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Home Language and Philosophers' Language

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Abstract This paper investigates whether Wittgenstein can be considered an 'ordinary language philosopher'. A central role in his thinking is that of what may be called our 'home language' – the language we bring along in coming to do philosophy. The intelligibility of philosophers' language depends on its relation to the home language. This is the central point of *Philosophical Investigations* § 116. Traditional philosophical 'uses' of a word like 'knowledge' have a problematic relation to our customary uses of the word. In consequence, traditional philosophers have sometimes lost the grip on how such words are actually used in human interaction.

Keywords Ordinary Language. Wittgenstein. Language Use. Philosophers' Language. Knowledge.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Philosophers' Use. – 3 Bringing Words Back. – 4 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work is often held to be the main origin of the philosophical movement known as 'ordinary language philosophy'. I here wish to explore in what sense he can be called an ordinary language philosopher.[1]

When Wittgenstein uses expressions like 'ordinary language', 'ordinary sense', 'ordinary ways of speaking' (*gewöhnliche…*), in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI),[2] he seems to have different contrasts in mind. A few times, the contrast is simply between, on the one hand, an imaginary form of speech thought up by Wittgenstein for the occasion, and on the other hand customary ways of speaking: thus, in PI, § 19 it is between the one-word commands used in the imaginary builders' game and the customary way of formulating commands; in PI, § 60 it is between someone who refers to an object by listing its parts (he asks for a broom and the stick fitted into it) rather than, as we normally do, to the composite object (the broomstick); in PI, § 243 it is between someone who gives voice to his feelings and moods in a language only he can understand, and the customary way of talking about feelings and moods in a shared language.

At other times, the contrast has to do with the notion of a philosopher stipulating a form of speaking which is, in some sense, assumed to be more adequate than the customary ones: thus, in PI, § 39 the suggestion is that a *name* ought really only to refer to something *simple* (not composite), and thus what we customarily call names are not really names in the strict sense of the word. In PI, §§ 81 and 98 Wittgenstein speaks about the idea that our customary ways of speaking ought to be replaced by a 'perfect' language, that is, presumably, a language in which the logical relations between propositions are supposedly mirrored in their physical form. In PI, § 402 he speaks about the notion that our customary ways of speaking fail to describe things 'as they really are'; thus presupposing the idea that the way we refer to things may or may not correspond to the way reality is constituted. Here, the contrast is between customary ways of speaking and ways of speaking that are, in some sense or another, thought to be philosophically superior.

When the philosophical value of concentrating on ordinary language is debated, the issue is often regarded as a matter of choosing

1 Among fairly recent discussions of ordinary language and philosophy I should like to mention Hanfling 2000, Levi 2000, Baz 2012 and parts of Cockburn 2022. These works are helpful elucidations of the field, and I find myself largely in agreement with the thoughts expressed in them, though I also have some points of disagreement. I find Levi's work particularly incisive on the issue of ordinary language. For reviews of Baz's book, see Levi 2014, Hertzberg 2016.

2 All references to the *Philosophical Investigations* are to Part I.

between different objects of study. Critics of ordinary language philosophy often allege that a concern with customary forms of speech is intellectually uninteresting or culturally conservative. There is no reason, it is argued, to investigate any but the most sophisticated forms of language currently in use. Thus, it will be thought that it is more fruitful to focus on uses of language accompanying, say, the latest advances in natural science than to concentrate on the conventional talk of ordinary citizens. At other times, again, the issue may be thought of in terms of the goals of philosophical activity. While ordinary language philosophers 'simply attend to the use of words', it is more important to get clear about the reality those words refer to: not just to ask, "How do we use the word 'real'?" but "What *is* the nature of reality?", not "How do we use the word 'know'?" but "What *is* it to know things?", etc. What is to be sought for is the essence of reality, knowledge, the self, the proposition, and so forth. Or then again, the goal of the activity may be thought to be to replace what are seen as the shifting, ambiguous and vague forms of everyday speech – for the purpose of philosophical inquiry if not in everyday life – with a logically exact language in which each well-formed sentence has determinate sense. Bertrand Russell, in a well-known critique, wrote:

