

Demythologizing the Soul

Fergus Kerr O P

When Wittgenstein chose St Augustine's account of how an infant learns to speak, he was surely signalling his intention to interrogate the whole western way of thinking (and feeling) about the relation of body and soul.¹ He was engaging in the Philosophy of Psychology, as they say. The hard thing, as he noted (*Culture and Value*, p 48), is to get hold of the difficulty *deep down*: "Because if it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots; and that involves our beginning to think about these things in a new way". Merely to *say* that we no longer believe in the story of the soul's exile in the body doesn't mean that we have worked ourselves free of all the ramifications of that powerful ancient myth. On the contrary, quickly reached 'results' in philosophy, or easily 'taught' methods and theses, only leave the student more oblivious than ever to his or her own confusion. "The philosopher *treats* a question – like an illness" (*Investigations*, no 254). The sickness must run its natural course: "slow cure is all important" (*Zettel*, no 382). Wittgenstein held that the 'solution' to a problem in philosophy is no good unless it comes to you *when you need it*. The first step in philosophical work is thus to make us see that we really did need such an answer. In fact Wittgenstein "hoped to show that you had confusions you never thought you could have had".² By far the most difficult task, in preparing students to think theologically, is to get them to recognize the extent to which they need to do philosophy. This wouldn't have surprised Wittgenstein – in fact his conversations with Drury suggest that he knew it. But his whole conception of philosophical work acknowledges the reluctance with which anybody would want to become seriously involved. The 'results' of philosophy, as he once wrote (*Inv.* no 119), are the uncovering of some bit of nonsense *together with* bruises that the intellect has got by running up against the limit of the language: "It is the bruises that allow us to recognize the value of the discovery". People are only too easily taught skills or attitudes that enable them to uncover this or that piece of plain nonsense. But no philosophical work has been done unless one has been bruised. (It would take us too far afield to trace the history of the philosopher as *wounded*.)

That Wittgenstein keeps returning to the ancient myth of the soul is easily documented. In the recently published late notes there are pages along the following lines (*Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume I p 108). The traditional dualist wants to say something like this: "To man it has been given to talk to himself in total seclusion; in an isolation far more perfect than that of any hermit". Inwardness is the gift that marks out Man. Nothing is more fundamental than the experience that the "I" has of itself. We have a picture, so Wittgenstein remarks (no 578), of "the complete solitude of the spirit with itself". This doctrine of the immediate self-presence of the human soul to itself is precisely what he interrogates indefatigably – because he recognises its power. He is also well aware of adjacent problems, about one's sanity and one's relationships.

"Everybody is mistrustful (or most people are), perhaps more so towards their relatives than towards others. Has this mistrust any basis? Yes and no. One can give reasons for it but they are not compelling. Why shouldn't a man suddenly become *much* more mistrustful towards others? Why not *much* more withdrawn? Or devoid of love? Don't people get like this even in the ordinary course of events? – Where, in such cases, is the line between will and ability? Is it that I *will* not communicate with anyone any more, or that I *cannot*? If so much can lose its attraction, why not everything? If people are wary even in ordinary life, why shouldn't they – *perhaps* suddenly – become *much* more wary? And *much* more inaccessible?" (*Culture and Value*, p 54).

The epistemology of knowing other people's thoughts, feelings etc. was never separated from the problems of life. And the problem of our knowledge of other people's minds cannot be separated from the question of one's own sanity:

"I am often afraid of madness. Do I have any reason whatsoever for assuming that this fear does not spring from, so to speak, an optical illusion: taking something to be an abyss right at my feet, which is nothing of the sort?" (p 53).

There, writing in 1946, Wittgenstein is plainly as deeply concerned with thoughts of the *Abgrund* as Sartre was (in the book published in 1943) with the problem of nothingness.

Actually there is a great deal of dualistic thinking around, Manichean ideas, metempsychosis, and so on. It isn't only the so-called "simple faithful" but also the man (or woman) on the Clapham omnibus, of whatever religion or of none, whom such doctrines fascinate. Wittgenstein is out to unmask the more sophisticated and sublimated varieties. For example: if one is inclined to agree

that language is necessary only for *communication* – i.e. that it isn't essential for *thought* – one is succumbing very likely to just one further version of that ancient hankering after the soul's independence of the body. Secondly: if one is attracted by the idea that one has some self-awareness prior to one's insertion into the language community, or that one has a knowledge of one's own mental states (sensations, feelings, thoughts) prior to, and independently of, one's ability to speak – once again this seems like the old myth of the soul, all the more difficult to nail because of the more elaborate epistemological jargon. Thirdly, and lastly, if you have a profound sense of the split between your interior life and your external behaviour you may once again be mesmerized by the dualistic myth – but not necessarily (you may *be* a hypocrite).

A reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* (Part I) which would begin to demythologize the soul might be programmatically outlined as follows.

Augustine pictures his infant self as already aware of his own identity (what is going on inside his mind) and of what is going on around him (outside his body), prior to and independently of his mastery of language. He can already refer to inner states and external things, it is just that he hasn't yet learned their names, so that he cannot tell other people what he *means*.

Wittgenstein's opening move is to undermine the plausibility of the idea that meaning is basically referring. As he said elsewhere (*Lectures and Conversations*, p 2): "Language is a characteristic part of a large group of activities – talking, writing, travelling on a bus, meeting a man, etc." Words are something with which people *operate*, in many different ways, even in such a simple and straightforward business as shopping (*Inv.* no 1). Within the first (unusually long, admittedly) paragraph of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein moves meanings out of Baby Augustine's sealed-in consciousness and rediscovers them in the mundane public world of trade. From the outset, that is to say, he wants us to see (what is obvious) that the place of meaning is in *people together* – not in the fastness of the solitary soul. Even to be capable of asking a thing's name one has already to be able to do a great deal else. (no 30).

Wittgenstein's second move has already begun – he proceeds rather as waves come into the shore, overlapping one another. It might be thought that nothing could be more basic than *pointing* – and pointing (ostensive definition) is indeed "an important part of the training" which the child receives – and that may well include establishing an association between the word and the thing, in the sense that "a picture of the thing appears before the child's mind, *vor die Seele*, when it hears the word" – but again – that

cannot be all there is to it. It is not just the purpose of words “to awaken images” (as in the Platonic anamnesis perhaps). Even so primitive a gesture as pointing will explain the meaning of a word only when it is already clear what role the word is supposed to play in the language at all (no 30). As Sellars says: “One has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all – and indeed ... a great deal more besides”.³ In effect, there is no way of learning anything from pointing except in conjunction with a great deal else. One is initiated into a whole way of life, when one learns to speak (and eventually to name and point). Wittgenstein has already introduced references to classroom instruction (no 5) and to playing games (no 7). It is as members of a school class or of a team, so to speak, that one learns to speak. Baby Augustine has to come out of his dream of interior exile and join the social activities of the group.

Wittgenstein thus conducts a first assault on the idea that naming is “some remarkable act of mind, *seelischer Akt*, as it were a baptism of an object” (no 38). He has a long way yet to go, but he has started to lay bare the ramifications of the notion that naming (or referring) is some basic “gesture” interior to the mind) which is performable on its own, prior to a great deal else. He now turns on the equally metaphysical idea that names designate what is simple and basic (*das Einfache*) – beginning about paragraph 46. Here he envisages the whole tradition from Plato to Bertrand Russell and his own early work, the *Tractatus*: the whole desire to get down to “the primary elements ... out of which we and everything else are composed”. This complements his demythologization of the story of a soul. Those who want to find essences in reality are just as bewitched as those who find entities in the mind. It is not to our purpose here to trace out this correlative theme as it weaves through the *Investigations* and beyond. It is enough to say that, in the end (*Inv.* Part II, p 226), it is (for Wittgenstein) *forms of life* that are the given – not subjective mental states (sensations, raw feels, prelinguistic meanings or whatever), and not objective substances (atoms, elements or whatever). Where we begin and end is the forms of life, which are neither forms of meaning already inscribed in our souls (innate ideas etc.) nor transcendental Platonic Forms to which our souls aspire to be united (ideas in the mind of God etc.). Still less is it the *logical forms*, the condition under which the representation of reality by thought and language was supposed to be possible, according to the *Tractatus*. Quite deliberately, Wittgenstein takes up the ancient Platonic notion of ‘form’ and coins a phrase – ‘form of life’, *Lebensform* – to establish the new way of thinking (cf *Culture and*

Value, p 48). The difficulty of the new concept may easily be documented in the nonsense that philosophers have written about it. What is *given* is the human world: neither meanings inside the mind nor essences locked into objects, but the order in reality that human beings establish by their activity together. “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, playing” (*Inv.* no 25). Form (or ‘order’) is natural, known to human beings through their common humanity – and form (or ‘order’) is movement, dynamic, biological. What is ultimate is neither our subjectivity nor physical or metaphysical objects, but our being together in the world that is sustained by such ‘life-forms’ as pitying, caressing, story-telling etc. This is an extremely difficult concept to grasp.⁴

