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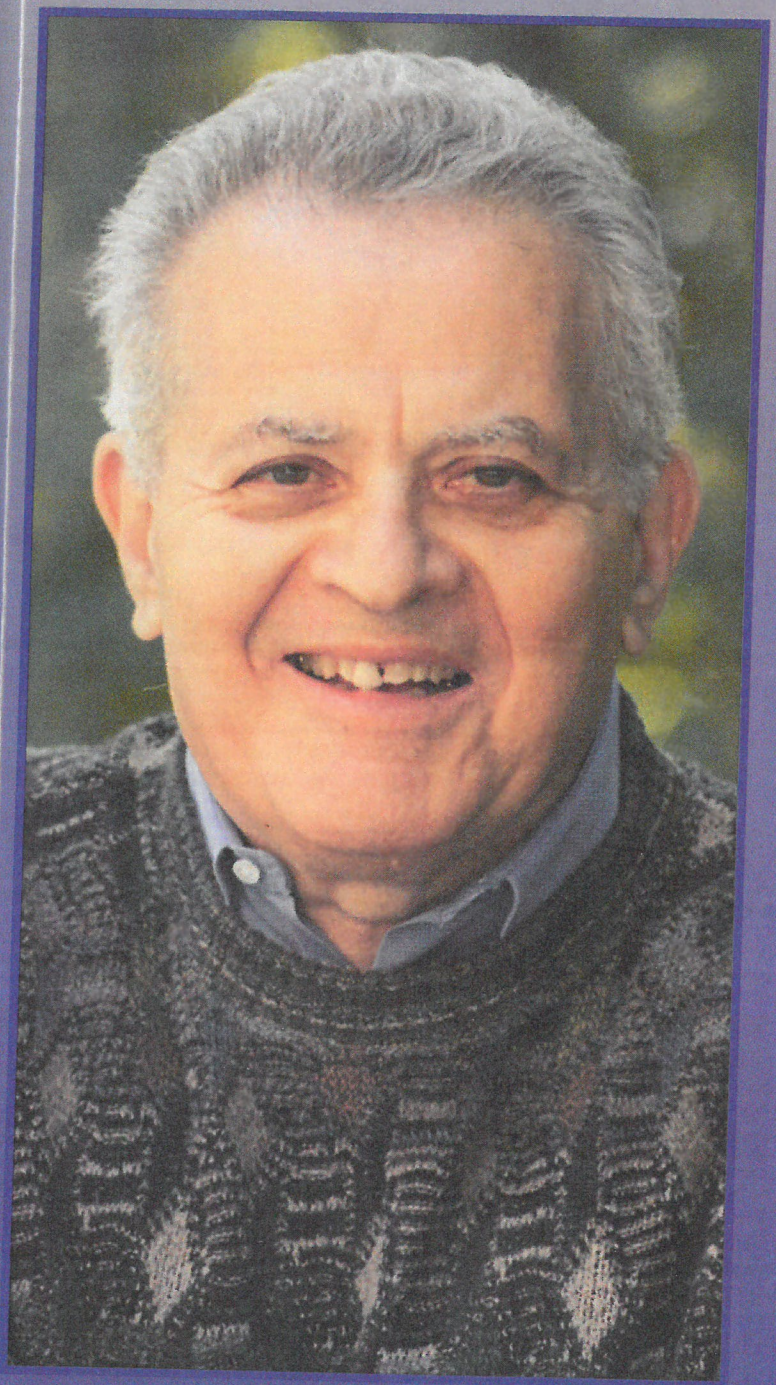

Essays Honoring Stanley Rosen

Edited by
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Where My Spade Turns

On Philosophy, Nihilism, and the Ordinary

Sharon Rider
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> 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."[1]

Introduction

The title of this essay may be startling to those readers who recognize the reference as a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein. And, I will in fact be discussing certain recurring themes in Wittgenstein's philosophy which I take to be in harmony with a number of central insights in Rosen's thought, although the focus throughout will be on ideas, and not authors.

I have three reasons for undertaking this task. The first reason is purely autobiographical. I have been deeply influenced by Wittgenstein's work for the last decade, but in the most fundamental respects, I see this influence as a continuation of the philosophical training I received under the tutelage of Stanley Rosen. Second, and more importantly, precisely because their work is so very different in form, the reflections offered here have to do with what I take to be serious intellectual and ethical concerns motivating the work of both men, rather than with the technical arguments to which those concerns give rise, or with schools of thought, traditions of interpretation, and so forth. They are questions such as: What is the relationship between reason and the good, i.e. in what way, if any, is intelligibility bound up with values? Or: What is the relationship between "everyday life," "ordinary experience" or "the life world" on the one hand, and philosophical insight and conceptualization, on the other? Third, I believe that making clear where there is more agreement than may be assumed between these two so radically different ways of viewing and engaging in the philosophical enterprise can provide instructive cues to answering those general questions. Because the point of the essay is conceptual rather than expository, I will take the liberty of

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* (1953) transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell: 1958), §217.