> I […] am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy […]. Everybody agrees that physics and chemistry and medicine each require a language which is not that of everyday life. I fail to see why philosophy, alone, should be forbidden to make a similar approach towards precision and accuracy. (1959, 178)

Contrary to this, J.L. Austin – who is regarded as another originator of ordinary language philosophy besides Wittgenstein – saw a particular value in the study of customary forms of expression:

> [O]ur common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon […]. (1970, 182)

Things may not be as straightforward as Austin makes them out to be here. Human life-forms are subject to constant change, and we can hardly think of the evolution of language as linear progress towards ever more useful vocabularies. The situations in which our common words are used may vary greatly over time and context: a

distinction that has stood the test of time in one context may sit awkwardly in another.

I shall get back to the idea of looking for essences further on. When it comes to the idea of linguistic reforms, Wittgenstein does not reject it outright. In PI, § 132 he writes:

> We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order for a particular purpose; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order. For this purpose we shall again and again *emphasize* distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook. This may make it appear as if we saw it as our task to reform language.
>
> Such a reform for particular practical purposes, an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, may well be possible. But these are not the cases we are dealing with. The confusions which occupy us arise when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work.

What Wittgenstein is questioning is the idea of a wholesale reconstruction of our language. In PI, § 98 he writes:

> On the one hand, it is clear that every sentence in our language 'is in order as it is'. That is to say, we are not *striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language still had to be constructed by us. – On the other hand, it seems clear that where there is sense there must be perfect order. – So there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence.

The idea that a language might be in need of wholesale improvement is problematic. Our sentences normally function in the contexts in which they are uttered. However, a limited reform for practical purposes might very well be called for in a given case: thus, it might be found that some part of the vocabulary employed in the context of a specific activity such as astronomy or car repairs is confusing in some respects, and that it needs to be replaced by one that is more transparent. However, the capacity for undertaking such a task is primarily to be found with those involved in the activity – it does not off-hand appear to be an occupation for which philosophers are particularly well suited (conceivably, philosophers might be in a position to contribute, say, when it comes to legal terminology, or to the vocabulary of the human sciences).

The abjuring of customary forms of expression should not be accepted without detailed examination of any alleged problems. Besides, unless we have a clear understanding of the very forms of

expression we use in introducing an allegedly superior language form, our deficient understanding will simply be transplanted into the new language.[3] Hence attention to our customary forms of expression will be necessary in any case.

Let me formulate a truism: philosophical discussion is carried out by means of words, so: in a language. Then where does that language come from? The language in which we come to do philosophy is the language we inhabit, the language we have learnt to speak and understand in living a life with other people. This 'home language' will of course comprise more than the everyday language we all share: it may include the language of specific areas of concern, such as religion, politics, the law, or science. The language we start out with will no doubt be modified in the process of doing philosophy: new forms of expression may gradually become commonplace, professional terms may be introduced, but this too will take place with the home language as a starting point. We have no choice where to start.

In knowing her language the philosopher knows herself. She has grown into her language. Some words may be unfamiliar and she will try to master their use, but language as such is not a skill she is trying to master. Of course, you may raise the question whether she is actually using this or that word in the customary way. You may tell her that in using the word the way she does she is liable to be misunderstood. Suppose she says "I was really annoyed by that waiter", and you ask "Don't you simply mean you were irritated?". Her response may be, "No, I really was annoyed", or "Oh yes, I actually meant to say I was irritated" or perhaps "I never thought about the distinction between annoyance and irritation". In the last case you may try to explain the difference to her, maybe by giving examples of how the two words are used or making clear to her how the words differ in the way they would sit in the context. In accepting our instruction she finds her way back to the language she means to be speaking. (On the other hand, she might insist that the attempt to distinguish the two is pointless and that she is not planning to heed the difference between the words – in which case you may simply shrug your shoulders and wish her good luck.)

3 Austin, too, recognised the potential need for linguistic reform. He writes: "[O]rdinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it *is* the *first* word" (1970, 183).