In connection with games Wittgenstein has already mentioned the notion of ‘rules’ (e.g. no 54). Philosophers have often compared language with a calculus which has rigid rules (no 81). The comparison may be all right – but if we give into the temptation to say that our language “*only approximates*” (his italics) to such a calculus, “then you are standing on the very brink of a misunderstanding”. This leads him off on an interweaving trail which again it is not to our present purpose to follow.⁵ But, with the notion of ‘rules’, we come to the so-called ‘rule-following’ considerations which are now recognized as “the mountain range that must be crossed before Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be understood”.⁶

The topic is introduced together with some remarks on *normality*. The entire human world rests upon certain human reactions and responses which, in standard conditions, are normal. Wittgenstein’s favourite example is the case of teaching someone to write down the numbers, then you make him copy them – “And here already there is a normal and an abnormal learner’s reaction”. The very possibility of his mastering the system depends on his going on writing out the series *on his own*. His ability to go on with the numbers depends, then, on his recognising a recurrent pattern. He can never progress in arithmetic, say, but for certain standard reactions. Our ability to communicate depends on our having the same natural reactions – it depends, Wittgenstein will finally say, upon our mutual attunement in judgments (no 242). The child may copy the figures on his own but at random, *regellos* – “And then communication stops at *that point*”. At that point, and in a thousand similar instances, a child’s entry into the community that counts and recounts, that practises mathematics and literature, and all the rest, either succeeds or fails. The child may make a mistake, when he copies out the numbers on his own – but it will then be an intelligible move. It will be possible to wean him from a *systematic* mistake. But the effect of all further explanation always depends on his initial *reaction* (no 145). Our incorporation

into the human community as participants depends upon a thousand and almost brute and animal reactions to training by those who want us to succeed. If a pupil simply cannot copy out a series of figures in anything but a random order, the teacher can do nothing with him.

Even here, however, the ancient myth reappears. Suppose the child continues the series satisfactorily. How far does he have to go before you would say that he has “understood” the principle of the thing? Don’t you feel tempted to say that his understanding of the principle cannot simply consist in his continuing the series to *this*, or any other, point? Don’t you want to say that now he has succeeded in *applying* his understanding of the principle – but his understanding of it is itself a mental state from which his correct moves flow? Mustn’t the mental process of understanding be something that lies concealed behind those grossly physical phenomena (no 153)? With one exercise after another, throughout these pages, Wittgenstein searches out every last defensive move to protect the cherished idea that, in any act of meaning, “your soul as it were flew ahead and completed all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one” (no 188). To yield to any such thought is once again to submit to the myth of the existence of mental entities prior to, and independently of, the speaking of language and the writing down of figures which take place physically and which take time. If there has to be something that lies behind the utterance of any formula then it isn’t anything inside my head – it is certain *circumstances* which justify me in saying that I know how to go on, when the formula occurs to me (no 154). If there is anything that “transcends” my utterance and gives it meaning it is the intersubjective context in which I participate – not some goings-on concealed behind my eyes. If there has to be something that substantiates what I say it isn’t inside me but outside – in the social and historical world.

To understand any single sentence, as Wittgenstein says (no 199), is to be at home in a whole language. To be at home in a language, in turn, is to have mastered an immense set of skills. It isn’t only that you copy things correctly, or with mistakes that are explicable. Your mastering of the highly complex skill of repetition marks your entry into civilization. It couldn’t only have been once that somebody told you a story. It couldn’t only have been once that somebody followed a rule. There is a ‘regularity’ that pervades our life. Again and again, in his later writing, Wittgenstein brings out the astonishing fact of the extent of the systematic agreements among us. Following a rule, narrating, commanding, playing a game – these are customs, habitual practices, institutions (*ibid.*).

This marvellous passage by Stanley Cavell sums it up:

“We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying”.⁷

One discovers oneself, not in any prelinguistic moment of self-presence, but in that network of multifarious relationships.

“That I can be a man’s friend rests on his having the same *possibilities* as I myself have, or similar ones” (*Remarks on Colour*, p 57).

“We say that, in order to communicate, people must agree with one another about the meanings of words. But the criterion for this agreement is not just agreement with reference to definitions, e.g. ostensive definitions – but *also* an agreement in judgments. It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgments” (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 1978, p 343).

The judgments that Wittgenstein has in mind are of course very basic.

“How do I know that the colour that I am now seeing is called ‘green’? Well, to confirm it I might ask other people: but if they did not agree with me, I should become totally confused and should perhaps take them or myself for crazy. That is to say: I should either no longer trust myself to judge, or no longer react to what they say as to a judgment” (*ibid.* p 337).

