

Concepts, Conceptual Schemes and Grammar

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Abstract This paper considers the connection between concepts, conceptual schemes and grammar in Wittgenstein’s last writings. It lists eight claims about concepts that one can garner from these writings. It then focuses on one of them, namely that there is an important difference between conceptual and factual problems and investigations. That claim draws in its wake other claims, all of them revolving around the idea of a conceptual scheme, what Wittgenstein calls a ‘grammar’. I explain why Wittgenstein’s account does not fall prey to Davidson’s animadversions against the idea of a conceptual scheme as a force operating on a pre-conceptual content. In the sequel I deny that the distinction between grammatical and empirical propositions disappears in the last writings: it is neither deliberately abandoned, nor willy-nilly undermined by the admission of hinge propositions in *On Certainty* or by the role accorded to agreement in judgement.

Keywords Concepts · Conceptual schemes · Wittgenstein · Davidson · *On certainty* · Grammar · Grammatical proposition · Empirical proposition · Hinge proposition · Framework · Agreement in judgement

My topic lies in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind. The topic of this special volume is “The Third Wittgenstein”, aka Wittgenstein’s post-*Investigations* Part I work. That period is standardly associated with epistemological topics such as knowledge and certainty, or with topics in the philosophy of psychology, notably colours or aspect-perception. Fortunately, however, there is a much more substantial overlap between these issues than a perfunctory reading of Wittgenstein’s last writings might suggest.

I shall explain why in the first section, which expounds the importance of my topic. The section “[Wittgenstein on Concepts](#)” lists eight claims about concepts that can be found in Wittgenstein’s later work. I shall start out from one of them, namely that there

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is an important difference between conceptual and factual problems and investigations, but that claim will draw in its wake other claims, all of them revolving around what we nowadays call a conceptual scheme. The section “Conceptual Investigation, Metaphysics and Grammar” introduces the conceptual/factual distinction. That distinction refers to another one, between ‘grammatical’ and empirical propositions, and hence to Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘grammar’, aka conceptual scheme. The section “Grammar and Conceptual Schemes” explains why Wittgenstein’s account does not fall prey to Davidson’s animadversions against the idea of a conceptual scheme as a force operating on a pre-conceptual content. In the sequel I deny that the distinction between grammatical and empirical propositions disappears in the last writings: it is neither deliberately abandoned (Section “Is the Conceptual/Factual Distinction Abandoned in *On Certainty*?”) nor willy-nilly undermined by the admission of hinge propositions in *On Certainty* (Section “Is the Conceptual/Factual Distinction Undermined by *On Certainty*?”) or by the role accorded to agreement in judgement (Section “Grammatical Propositions, Framework Propositions and the Role of Agreement”).

Why the Topic Matters

Wittgenstein is better-known for remarks about special *kinds* of concepts—formal concepts in the *Tractatus* and family-resemblance concepts in the *Investigations*—than about concepts simpliciter. While there are theories of concepts inspired by Wittgenstein, there have not been sustained interpretations of his own views concerning the nature of concepts. There is a straightforward excuse for this failure, namely that these views are hard to pinpoint. But there are two notable exceptions. The first is material from the early 1930s, in particular dictations to Waismann (VW); the second is material from his final period. In these passages Wittgenstein discusses the nature of concepts explicitly and at some length. What is more, he links it to topics which are central to his later work. Wittgenstein’s writings between 1945 and 1951, in particular, are an underappreciated source of reflections on concepts, word-meaning, rules and on the interconnections between these issues. This holds especially of the remarks that were posthumously collected under the title *On Certainty*.

I adopt a semantic perspective on this material by probing it for ideas on concepts, conceptual schemes and rules. I do not, however, proffer a ‘semantic reading’ of *On Certainty* to compete with the framework, transcendental, epistemic and therapeutic readings usefully distinguished by Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner (2005). For one thing, I am not considering *On Certainty* in isolation from other material of that period, such as *Remarks on Colour* and *Zettel*. For another, I am not claiming that semantic ideas hold the key to these later writings. What I am claiming is that the latter contain semantic ideas which are important both for exegetical and for substantive reasons.

Let me mention one general exegetical moral that can be drawn from this material. Some opponents of ‘orthodox’, analytic interpretations are impressed by how ‘Old Wittgensteinian’ the man himself clearly was during the transition period, as well they should be. But they have tried to console themselves by mooted that the mature later work became progressively therapeutic and ‘open-textured’.¹ The last discussions of

¹ Pichler (2004) is a particularly elaborate and philologically conscientious manifestation of this sentiment.

semantic issues belie this hypothesis about Wittgenstein's intellectual development. Rather than being more therapeutic or woolly, they tend to be more constructive and straightforward than some earlier remarks. This goes even for the occasional hesitations and qualifications. Indeed, Wittgenstein comes closest to being therapeutic when he throws caution to the wind and propounds provocative claims designed to jerk us out of our intellectual complacency. A case in point from his last writings is his claim (unsupported by argument) that perceptible qualities need not causally supervene on micro-structural properties, even if this upsets our established concepts of causation (Z §§608-10; LPP 100-1). Conversely, Wittgenstein is at his least therapeutic and most argumentative when he makes good on the following undertaking: "In the place of turbulent conjectures and explanations we want to put the quiet weighing of linguistic facts" (Z §447, see also §211). For trying to get it right will often require modifying or restricting initially attractive philosophical views or therapeutic interventions.