2 Philosophers' Use

The language we bring to philosophy, our home language, is not brought along as an object of study (at least not in the ordinary sense), nor as a model for the correct use of language. Philosophy is not of course, say, the study of English. (It would be tempting to call our language a philosopher's tool, as Austin does, although this metaphor is misleading since there is no separate material on which this tool is to be applied.) In a sense, I should like to argue, philosophy has no 'object', and I believe this was Wittgenstein's position. The language we speak becomes a point of focus when, in reflecting, some forms of expression appear to give rise to intractable problems, as when it seems that the word 'I' has no meaning or that any claim to know something is always erroneous. As soon as we agree on how those expressions are used, the problems vanish. (*What* expressions will give rise to problems varies with the language in question.) This point is being made in one of the remarks that are the most frequently quoted in discussing Wittgenstein and ordinary language, PI, § 116:[4]

> When philosophers use a word – 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'sentence',[5] 'name' – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? –
>
> What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[6]

I would like to make three points about this remark. The first concerns Wittgenstein's use of the word 'philosophers'. What he is referring to here are obviously traditional philosophers – the kinds of philosopher who are the target of his criticism throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*. He evidently excludes himself from this group.

4 For a meticulous discussion of Wittgenstein's use of the word 'metaphysical' in this remark, see Baker 2006.

5 The Hacker-Schulte version (PI) of the translation of the *Philosophical Investigations* gives two words, 'proposition' and 'sentence' where the German has only one: '*Satz*'. This is a response to the vexing translation problem arising from the fact that the German uses only one word for both.

6 In German: "Wenn die Philosophen ein Wort gebrauchen – »Wissen«, »Sein«, »Gegenstand«, »Ich«, »Satz«, »Name« – und das *Wesen* des Dings zu erfassen trachten, muß man sich immer fragen: Wird denn dieses Wort in der Sprache, in der es seine Heimat hat, je tatsächlich so gebraucht? – /*Wir* führen die Wörter von ihrer metaphysischen, wieder auf ihre alltägliche Verwendung zurück".

The second and third points require more discussion. The second point concerns the word 'use'. The third concerns the form of the first paragraph of the remark. I shall address each of these points in turn.

Wittgenstein apparently juxtaposes two kinds of use of the words he lists, the (traditional) philosophers' use and the use made of them in the language in which they are at home. However, it is not clear exactly what it means to speak about 'the way philosophers use a word' or *how* we are supposed to compare these.

The notion of a philosophical use also occurs in the last paragraph of PI, § 38:

> Naming seems to be a *strange* connection of a word with an object. – And such a strange connection really obtains, particularly when a philosopher tries to fathom *the* relation between name and what is named by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word 'this' innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. And *then* we may indeed imagine naming to be some remarkable mental act, as it were the baptism of an object. And we can also say the word 'this' *to* the object, as it were *address* the object as 'this' – *a strange use of this word, which perhaps occurs only when philosophizing*.[7]

Different types of use are also contrasted in PI, § 117:

> I am told: "You understand this expression, don't you? Well then – I'm using it with the meaning you're familiar with". As if the meaning were an aura the word brings along with it and retains in every kind of use.
>
> If, for example, 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.[8]

On the face of it Wittgenstein's formulation, in contrasting actual uses with various other uses, is contradictory. How are we to understand this? The philosopher imagined in Wittgenstein's remark seems to assume that the sentence uttered is meaningful because it consists of familiar words and its syntax is familiar. However, I would suggest that it is the other way round: unless the speaker's utterance makes sense to us, we have no way of telling how the individual words are to be taken.

7 Last italics mine.

8 Also PI, § 412 and OC, § 10.

Suppose someone, say, in the course of trying to install a stereo system, points to a wire and says, "This is here"; his assistant might ask, "I'm sorry, which do you mean?" or "Where did you say it is?". However, when a philosopher simply ponders the sentence "This is here?", there does not seem to be any room for his interlocutor to ask which object he means or which place he is referring to. There is no distinction between understanding what the speaker is saying and not understanding it. In that way, the case differs from an 'actual use' of the words.