focussing primarily on issues discussed in Rosen's most recent treatment of Wittgenstein (in *Philosophy and Ordinary Experience* and *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary*),[2] although familiarity with his other writings will be assumed. What I offer below is a way of understanding Wittgenstein that I take to be both deeper and more philosophically interesting than the received view(s). While this way of reading Wittgenstein is something that I in fact have learned from others, the claims I make are to be taken as my own reflections, inspired by my understanding of Wittgenstein.[3]

Let me begin by saying something about what I do *not* take Wittgenstein to be saying. A common picture of the later Wittgenstein's project is that it is intended to help us delineate *rules* for meaningful speech on the basis of *de facto* speech. Commenting on Wittgenstein's emphasis on ordinary language, Rosen writes:

> He begins from the conventional or historical fact of the linguistic community whose members speak in more or less the same way. It is as a member of this community that the philosopher or speech therapist has access to standard idioms and rules of linguistic use, by which to eliminate mistakes arising from misuse of those idioms and rules.[4]

I would say that one of the driving motivations behind the *Investigations* (in contrast to the *Tractatus*) is the attempt to find a legitimate function for serious philosophical thinking, given that philosophy has lost its mandate to legislate norms. In itself, however, this insight need not entail the view that classical philosophy was wrong or confused insofar as it attempted to assimilate the logical and the ethical, but rather reflects the sober recognition that philosophy, as a

2 Stanley Rosen, *Metaphysics in Ordinary Experience* (Yale University Press: 1999; St. Augustine's Press, 2006), and Stanley Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary: Studies in the Possibility of Philosophy* (Yale University Press: 2002).

3 A few interpretations and applications of Wittgenstein's philosophy that have inspired some of the ideas sketched below are: Sören Stenlund, *Language and Philosophical Problems* (Routledge: 1990); Martin Gustafsson, *Entangled Sense* (Uppsala University Press: 2000); Pär Segerdahl, *Language Use* (Macmillan: 1996); Lars Hertzberg, "Wittgenstein and the Sharing of Language," in *The Limits of Experience* (Acta Philosophica Fennica: 1994) and "On the Need for a Listener and Community Standards," in *The Practice of Language,* Martin Gustafsson and Lars Hertzberg (eds.), (Kluwer: 2002), and James Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," in *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998).

4 Rosen 2002, p. 141. Perhaps the most prominent Wittgenstein interpreters who hold something like this view are Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker (*Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity,* Blackwell 1985). The issue of rule-following is crucial to, and therefor, pervasive in Wittgenstein scholarship and interpretation, but clearly beyond the scope of this essay. The reader is referred to an excellent review and analysis of the problems in Martin Gustafsson (2000).

matter of fact, no longer has a morally legislative function. In this respect, there is clearly a Nietzschean element to Wittgenstein's thought.[5] But, as I will try to show, this recognition does not make Wittgenstein a nihilist, but rather, like Nietzsche, a philosopher who is grappling with the problem of nihilism (among other things).

For Nietzsche, as opposed to many of his disciples, "the problem of nihilism" was not a theoretical issue, nor a rhetorical or literary trope, nor an intellectual mannerism. His pronouncements on the revaluation of all values, the death of God and so forth have overshadowed a more matter-of-fact expression of the same concern: there seems to be nothing more worth taking seriously.

When Nietzsche denies that there are "moral facts," or when he derides Kant's notion of the will as a "faculty," in other words, when he criticizes metaphysics and theology, he does so, one might say, on *ethical* grounds: the kinds of "facts" presented in theological and philosophical discourse, rather than expressing incontrovertible truths as they claimed to, in effect, expressed moral demands. Nietzsche rarely criticized ethical practices or personal beliefs *per se*; what he criticized was the tendency of normative systems to parade around as logically binding facts (this is especially clear in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist*). On this reading of Nietzsche, he is not making a negative metaphysical claim when he says, for example, "there are no moral facts whatsoever". He is saying that it *makes no sense* to talk about "moral facts" at all. Thus it makes no sense, really, to make the claim that nothing is morally true, if by that one means that the truth of all ethical questions lay somewhere else, in, let us say, some materialist conception of human life, for instance. The problem with philosophers, as Nietzsche describes it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Twilight of the Idols* and *the Gay Science*, is that they have been concerned with justifying a certain moral order.

Nietzsche's assertion that "God is dead" is commonly treated as if it were Nietzsche himself who committed deicide, as if Nietzsche *demanded* of his readers that they cease believing in God, as if Nietzsche wanted to replace God with "the absence of God" as a metaphysical starting-point, i.e. atheism as a philosophical position. But one can also understand, for instance, book III of *The Gay Science*, as simply *pointing out* that the language of guilt, punishment and reward, right and wrong, good and evil, which were part of the religious way of life, had lost their meaning, and that what remained were abstract codes and empty forms. In this light, we can see Nietzsche's often trying praise of hardness, strength, will, and nobility of character as words of encouragement to those who had the same

5 Despite deficiencies in his discussion of Wittgenstein's ostensible "faith" in ordinary language, Erich Heller's comparison of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein is worth reading in this context. See Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche* (University of Chicago: 1988), chap. 8.

suspicions. Nietzsche was encouraging what Heidegger would later characterize as *Beschlossenheit*, resoluteness, in the face of the new *facts of life*. In this respect, Nietzsche's ethical teaching is indistinguishable from his conceptual analysis.