It is the extent and the depth to which we do all agree in such judgments that makes Wittgenstein wonder – and that wonder was already expressed in the *Tractatus* (4002): “The tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated”. The agreement here, however, isn’t a contract or mutual understanding arrived at deliberately as the result of discussion. It is a being in harmony all along, attuned to one another in this or that ‘form of life’, whether it is counting, re-counting, caressing, threatening or whatever. And our sanity de-

depends on community in such judgments.

It is at this point in the *Investigations* (no 243) that the desperate desire once again breaks surface to insist on *something* in one's own interior life prior to and independently of one's immersion in time and language.

"All right – maybe our involvement with language and community has been demonstrated – but isn't there a language in which one is able to refer to what can be known only to oneself, i.e. one's immediate, private experiences, feelings, moods, sensations"?

Surely Wittgenstein doesn't want to deprive us of our very sensations? There has been a long reluctant climb-down from Baby Augustine's inner life, but isn't this the limit? In the domain of my sensations surely I am king? You can't take my sensations away from me – they are *mine*, whatever happens: incommunicably and inalienably and inimitably *mine!*

The last resort of the Cartesian soliloquist is to crawl into the crudest empiricist myth of "raw feels". But how do words "refer" to sensations? How does one establish an association between a word and a feeling? How does one learn to identify a sensation as a *pain*? How else except that words are interwoven with the original physical expression of the sensation and come to be used in its stead?

"A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour" (no 244).

Learning to "refer" to a given sensation as "pain" comes along with screaming and being comforted; the language in which to discuss the sensation calmly and clinically comes out of the physical relief of yelling and being fondled or pummeled or whatever. And yet one has this deep desire to get in between the expression of the sensation and the sensation itself *with language* – as if language were only some optional mediation (no 245). As if one's sensations were communicable only at one's own *will*. As if there were a radical gap between my feelings and my outward expression of them. In that case, Wittgenstein asks, are we premature in our assumption that an infant's smile cannot be forced or deceitful (no 249)? As Augustine said:

"Myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother".

It knew about foster-brothers, it felt the appropriate envy, it could pale its face – only it couldn't yet *say* what it felt. For pages on

end Wittgenstein encourages us to follow our desire to give in to the charm of the metaphysical idea of the disembodied languageless institution-free "I". In the end the solipsist is cornered and left with only an inarticulate sound with which to refer to his private sensations —

"But such a sound is an expression only in a particular language-game, which we may now go on to describe" (no 261).

"It's as if I cast a sidelong glance down inside at the private sensation, when I mention it — just to reassure myself that I have an experience of it prior to putting it into words that I have learned from other people" (no 274).

Thus, by the end (no 693), Wittgenstein hopes to have persuaded us that nothing is more perverse (*verkehrt*) than thinking of meaning as a mental or spiritual activity. If you imagine that then you are living in a crazy, inverted world. But that is what the tradition has encouraged us to do all along. From the Augustine quotation at the beginning of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein has been exposing the ramifications of the ancient myth of meaning as a mysterious internal process going on in secret behind our high brows. Again and again he reminds us of how meaning constantly links up with the whole system of the human way of doing things together. There is nothing left that the individual can call his own. There are no mental contents that do not owe their existence to one's collaboration in the language community. The myth has also helped to justify a whole way of life in which some few people are indeed the ones in the know, with superior insight, while the rest are the workers, the engineers (of whom Wittgenstein was once one). The dream of being only in exile from the world of the transcendental Forms colludes with the division of labour between mind and hand to sustain a world which is indeed perverse. But such implications need to be discovered in the struggle with Wittgenstein's text.

Wittgenstein's work thus articulates, in order to neutralize, every conceivable temptation to construe the inner life as composed of objects (of course *private* objects) — whether on the model of a Humean theatre of successive perceptions or a Jamesian stream of consciousness with thoughts bobbing along or something more Platonic. To release us from the incubus of that picture of the soul is a purpose, interwoven with several others, running through all his later writing. It is as though we had to let ourselves be stripped of a certain image of the soul in order to get into touch with ourselves: "It is as though Wittgenstein felt human beings in jeopardy of losing touch with their inner lives altogether", as Cavell says (*Claim*, p 91). The resistance his work arouses perhaps bears this

out. In letting him deny that we have privileged introspective knowledge of our mental states (sensations, raw feels or whatever), we feel (fear) that we have allowed him to deprive us of something absolutely essential to our own being. If one feels afraid or angry at the very idea, then perhaps one has begun to suspect that we do indeed have nothing inside, that we *are* empty. Indeed, if readers of the *Investigations* fail to be disorientated, that may be because they refuse to allow their ideas of hidden depths, incommunicable thoughts, inexpressible experiences, etc. to be brought out into the open. He once asked himself why what he was doing was important, since it seemed only to destroy everything interesting, i.e. all that is great and important (no 118). But he consoled himself with the thought that he was only destroying structures of air, by laying bare the ground of language on which they stood. If a certain image of the soul, that, in many refractions, has got oppressively in the way of our knowing ourselves, has finally turned out to be a house of wind, then we may be back on the rough ground of the language in which alone we find ourselves and each other.