How then are we to understand the distinction between 'philosophical' and 'actual' uses of words? It is not as if the philosophical and the customary use could be compared like two nomenclatures: the aim of the traditional philosophers is not just to propose a different range of application for our words as if it were a question, say, of different ways of carving up the colour spectrum or different ways of classifying birds. Rather, I would suggest, we are up against *different senses of the word* 'use', though this distinction is not explicitly marked by Wittgenstein; apparently he did not worry about the unclarity.[9]

It is hard to find words by which to mark this distinction, since the word 'use' seems to cover a variety of aspects of linguistic expression. I would like to suggest that what the phrase 'actual use' seems to hint at might be called instances of 'making use of a word' or of 'putting a word to use' – as opposed to a word appearing or occurring in a sentence.

Consider, for instance, how we may make use of the word 'know' and its cognates. I may use the word in an attributive sense, as in "He knows who stole the money", say, as a preface to saying (in one type of case) "so you may ask him" or (in a different type of case) "so you don't need to tell him".[10] Or I may use it to claim knowledge: "*I know* who stole the money – trust me!", or as a declaration: "I know who stole the money: it was…", or as an admission, "Yes, I've known it all along but I didn't want to say", etc.

Now consider, on the other hand, the following passages from philosophical texts, chosen more or less at random, and yet, I hope, possible to recognise as representative of the sorts of thing philosophers are liable to say in discussing issues of knowledge:

> Whatever the process and the means may be by which knowledge reaches its objects, there is one that reaches them directly and forms the ultimate material of all thought, viz. intuition. (Kant 1966, 21)

9 The same is true of the German. Wittgenstein uses two words here: '*Gebrauch*' and '*Verwendung*', but he seems to employ them interchangeably.

10 Hanfling has a useful discussion of situations in which we attribute knowledge to someone (2000, 94-110).

> Our knowledge springs from two fundamental sources of our soul; the first receives representations […], the second is the power of knowing an object by these representations. (Kant 1966, 44)

> We must recognize that when we know something we either do, or by reflecting can, know that our condition is one of knowing that thing, while when we believe something, we either do or can know that our condition is one of believing and not of knowing: so that we cannot mistake belief for knowledge or vice versa. (Prichard 1967, 63)

> Since one condition of knowledge is truth, it follows that no belief constitutes knowledge unless it is true. Thus, if our justification fails to guarantee the truth of what we believe, then it may leave us with a false belief. In that case, we lack knowledge. So justification sufficient to ensure us knowledge must guarantee the truth of what we believe. (Lehrer 1974, 79)

> When there is some chance that a man is in error, that his belief is incorrect, then there is some uncertainty, however slight, and he does not know for certain that what he claims is true. (Lehrer 1974, 239)

> When you *know* that something is so, the thing is absolutely *clear* to you. Thus, no further experience *could possibly clarify* the matter as far as you are concerned. Nothing that could turn up could make it even the least bit clearer to you that the thing is so. (Unger 1975, 141)

I would suggest that there is a clear contrast between the appearance the words 'knowledge' and 'knowing' make in these passages, and the instances given above of making use of the words as in attributing, claiming or admitting knowledge. The distinction should be kept distinct from the classical one between the mention and the use of a word: one typical sign of a word being mentioned is its being put in quotation marks. (I am bypassing for now the problems attaching to the use-mention distinction.) It is true that philosophers in discussing knowledge will occasionally mention rather than use the words 'know' and 'knowledge'; however, in the instances quoted here they are not just mentioning the words – they are purporting to talk *about knowledge*. They are advancing 'philosophical theses', which according to Wittgenstein cannot be done (PI, § 128). Possibly, in some cases when the word 'know' is employed rather than simply mentioned in a philosophical text, the writer's purpose may nevertheless be to say something general about the ways we may make use of the word 'know'. Traditionally, however, philosophers have been

taken to wish to say something about *knowledge as such* rather than talk about uses of the word 'knowledge'. This seems obvious, say, in the quotation from Kant: he is making a remark about the 'faculty of knowledge' and how it functions. In other cases, again, it may not be clear whether a remark is intended as an assertion about uses of the word 'knowledge' or about knowledge as such.