But we can appreciate his attempt to save humanity from nihilism, from the sense that "there's nothing more worth taking seriously," without accepting his proposed solutions. While it might have seemed plausible to Nietzsche that a great work of philosophy, or art or literature could revivify culture by introducing new values, or even re-introducing ancient ones, that is not a viable option for us today, since even nineteenth-century ideas of literary or artistic greatness have become obsolete.

Yet the problem of nihilism might not be the same problem for us today as it was for Nietzsche. One might say that everything that Nietzsche feared has come to pass, but then, looking at our lives and our culture not as a future possibility or an historical event waiting to be interpreted a hundred years from now, but from *within*, so to speak, it is not so certain that the situation is as bad as all that. While we are constantly being bombarded with claims that we *must,* as enlightened denizens of this the most enlightened epoch, see ourselves as atoms whirring meaninglessly in the void, we have now, as always, the option of meeting such claims with circumspection and even suspicion. We can follow Nietzsche's advice in *Beyond Good and Evil:* "So let us, for once, be more cautious, let us be 'unphilosophical'."[6] I take the later Wittgenstein's philosophy to be "unphilosophical" in precisely this regard.

Certainty and the Unsayable

It is true that the later Wittgenstein most certainly would say that the hypostatization of the transcendental I as the source and guarantor of certainty is impossible for us to take seriously anymore. This does not, however, entail the impossibility of certainty, even in moral issues, that is often assumed to follow from that impossibility. It is not that certainty is impossible; it just turns out to be something other than what philosophers have thought. Certainty is something attained on the basis, infamously, of the "unsayable". In what follows, I will attempt to show the respect in which the *unsayable* is not the same as the *silent*. The unsayable is actually quite articulate (if not garrulous). That is, it is constantly *showing itself* in any number of things that we are inclined to say and do. But the things that we are inclined to say and do are so complex and variegated that they cannot be stated

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (1886) transl. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin: 1973), "On the Prejudices of the Philosophers" §19.

in this or that doctrine. Nonetheless, something can be said about our various and sundry practices: this is what is meant by the notion of a *rule*. The notion of rule-following is misleading, however, because we tend to think that first there is a rule, and then we either follow this existent rule correctly, or incorrectly, or not at all. For Wittgenstein, the rule derives its determinate meaning from practice, and not the reverse. Thus, Rosen is naturally right when he describes Wittgenstein's project as finding meaning in *de facto* praxis. Nonetheless, I think that one should take great care to understand the import of this *conceptual* point regarding the relationship between rules and practice, namely, that anything we can *say* about what it means to do something presupposes the practice the statement is intended to describe. This is the respect in which a full description is "unsayable," that is, it never hits bottom. But Wittgenstein is not suggesting that there are two kinds of knowledge/language, "propositional" or "discursive" on the one hand, and some sort of "tacit knowledge" or "non-discursive insight," on the other. What makes Wittgenstein's later philosophy so difficult is that his studies of "depth grammar" are comparable to Kant's transcendental reflections insofar as they are not propositions about states of affairs at all. They are rather meditations on the conditions for making such propositions (given the fact that we can and do engage in such discourse) and, as such, "say nothing" about anything:

> We feel as if we had to penetrate phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the "possibilities" of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the kind of statement that we make about phenomena[. . .] . Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expressions in different regions of language.[7]

Grammatical investigations naturally use language, presuppose language and take place in language, since the whole point is to describe our form of life from the point of view of lived experience (that is, from the point of view of the user of language). The "given" for Wittgenstein is not "the contingent practices and conventional ways of speaking of our historically particular culture"; such a description presupposes our language and form of life as an *external object* for consideration, a point of view which is parasitic upon the first-person, or internal, perspective we all have in our everyday dealings with language.

7 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (1953) transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell: 1958), §89.

One may describe Wittgenstein's project as the attempt to do philosophy *given* that we cannot lift ourselves up by our hair or step out of our skin: he describes our linguistic practices as *ours*. And, for *us*, as language users and livers of our form of life, that is, from the first-person perspective, there is nothing accidental, historically contingent *or* conventional about most of the things that are important to us, least of all, moral and religious practice. There is plenty of room for ethical *truth*: what you (we) *really* want. There is equal room for logical or philosophical *truth*: what you (we) *really* mean. But these truths are not statements of fact in the scientific sense, and the tendency to waffle between these sorts of insights and statements of fact leads inexorably to philosophical confusion. Yet certainty in these questions can be shown (most often in and through language, or discursive practice, or whatever term one prefers), although not "stated" as such. Once more, Rosen is certainly right to point out that if ordinary language is understood as "the changing idiom of history," then it is indeed a theoretical construction. But from the first-person perspective, language cannot be seen thus; and for Wittgenstein, for whom genuine communication about the world is not only a possibility but an actuality (and thus the starting point for all philosophical investigation), the goal of philosophizing is to understand what we actually (really) *mean*.