The real difficulties remain. As Wittgenstein noted, for example (in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, volume II, p 99), one man may be a closed book to another: "the only way to understand someone else would be to go through the same upbringing as his". He invites us to imagine people whose upbringing is devoted to suppressing the expression of emotion in their faces and gestures, and who make themselves inaccessible to us by thinking aloud in a language unintelligible to us – they seem like the English gentry.⁸ But class is not the only barrier. Stanley Cavell writes as follows (*Claim*, p 90):

"Part of the difficulty in treating psychotics is the inability one has in appreciating *their* world, and hence in honouring them as persons; the other part of the difficulty comes in facing how close our world is (at times; in dreams) to theirs. In making the knowledge of others a metaphysical difficulty, philosophers deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another's gaze, or bear of it. Doubtless such denials are part of the motive which sustains metaphysical difficulties".

1 Cf "Stories of the Soul", *New Blackfriars*, March 1983.

2 See the Gasking-Jackson obituary in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1951.

3 Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality*, 1963, p 148.

4 This is brought out by Derek Bolton, in his lecture "Life-form and Idealism", in *Idealism – Past and Present*, edited by Godfrey Vesey, 1982; but also in his book,

An Approach to Wittgenstein's Philosophy, 1979, a Cambridge thesis supervised by G.E.M. Anscombe and C. Lewy, and by far the finest introduction available to Wittgenstein's work.

- 5 It is the trail which, for a Wittgensteinian, heads straight into the morass of general theory of meaning etc.
- 6 *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, Volume 1, by G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, 1980, p 7.
- 7 The essay appeared in 1962 but is reprinted in *Must We Mean What We Say?* The quotation comes on page 52. My understanding of Wittgenstein's writing on the soul has been deeply influenced by Cavell's splendid book, *The Claim of Reason*, 1979.
- 8 There are some beautiful exceptions.

Reviews

LANGUAGE AND LOGOS: Studies in ancient Greek philosophy presented to G E L Owen. Edited by Malcolm Schofield & Martha Nussbaum. Cambridge University Press. 1982. pp xiii + 359. £27.50.

This collection of essays, assembled in honour of Professor Owen's sixtieth birthday, is an eloquent testimonial to a highly influential and much-loved teacher. The contributors are all either former students of Owen's, or younger colleagues who have been inspired by him. As the reviewer too can bear witness, Owen has a remarkable capacity to make Greek philosophy interesting philosophically as well as historically; he also has a great gift for friendship. The affectionate and congratulatory undertone which runs through this Festschrift will be well understood by all those who have known Professor Owen. And the readiness of the contributors to disagree with Owen will also be no surprise to those who have appreciated his delight in serious argument.

The essays in this volume deal with topics ranging from the Presocratics to Plotinus, with a substantial section devoted to Aristotle: two essays on Heraclitus, five on Plato, six on Aristotle, one on the doctrine of non-propositional thought allegedly found in Plotinus, and one on the famous *sorites*. Though the level of discussion is highly professional, readers who are not experts in ancient philosophy need

not be daunted by the book, and can expect to learn much from it. Some of the contributions take up basic points, which are of importance for any understanding of the history of philosophy. Moravcsik's essay on the alarmingly off-putting, but historically extremely significant, second half of Plato's *Parmenides* is very helpful, and Irwin on "Aristotle's concept of signification" clears up very convincingly a persistent muddle, by showing that Aristotle can be read as consistently relating significance to ontology, not to any theory of meaning. Martha Nussbaum, on "Saving Aristotle's Appearances", is a useful and sympathetic exploration of Aristotle's approach to philosophy as a whole. Burnyeat on the *sorites* helps to clarify exactly what that infamous argument was and was not intended to achieve. The two articles on Heraclitus show yet again the rightness of Barnes' comment that Heraclitus "attracts exegetes as an empty jam-pot wasp; and each new wasp discerns traces of his own favourite flavour". Of the two, I found Hussey's the more enlightening, and he suggests a way of getting from *logos* in what must be its basic sense ("discourse") to *logos* as some kind of cosmic