A conception of what it means to write philosophically about knowledge is expressed in the following passage from Keith Lehrer's book *Knowledge*:

> A theory of knowledge need not be a theory about the meaning of epistemic words any more than it need be a theory about how people come to know what they do. Instead, it may be one explaining what conditions must be satisfied and how they may be satisfied in order for a person to know something. When we specify those conditions and explain how they are satisfied, then we shall have a theory of knowledge. An analogy should be helpful at this point. Suppose a man says that there are only two kinds of theories about physical mass. Either a theory of matter is a theory about the meaning of 'mass' and semantically related physical terms, or it is a theory about how something comes to have mass. This dichotomy would be rejected on the grounds that it leaves out the critical question of what mass is, or to put it another way, it leaves out the question of what conditions must be satisfied for something to have a given mass.
>
> A theoretician in physics might be concerned with precisely the question of what conditions are necessary and sufficient for an object to have mass, or more precisely, to have a mass of *n*, where '*n*' is a variable that would be replaced by a number. Similarly, a philosopher might be concerned with precisely the question of what conditions are necessary and sufficient for a man to have knowledge, or, more precisely, to know that *p* or that *S* is true, where '*p*' is a variable that would be replaced by a declarative sentence and '*S*' by the name of a sentence. (Lehrer 1974, 5ff.)

Lehrer is arguing that there is such a thing as identifying conditions for knowing which are independent of the question how the word 'know' is used. He appears to assume that we may measure our customary ways of making use of the word 'know' against the nature of knowledge as such.[11] Thus, we might imagine cases in which we

11 Austin, surprisingly, hints at such a view when he writes: "[W]ords are not […] facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and can relook

would not make use of the word 'know', but where the conditions for attributing knowledge to someone would nevertheless be at hand, and thus an assertion of the form "N.N. knows that *p*" would be true – would be part of a complete description of how things are in the world. (G.E. Moore holding up a hand and saying "I know this is a hand" might be a case in point.) And on the other hand it might turn out that some of the cases in which a person would customarily be said to know something or other do not in fact fulfil the conditions for being called knowledge, and hence the customary use would be seen to be erroneous. A radical sceptic (such as Unger) would claim that this is true of all attributions of knowledge and knowledge claims, while those who adhere to more limited forms of scepticism would argue that it is true only where the knowledge in question concerns future events, the past, or other people's thoughts and feelings (conceivably the sceptic may add that it is acceptable for practical purposes to attribute knowledge to someone in such circumstances, although the attribution would not be strictly correct).

The comparison of theories of knowledge with theories about mass is not illuminating. Conceivably Lehrer is regarding mass here under the model of a substance like water. There is that which we commonly take to be water, but there is also a chemical formula specifying what water is. Given that, there is a possibility that something taken to be water under the normal criteria is actually some other chemical compound. Applying that to the case of knowledge, there is the possibility that some instances of what to all intents and purposes appears to be a case of a person knowing something are in fact something else. Perhaps, in accordance with Hilary Putman's twin earth thought experiment, there might be twin earth 'knowledge' which is not knowledge at all, though it coincides with what we call knowledge in its manifestations. However, putting it this way, Lehrer's suggestion sounds like a weird fantasy.

Anja Weiberg (forthcoming) has drawn attention to Wittgenstein's use of the word 'subliming' in criticising philosophers' tendency to use models which give a distorted picture of the actual use of words. She quotes his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2:

> Some will say that my talk about the concept of knowledge is irrelevant, since the concept as understood by philosophers, while indeed it does not agree with the concept as it is used in everyday speech, still is an important and interesting one, created by a sublimation

at the world without blinkers" (1970, 182). The picture drawn here is quite problematic. Austin, I am tempted to say, is at his strongest when he practices his skill of taking note of specific verbal nuances and distinctions, not when he is giving an account of the kind of activity philosophy is or might be.

> from the ordinary, rather uninteresting one. But the philosophical concept was derived from the ordinary one through all sorts of misunderstandings, and it strengthens these misunderstandings. It is in no way interesting, except as a warning. (RPP, II, § 289)

We may think that the philosopher's 'subliming' of the use of the word 'knowledge' somehow has the power of deepening our understanding of what knowledge is. But there is no basis for such a belief. (One might ponder why philosophers should consider their own – actually made up – conceptions about our words more 'interesting' than the customary ones.)