If philosophy is about what we really can meaningfully say, this is neither because meaning is prior to use, nor because there are conventional rules determining what is an allowable move in a language game. It is rather because in learning our native language, we "take in" the world. We cannot simply choose "alternative" pictures or uses at will and still be able to mean at all. To mean is not the same thing as to apply a theory of meaning (the choice of which makes not the slightest difference for how we live our lives). For Wittgenstein, the failure of philosophy to describe adequately and accurately how it is that we can "mean," rather than suggesting that meaning is arbitrary or uncertain, indicates that there is something fundamentally wrong with the question. Another way of putting it is to ask, with Wittgenstein: "You ask how meaning is possible? In what respect?" Posing the question this way, Wittgenstein hopes to show how meaning is possible, in a way that is not a general statement of fact (because the question of how meaning is possible is not a question about a state of affairs).

Compare now what I have said above with the following remark, in which Rosen criticizes what he takes to be Wittgenstein's implicit historicism:

> Since grammars define families of language games or constitute a "life-form," and life-forms are multiple as well as diverse, or in other words, since there is no universal life form, any more than there is a universal form of the proposition, it seems that human nature, and so what counts as ordinary or healthy use, is a function of history, that is to say, of chance.[8]

8 Rosen 2002, p. 140.

To begin with, Rosen states that "grammars define families of language games" or constitute a life-form. But what is meant by *grammars* here? Wittgenstein writes:

> In the use of words one might distinguish "surface" grammar from "depth" grammar. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of sentences, the part of the use—one might say—that can be taken in by the ear.— And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word "to mean," with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about.[9]

Wittgenstein would not accept the idea that surface grammars (such as the rules formulated by grammarians, or the logical combination of meaningful sentences in the manner of Carnap's logical syntax) define forms of life. It's not as if Wittgenstein thinks that the most important things we can know about a form of life is the prevalence of gendered articles or the prevalence of strong verbs within a language group, or linguistic theory. Those sorts of rules are obviously arbitrary insofar as they were developed precisely for scholastic instruction (primarily, in fact, for foreign language instruction, that is, "official Greek"),[10] in the one case, and developed within the particular history of the philosophy of language stemming out of Frege and Russell, on the other, and are thus the result of historical contingency. Historically speaking, the world of lakes and the practice of swimming existed long before the grammarians parsed up language into verbs and nouns, or the logicians formulated the rules for well-formed sentences. Furthermore, in cultures in which speakers have no notion of verbs or nouns, people talk about lakes and teach their children to swim, *using* language. The suggestion that there is some grammar dictating these practices that these people are implicitly following is, to say the very least, highly speculative, and, I do not think a view that Wittgenstein would hold. So what is being suggested here? It must be that *depth grammar* is what is definitive of a language and form of life. And, insofar as we are philosophizing, that would be Wittgenstein's view. Depth grammar describes, as it were, a horizon of our understanding, a point at which

9 Wittgenstein 1958, §664. Richard Sørli points out that, while the standard reading of the distinction is to identify surface grammar with the "obvious syntactic features of sentences and the words of which it is composed," and depth grammar with "the combinatorial possibilities and impossibilities, of the circumstances of its use, and of its consequences" (Hacker, cited in Sørli), this reading neglects the importance Wittgenstein ascribes to *use*. Thus what Wittgenstein intends by "surface grammar" is close to the standard reading of "depth grammar." I follow Sørli in my use above. See Richard Sørli, "Wittgenstein, Grammar and the Orthodoxy of the Ordinary," unpublished manuscript, 2002.

10 R.H. Robbins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (London: 1967), p. 13.

nothing more can be said *about* meaning, although meaningful speech that is revelatory of that horizon is both possible and actual (but not as an intellectual discourse about *some thing*).

In the rest of the quote, a number of consequences are drawn from Wittgenstein's refusal to engage in generalized discourse about "human nature," "a universal form of the proposition," etc., in particular that it results in historicism. But Wittgenstein is not advocating an historicist view, simply by criticizing an ahistoricist view. Once more, he is trying to avoid "saying too much," and thus risk saying nothing ("nonsense"). Wittgenstein would presumably grant a number of historicist assertions about particular cases, without embracing historicism as such, that is, he would grant its point as critique in any number of contexts, but refuse to grant it as a philosophical thesis or doctrine.[11] As a general thesis, historicism assumes in advance of the formulation of any specific problem that the problem *ought* to be formulated in such a way as to be amenable to historical explanation. But Wittgenstein would first demand that we are clear about what it is that we want to know before assuming an historicist stance.

As critique, historicist works mostly describe the *de facto* conditions in which past thinkers worked, the intellectual debate of the period, the connotations of certain terms in a given epoch and so forth. The motivation behind such studies is presumably the prevalence of treating philosophers in the past as if there were no such conditions, as if philosophers did not in fact write in a certain context and not another.

As a general thesis or starting-point, however, historicism seems inevitably leads to a number of perplexities. First, the prioritizing of questions concerning cultural bias, for example, is often assumed to be unproblematic given the historicist starting-point. The historicist position provides a kind of metaphysical justification for posing certain questions, and simply disregarding others, as those become nonsensical within the historicist framework. Second, it presumes that one can say something sensible about a culture as a whole, and thus moves from being a modus operandi to an ontology. If we follow this line of thought to its natural conclusion, we seems to be forced to embrace one of the following, to my mind absurd, conclusions:

Past thinkers (or actors) were culturally limited. We, however, can see the conditions of their thinking better than they could because of our historical distance.

