weak to ever yield something we might regard as “the solution”... Eventual rational convergence is an item of faith...

It will rarely be possible to capture *all* the data in a simple systematisation. But... to dismiss intuitive convictions solely on the grounds that they stand in the way of such a theory is obviously illegitimate.

...there are no explanatory layers in *a priori* reality; so there is no prospect (as there is in science) of a revelatory *underlying* simplicity either.

If a *complex* systematisation is all that can be achieved then there are bound to be equally good alternatives; in which case we won't have legitimate epistemic norms that will enable us to decide between them. So knowledge will be impossible.

Horwich makes these remarks (pp.43, 49-50) as part of his general critique of theoretical philosophy. I have been raising doubts about whether these remarks really apply quite as generally in philosophy as Horwich believes. But what does immediately strike the reader about these remarks—and this is the feature that made them worth quoting at some length—is how exactly fitting they are as a critique of moral theory. (The same is true of the *Blue Book* remarks about science-envy that I began with.)

And here we come to the usual question for ethical as for other anti-theorists—with the Russellian charge of “laziness” perhaps lurking behind it: “If not theory, then what?” Here Wittgenstein himself, it seems to me, gives us positive things to say. For alongside the neat applicability to moral theory of Horwich's sceptical remarks about general method in philosophy, there are also a number of constructive methodological or metaphilosophical remarks of Wittgenstein's that can equally neatly be transposed to the case of ethics. Three small examples: (1) when Wittgenstein says “Don't think, but look!” (PI I, 66) this can be applied in ethics as an exhortation to focus on actual moral experience, not on theoretically prejudged interpretations or classifications of it. (2) When Wittgenstein says that “Philosophy leaves everything as it is”, and (3) that “If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them” (PI I, 124, 128), these remarks come out as wildly false on any conception of the task of philosophy as allied to the task of science—science being the paradigm inquiry that does *not* “leave everything as it is”. But if normative ethics is about the construction of theory but about the just, accurate,

and revealing portrayal of moral experience, then ethical argument succeeds when it *rings true*. Success in ethics will mean offering theses that (for some recognisable senses of “everyone” and “always”) capture what everyone has always known and what has always been the case. In *this* sense—though probably not in any other—*ethical* philosophy—though perhaps not any other part of philosophy—is indeed, as the *Blue Book* says, purely descriptive.

“Assembling reminders” as an *ethical* undertaking is no small task. It’s what poets and novelists constantly strive to do, and do not always succeed in doing:

Fiction helps. It highlights patterns, spells out implications, draws distinctions, and identifies possibilities we had not recognised in the welter of information before us. (Catherine Elgin, *Considered Judgement* (Harvard UP 1996), 189)

Wittgenstein himself may well have thought that poetry was a possible source of recognitions in this sense:

People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them*—that does not even occur to them. (*Culture and Value* 36)

The reminders help us to see clearly, to see patterns, to question and sift, to tell the important from the unimportant. This imaginative and structuring exercise seems unlikely, to put it mildly, to be possible in anything with the structure of a typical moral theory. It doesn’t follow that the exercise will be a cop-out for the lazy, or that all the serious work in this line can be done in an afternoon. Learning “one’s way about” is not always a trivial task, or even one that everyone who attempts it, completes.

In any case, to offer one last word on the charge of laziness, it is not always remembered that Wittgenstein is not the only great philosopher to think that if we see things straight then we will just agree with each other each other—and nonetheless also thought that the task of philosophy is either trivial, or likely to be got through at all quickly. For all his very un-Wittgensteinian adherence to the Way of Ideas, John Locke thought so too (*Essay* 2.13.28):

The knowing precisely what our words stand for, would, I imagine, in this as well as a great many other cases, quickly end the dispute. For I am apt to think that men, when they come to examine them, find their simple ideas all generally to agree, though in discourse with one another they perhaps confound one another with different names. I imagine that men who abstract their thoughts, and do well examine the ideas of their own minds, cannot much differ in thinking; however they may perplex themselves with words, according to the way of speaking of the several schools or sects they have been bred up in: though amongst unthinking men, who examine not scrupulously and carefully their own ideas, and strip them not from the marks men use for them, but confound them with words, there must be endless dispute, wrangling, and jargon; especially if they be learned, bookish men, devoted to some sect, and accustomed to the language of it, and have learned to talk after others. But if it should happen that any two thinking men should really have different ideas, I do not see how they could have discourse or argue with one another. Here I must not be mistaken to think that every floating imagination in men’s brains is presently of that sort of ideas I speak of. It is not easy for the mind to put off these confused notions and prejudices it has

imbibed from custom, inadvertency, and common conversation. It requires patience and assiduity to examine its ideas, till it resolves them into those clear and distinct simple ones, out of which they are compounded; and to see which, amongst its simple ones, have or have not a necessary connexion and dependence one upon another. Till a man doth this in the primary and original notions of things, he builds upon floating and uncertain principles, and will often find himself at a loss.