3 Bringing Words Back

Presumably, it is this form of reasoning that Wittgenstein is rejecting in PI, § 116. This brings us to the third point I wish to make about this remark. I think readers of Wittgenstein have frequently overlooked the fact that the first sentence of PI, § 116 has the form of a question, not a prescription. Wittgenstein means to remind us of something, not to prohibit certain forms of expression. To say that words like those he mentions must never be employed (must never appear) in any way that deviates from that in which they are used "in the language in which [they are] at home" (PI, § 116) (even apart from the point made about the word 'use' above) would be pointless. It would of course be futile to try to prohibit people from deciding to use words in any way they like (though they may have to explain their use if they wish to make themselves understood).

Now, as I was arguing above, what we are to compare here are not really different ways of making use of the same words, but the use we make of certain words on the one hand, and philosophers' alleged claims about the things talked about on the other hand. The philosopher's point is dependent on recognising that in presenting her conception of knowledge, say, she means to be talking about 'the same thing' that is involved in our making use of the word 'knowledge'. The tension arises because the philosophers' claims are supposed to have consequences for the use we make of those words.

Quite often, the conclusion the philosopher ends up with will have the form of the assertion that customary uses of the word in question are illegitimate. Thus, we are told that we cannot claim to have knowledge of some fact unless the possibility of us being mistaken is excluded. Normally, I may say "I know where the car is", without allowing for the possibility, say, that I may misremember where I parked it, or that it may have been towed. So the philosopher's claim would be that I do not really 'know' where the car is (he may concede, however, that the way I was using the word 'know' here is all right for everyday purposes).

'Ordinary language philosophers' are often accused of wishing to make our customary ways of speaking normative for philosophical language – but as it turns out, it is the philosophers who are trying to make their ideas about our words normative for customary speech.

How do philosophers arrive at the claims they make, say, about our inability to know things? Such claims are normally arrived at by a series of steps which starts with making observations about some customary occurrences of the word in question, and then gradually reaches a point where some quite extraordinary assertions are made about what the word means or about the conditions for using it.

In PI, § 116 Wittgenstein seems to be urging us to look back and take note of the long distance we have travelled from the ways the word enters into our customary conversations to the philosopher's claim about the conditions for the word to have application. This exercise is liable to give us a sense of vertigo: it seems every step of the way was incontestable, and yet we ended up in a place which seems totally alien. We find ourselves marooned in space. As Wittgenstein writes in PI, § 107:

> The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had *discovered*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming vacuous. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!

In practice, nothing hangs on the philosopher's claim that we cannot know this or that which, in our customary parlance, we claim to know without hesitation. In struggling with the question whether we really ever do know anything, being reminded of a customary use of the word may refresh us like a cool shower on a muggy day, as in Wittgenstein's response to Moore's claim to know that his hand is a hand:

> Why doesn't Moore produce as one of the things he knows, for example, that in such-and-such a part of England there is a village called so-and-so? In other words: why doesn't he mention a fact that is known to him and not to *every one* of us? (OC, § 462)

If Moore had wanted to remind us of some of the uses we typically make of the word 'know', Wittgenstein seems to be saying, he might, for instance, have brought up an example of someone being in a position to inform his interlocutors of some fact.

4 Conclusion

How we respond to the discovery of the distance between the philosophical claim and our customary ways of speaking will ultimately be up to us. On the one hand we may think that the philosophers' 'subliming' of our use of the word 'knowledge' will have the power of somehow deepening our understanding of human knowledge and our relation to the world. Or on the other hand we may feel that somewhere along the way the philosopher lost track of where he was going. We may then be left wondering where the 'decisive movement in the conjuring trick' was made (cf. PI, § 308) – though in the present case we may feel that the philosopher has tricked himself no less than his audience.

If we are differently minded, however, we welcome the philosopher's radical proposal, and impatiently push the everyday example aside as irrelevant and banal. The notion that we can never know anything for certain may seem to have a romantic appeal. For those on the other side of the debate, this will seem to be an illusion. Knowledge attributions and knowledge claims play a role in every type of human interaction they will argue; rather than instil suspicion of their meaningfulness, we should try to make ourselves aware of their role in human conversation.[12]

12 I wish to thank David Cockburn for incisive comments on this essay.

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