We are culturally limited, we cannot understand anything at all except for our own cultural projections.

11 Here Koselleck's historicizing of historical thinking in *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (MIT: 1988) is relevant. The historical coincidence of the development of "historical thinking" in the modern sense and the advent of "critique" is a useful reminder to us that we are not nearly as self-critical in our perpetual gesturing to "historical contingency" as some kind of neutral fact as we ought to be.

Interestingly enough, few draw these drastic conclusions, but at the same time, neither do they draw a lesson from the fact that they are unprepared to do so. I would say that the lesson to be drawn is that our own experience inoculates us from such theoretical extremism in practice (although not in philosophy).

I take the Wittgensteinian position toward historicist claims to be that it is something that must be decided from case to case, issue to issue. We cannot, in advance of inquiry, decide, for instance, that either (i) there is no such thing as sex and death *per se*, but only different cultural practices of, say, courtship and religious mysticism, or (ii) there is only copulation and expiration, and these are the basis for various arbitrary cultural expressions such as marriage and religious institutions. The question of the constancy of human nature can only be decided in the context of a much more specified question, and with respect a predetermined and presumably narrow use of the notion of constancy. As a hermeneutic principle, this means that the extent to which ancient texts, for example, are intelligible or unintelligible to modern discourse is simply the extent to which they are intelligible or unintelligible. The question is, what problems are you trying to solve? If an ancient text does, effectively, shed light on a problem, then it is apparently intelligible in the relevant sense (even if only to a few). As Rosen writes, "[i]t is our perception of human nature that makes Plato and Aristotle intelligible to us."[12] But to ask if such perception *in general* is an historical artifact or a part of the natural order is to pose a question that cannot be decided once and for all. In Wittgensteinian terms, it is not a question we can "get clear about".

More importantly, such a stance can only be taken towards an object of inquiry, that is, towards language or culture as an object. Wittgenstein's remarks are not about linguistic practice as an object of study, but are "internal" to actual language use. In this respect, there are "logical" or "grammatical" remarks that are not in the least arbitrary, that is, which show *necessary* relations, *given* the language we have. There are certain facts about our language that cannot be otherwise, whereas the philosophical explanations we develop to explain these *may well be* historically contingent.

The concept of a line, one might want to say, is relative to the cultural and linguistic horizon it inhabits. What would it mean, however, to say that there are lines that lack length? However fuzzy and confused our idea of the dark side of the moon as a possible object of perception, we can at least get started thinking about it. And we certainly have no trouble grasping the claim that dogs perceive odors that human beings cannot. Thus we may be tempted to say that there is or could be a society or language in which lines were not always perceived as having some length; say, a tribe in which all members suffer from some kind of hereditary congenital blindness. In the imagined case, the tribe has survived without the

12 Rosen 1999, p. 221.

capacity to perceive lines at all, and this might seem to provide evidence for the notion that attributing length to lines is a convention, or as counter-evidence to the notion that the association between length and lines is some sort *of biological* fact about human psychology. But from the point of view of depth grammar, the relationship between length and the notion of a line is internal; length belongs to the meaning of a line. A notion of line without length would be a *different use* of the word, a different concept, than the ordinary geometrical one. As a grammatical remark, the foregoing is neither normative (it is not a prohibition against using words as one wishes) nor informative (it provides no explanation); it is a description of a defining feature of the ordinary use of the word line.

Neither psychologistic nor conventionalist explanations of how we have the notion of line that we have can get off the ground without assuming the meaning of line, lest they not know what it is they are explaining or disagreeing about in the first place. In fact, they would have nothing to explain (they would have no problem to pose). *All* empirical explanations (that is, explanations about things) rely upon "grammatical facts" of this kind. To say that a line necessarily has length is to reach the point at which "my spade turns". It's the sort of remark that few would dream of questioning, but not because it's an implicit or tacit theory. Rather, it's the sort of remark one arrives at when trying to define what it is that one is talking about, what it is one is trying to explain, what it is that one "really means". But it is, in a sense, a "transcendental" remark insofar as it tells us nothing that wasn't already there with us from the moment we learned how to use the word "line," and which simply has no use outside of the context of such reflection. I take this to be Wittgenstein's point when he remarks: "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them".[13] The various ways we were trained to use "line," the nearly infinite number of circumstances at home, in the playground and even the first-grade classroom cannot be cursorily stated in a philosophical theory without falsification or unwarranted speculation (which is not to say that such speculation and even simplification is always unwarranted. One can imagine uses for it in, for example, early childhood development studies, where one is interested in testing various methods of early instruction to improve geometric understanding among schoolchildren).

In response to the objection that *either* there is a natural order *or* there is only construction, I would say that Wittgenstein simply refuses to accept that dichotomy as helpful in a number of important philosophical issues, because the terms are formulated at the outset before the posing of the particular question. That lines have length is not a "construction," if by that we mean a convention that could be

13 Wittgenstein 1958, §127, §128.

otherwise. Objections with reference to non-Euclidean geometries or Poincaré's conventionalism are irrelevant here, since we are not talking about a working definition, say, a line as the shortest distance between two points. Poincaré's conventionalist view of mathematics is largely in harmony with Wittgenstein's, but the internal relation between the notion of line and the having of length is not a part of mathematics. But is it a "natural fact"? Hardly. In an important sense, it's not a "fact" at all. Rosen reads Wittgenstein as seeing nature as a theoretical construction, but I do not think that Wittgenstein sees ordinary use as theoretical in this way. There is, however, a use of nature that *is* a theoretical construction, namely, the "nature" of the natural sciences (which is often assumed in an unspecified and fluid manner in philosophical discussion). Borrowing a phrase from Rosen, one could say that it is not Wittgenstein's analysis of the "ordinary" that is endless, with "no bottom and no top," but rather generalized philosophical notions of "nature," "custom" and so forth that are endless (because fluid). Words such as "nature" and "culture," like words such as "object" or "I" tend to play the field in philosophical discussion. When we "bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use," we are, Wittgenstein says, bringing them back to the language-game which is their original home,[14] or rather, calling them back to work when they've gone, as Wittgenstein says, "on holiday".[15] This is the sense of the "extraordinary use" of words in philosophy that we have to learn to resist if we are to attain the clarity that is for Wittgenstein the goal of philosophy. But is clarity certainty? Can we say that we are "certain" that lines have length?

The goal of certainty in modern philosophy seems to involve starting with what cannot be doubted even in principle, and building up arguments on that basis. For Wittgenstein, this philosophical notion of certainty that is both the starting-point and ultimate goal is problematic. I will not rehearse Wittgenstein's discussion of certainty here, but will rather limit myself to a few points relative to the discussion above. I wish to say that clarity is not certainty, but that we should perhaps not be concerned with certainty in philosophy, precisely because certainty is something we aim at with regard to facts. Philosophy, however, can provide us with clarity such that the issue of certainty never arises (because the kinds of insight philosophy provides cannot be doubted). In "A Central Ambiguity in Descartes," Rosen notices that the rejection of everything that can be doubted in principle presupposes the capacity to identify with certainty what constitutes dubious knowledge. But is our distinct recognition that we are uncertain about something, something about which we can be certain? Carl Page writes:

> Certainty in all its forms entails a meta-reflection, an assessment that a given judgment has been made properly and correctly. It is a retrospective certification that the evidence is in order and that the train of thought leading up to

14 Wittgenstein 1958, §116.
15 Wittgenstein 1958, §38.

> the judgment has followed adequate procedures. Declarations of certainty in actual cases are thus relative to the standards of evidence and ratiocination presupposed for different types of judgement.[16]

I take this to be an accurate and succinct description of the use of the notion of certainty. And it invites the question, are all insights that cannot even in principle be doubted, amenable to demands of justification, standards of evidence and procedures of ratiocination? How could I, even in principle, satisfactorily demonstrate that all lines have length? Or more to the point, how can I even begin to doubt that lines have some length? What would such doubt mean? If I am looking at two lines written on a blackboard two meters away, and describing what I see for someone on the telephone, he might question whether or not my *observation* about the relative lengths of the two lines is correct. And, in such a case, I may well squint my eyes for a few seconds (checking the equipment, as it were), and then I might be inclined to say, "Yes, I'm quite certain now. Line A is longer than line B." In this case, I have reason to distrust the testimony of my senses, and indeed, there is a procedure for checking the accuracy of my original statement. The extent to which we speak of evidence is exactly the extent to which the statement refers to a state of affairs, that state of affairs being the relative length of the two drawn lines. Similarly, my certainty is tied to my assessment that the evidence is in order.

What are we to make of the internal relation between lines and length then? I would certainly want to say that it is indubitable, but this precisely because it is not a fact or state of affairs, and therefore not susceptible of proofs either. Evidence and justification belong to cases in which doubt has been introduced. To state the matter perversely, we can only be certain about what can be doubted. But this does not open the floodgates of nihilism, since accepting that certain things simply cannot be doubted, that we have hit rock bottom, is merely to admit the *limits of philosophy*. Wittgenstein's proposal is that philosophy is still possible if it takes as its task to remind us of what we as *human beings* cannot doubt, and leave the work of justification and meeting evidentiary demands to the special sciences. To return to Rosen's critique of Descartes, one might say that Descartes' "mistake," if one wishes to call it that, is to take the impossibility of his doubting that he is thinking *substantively*, that is, as a fact (as if he has identified some thing, namely, the act of doubting). As Rosen argues in "Philosophy and Ordinary Experience," the way out of the doubt raised by the rhetoric of science is a "reconsideration of ordinary experience, and so too the rediscovery of the starting points of philosophical investigation."[17]

16 Carl Page, "Symbolic Mathematics and the Intellect Militant: On Modern Philosophy's Revolutionary Spirit," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 57, no. 2, p. 237.

17 Rosen 1999, p. 238.

"The Highest Things"

One important theme in Rosen's work is the ranking of forms of life: distinguishing between good and bad, better and worse, coherent and incoherent, etc., or analyses and evaluations as two sides of the coin of judgment and discernment. Both in the *Preface* to *Metaphysics and Ordinary Language* and in the essay "Philosophy and Ordinary Experience," for example, Rosen suggests that rank-ordering of forms of life are an essential element of philosophy, without addressing explicitly certain objections that I take to be Wittgensteinian. In particular, one could say something like the following: A rank-ordering is a kind of systematization; but as Rosen has repeatedly pointed out, everyday life is not systematic. A rank order that does not bear the mark of a systematic structure, if it were an honest and intelligent appraisal based on the facts of lived experience would be an expression of wisdom, to be sure, but why philosophy? (It is, among other things, the assimilation of the logical and the ethical in the *Tractatus* that the later Wittgenstein takes issue with in *Philosophische Bemerkungen*).

Isn't the point of an immanentist view of philosophy in the manner of Wittgenstein to leave wisdom to the wise, and the analysis and dissolution of philosophical problems to philosophers? Of course, there are wise philosophers, as the example of Rosen strikingly illustrates, but there are wise men who are not philosophers insofar as their wisdom is simply not relevant to problems of metaphysics or epistemology. Similarly, there are "working philosophers" who have made important contributions to our collective thinking, but who few of us would be inclined to describe as "wise" in broader and deeper respects (Frege would, I imagine, be an example of the latter). A philosopher may well combine deep insight into human existence with trenchant conceptual analysis and breadth of erudition (I suppose this is what we mean by calling Plato or Kant "great philosophers"), but it is not clear that the relation is *internal*. Indeed, the sheer prevalence of the one unaccompanied by the other would seem to indicate an external relation. The philosophical rank-ordering, from whatever depths it may emerge, is bound to be taken as doctrine and dogma among disciples, and, at the same time, hardly needs to be stated for those who are capable of such discrimination. But once again, this does not mean that the insights are false, uncertain, subjective or contingent.

Rosen is concerned that "by forbidding us to speak of that which cannot be completely clarified, Wittgenstein condemns us to silence about what is of the highest importance."[18] On the reading proposed here, Wittgenstein does not forbid discussion of the highest and deepest things. He does, however, call into question the idea that philosophy, by attaining conceptual clarity, provides moral insight (what we referred to above as the assimilation of the moral into the

18 Rosen 2002, p. 144.

logical). Another way of putting the point is to say that intellectual or philosophical or scientific problems are inseparable, even unintelligible, in isolation from the intellectual discourse(s) which give rise to them. Existential or moral problems arise in the sphere of human action and intention, they are not problems that can be solved by achieving clarity into the context in which they arise, that is, they do not disappear just because we have understood them. In this respect, they are "real problems," problems that may well be irresoluble, not because we're not clever enough, but because they belong to human life: they may require of an individual that he make a substantial decision, or take a stand that cannot be justified on morally neutral grounds.

There is, of course, a clear connection between "wanting to know what I really mean," and "wanting to know what I really want," namely, they are both cases of "wanting," or, in Rosen's terms, desire. But isn't it interesting for our understanding of philosophy as being about "the highest things" of concern to us as human beings, that "there are neither idealists nor materialists in everyday life"?[19]

On the face of it, it would seem that philosophy is about very important matters, since it calls into question our most basic assumptions, precisely in order to secure certainty, to deliver us a sense of confidence and trust in our capacity to understand the world around us. It would be a terrible thing indeed if we were to be mistaken about what is most *essential*.

Let me, for a moment, caricature the problems of philosophers. A philosopher asks himself to what extent we can trust science or our everyday experience: are there really cars, women, antelopes, neutrons, the square root of two and black holes, and if there are, are they real in the same sense and in the same way? After much blood, sweat and tears, he may come to the point at which he feels that has come to grips with his problem. Perhaps he becomes an idealist, and maintains that physical objects can only be described as objects *for us*, that is, that phenomena are real only insofar as they are objects for a consciousness. He feels compelled to draw this conclusion from the insight that all knowledge presupposes a knower, every object that is observed or perceived presupposes the existence of an observer, and so forth. Even the psychologist who, in his role of psychologist treats the I as an object is himself a subject. If he attempts to observe himself when observing something else, what he observes then is actually not what he intended to observe, but rather the act of observing itself. And when I observe myself, there is always something missing in the description, namely, the observation that describes the I. If we take that observation into account in the description, we have yet another observer, etc. This relationship between the object and the subject of knowledge is unavoidable, according to our idealist. It is quite simply a condition for consciousness. Thus the naive belief in a reality independent of our thinking is eschewed.

19 Rosen 1999, p. 238.

Another philosopher may take the realist position, and take for granted either an immediate correspondence between objects and our ideas about them, or attempt to show how thought and perception organize the "raw material," that is, sense impressions. In both cases, the emphasis is on the knowledge we have of *objects*, and the task becomes to explain the constitution of the world and our knowledge of it (in our day, it is common to think in terms of brain function). One may describe this view as a sort of epistemological optimism.

Regardless of whether our philosopher is an idealist or a realist, it is important for him to feel that he has arrived at a deeper understanding in his meditations on these questions, and not satisfied himself with how things ordinarily seem, when he's not thinking philosophically. The point is, after all, to see through and beyond our everyday ways of seeing and acting.

The question of to what extent and in what respect the world can be said to be as it seems, and how much of what we perceive and experience is effected, or even produced, by our consciousness, or neurobiological processes, or habituation and training in Indoeuropean linguistic and cultural practice, is a hotly debated topic in philosophical journals, conferences and seminar rooms. Naturally, since it concerns nothing less than the existence or non-existence of the outer world.

Wittgenstein expresses a certain discomfort with the form of the question. In order to see more clearly the weight of the question for us, for how we live our lives (since, after all, these are very important questions), he tries to imagine a use or application of this set of questions outside the journals, conferences and seminar rooms. He writes in *Zettel*:

> §413. One man is a convinced realist, another a convinced idealist and teaches his children accordingly. In such an important matter as the existence or non-existence of the external world, they don't want to teach their children anything wrong.
>
> What will the children be taught? To include in what they say: "There are physical objects" or the opposite?
>
> If someone does not believe in fairies, he does not need to teach his children "There are no fairies: he can omit to teach them the word "fairy". On what occasion are they to say: "There are . . ." or "There are no . . ."? Only when they meet people of the contrary belief.
>
> §414. But the idealist will teach his children the word "chair" after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this and that, e.g. to fetch a chair. Then where will the difference between what the idealist-educated children say and the realist ones? Won't the difference only be one of a battle cry?
>
> §415. For doesn't the game "That is probably a . . ." begin with disillusion? And can the first attitude of all be directed towards a possible disillusion?
>
> §416. "So does he have to begin by being taught a false certainty?

> There isn't any question of certainty or uncertainty yet in their language game. Remember: they are learning to *do* something?[20]

Wittgenstein wants to bring philosophical questions, and answers, *back to life*: back to the life, the world, which gave rise to them. And notice that the realist and the idealist do to a great extent inhabit the same world. If my three-year old has never seen a film or book in which fairies are represented or mentioned, nor heard songs about fairies or heard them mentioned at all, how am I to make him understand that they do not exist? Well, by showing him certain books and singing certain songs, until he understood what a fairy is. Only then can I help him understand that they do not exist in the same respect as an armchair or his big sister. In the same way, I can eventually, if I am so inclined, train him to understand that the world isn't always what it seems to be. But in order for him to understand such comments, he must first be familiar with a world in which one pours milk in a glass, turns on the light-switch when entering a room, waits for the green light before crossing the street; in this familiar, homey world, the world in which he learns how one says things and how one does them, there is still no room for the sort of doubt out of which idealism and realism are born.

Is Wittgenstein's solution to the "big questions" with which philosophy has struggled for two thousand years to return to the innocence of a three-year old? Doesn't this way of reasoning amount to an exaltation or romanticizing of the simple, the primitive, the everyday? I don't think so. Rather, the case is this: Tinkerbell *is* a fairy, as much for the philosopher as for his young son. The difference consists mainly in that the father has already gone through the disappointment that accompanied the insight that he would never meet Tinkerbell "in real life". But recall Wittgenstein's question: "Can the first attitude be directed towards a possible disillusion?" Shall a mother say to her son: "Jimmy, fetch the chair, which furthermore exists!" Or express to him her meaning intention of his brushing his (by her intended) teeth?

One obvious objection to the intentional absurdity of such a scenario is that children are quite simply not capable of such abstractions. They have not learned the intellectual discourses in which such abstractions are used. The question is if *we* adult philosophers, who must in our daily dealings with the world, open doors, turn on lights and pass the salt to each other at the dinner table are capable of it either as *a way of life*. In other words, the question is whether it is possible to be *mistaken* about the existence of the outer world. How often can such a question be posed in such a way that it means something concrete, that *it makes a difference for what we do*, to be right or wrong?

Towards the end of "Sad Reason," Rosen takes up what he considers an intimate connection between analytic thinking and evaluation. And there may indeed

20 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell: 1967).

be some sort of "family resemblance" between the hardness of the logical must and the hardness of the moral must, but they are clearly distinguishable, and, in fact, distinct. In a certain respect, the latter is both logically and temporally prior. I must already implicitly accept the obligations imposed on me by a sense of logical responsibility if the logical must is to have any force. But it is precisely the nature of that sense of responsibility that is so problematic. Isn't traditional metaphysics exactly the attempt to state that nature and its necessary consequences? And isn't the failure of such statements in the past the cause of the disillusionment with reason in our day? Rosen and Wittgenstein agree that the philosopher has access, through his very humanity, to the standards, purposes and values that underlie theoretical reflections and technical productions. But Rosen thinks that we are forced to assume, explicitly or implicitly, "the constancy of human nature as underlying historical change," if we are not to end up in "historically relative dialects". I take it that Wittgenstein would reject the general nature of the formulation of the question that leads to this either/or. It seems to me that the difference between Rosen and Wittgenstein on this point consists in this: for Rosen, philosophy is the activity *par excellence* that tells us who we are. For Wittgenstein, the answer to that question can only be found in our living our lives.[21]

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