Wittgenstein on Concepts

To appreciate the substantive importance of our topic, let us look at some claims about concepts that one can garner from Wittgenstein's later oeuvre:

- (I) There is a difference between philosophical problems and investigations, which are conceptual, and those of empirical science, which are factual.
- (II) Concepts can be analysed, namely through analysing the "application" of words (PI §383). As regards colours, Wittgenstein promises us no "theories of colours (neither physiological nor psychological)", but instead the "logic of colour concepts" (RC I §122). Colour-exclusion statements like "Nothing can be red and green all over" are not based on either the physiology of colour perception or on an essential feature of colour experience. Rather, they result from linguistic rules that exclude a sentence like "This object is simultaneously red and green all over" as nonsensical. For this reason, a phenomenological analysis of the kind sought by Goethe and Husserl must turn out to be a "conceptual analysis" (RC II §16). As part of such analysis we compare and contrast (establish analogies, disanalogies, implications and exclusions between) concepts, for instance between the concepts of knowing, believing, and being certain (OC §§8, 21).
- (III) Concepts are part of a form of life. "Our concepts reflect our life" (RC III §302). They are both "expressions of our interest, and direct our interest" (PI §570). What concepts we employ depends on our cognitive requirements, notably on what distinctions we find it imperative or expedient to draw. Conversely, the way in which we conceptualize things can also shape what differences we notice or regard as important and what sort of things we can take an interest in.
- (IV) Concepts vary between individuals and groups, and they are subject to change.
- (V) 'Concept formation', i.e. the adoption and modification of concepts, and the resulting conceptual scheme ('grammar'), provides a pre-empirical framework for experience.
- (VI) 'Grammar', aka our conceptual scheme, is not dictated by any putative essence of reality, but autonomous in an important respect. While it may be

partly shaped by pragmatic constraints, it cannot be correct or incorrect in a metaphysical sense (e.g. PI II. xii).

- (VII) To possess a concept is to possess a range of abilities, in particular abilities connected to linguistic understanding.
- (VIII) Concepts are connected to language and word-meaning.

All of these claims are of considerable substantive interest. In this essay, I shall concentrate on a cluster of claims which are especially evident in Wittgenstein's last writings and which concern the connection between concepts, conceptual schemes and grammatical rules, i.e. claims I, III, IV and V.² But while I specifically discuss whether Wittgenstein came to abandon the distinction between grammatical and empirical propositions, I do not believe that these writings constitute a general break with the *Investigations*, by contrast to the genuine break separating the *Tractatus* from the work after 1929 (see Glock 2007a, 43–6). Consequently I shall also draw on earlier material where appropriate.

Conceptual Investigations, Metaphysics and Grammar

According to Zettel §458, “philosophical investigations” are “conceptual” rather than “factual” (*sachlich*). Conversely, it is constitutive of ‘metaphysics’—i.e. misguided philosophy—that it confuses factual and conceptual investigations. Metaphysics purports to establish true propositions about the essence of reality. Its propositions have the *form* of statements of fact, except that they seem to capture necessary rather than contingent facts. Science teaches us that no humans run faster than 40 km/h, or that there is no intra-mercurial planet; the metaphysician that no human can have the pains of another; Kant that there cannot be uncaused events. Wittgenstein dismisses this parallel between scientific and metaphysical claims as illusory. In so far as metaphysics is ‘descriptive’ (to use Strawson’s label), that is, attempts to capture rather than to revise our actual ways of thinking, it consists of (often distorted) ‘grammatical propositions’, propositions that express rules for the use of words, but in the disguise of factual propositions (see BB 18, 35; AWL 18, 65-9; WVC 67).

What the later Wittgenstein calls the ‘grammar’ of a language is the system of its constitutive rules, those rules which define the language. Grammar in this sense includes not just rules that are grammatical in the received sense, but any rule which determines what it makes sense to say in a particular language, including rules which are commonly described as syntactic, logical, or pragmatic (see PR 51; PG 60–4, 133, 143; PI §496; Glock 1996a, b, 150–5). According to Wittgenstein, ‘grammatical’ rules or propositions like

- (1) Black is darker than white

constitute our ‘method’ or ‘form of representation’. They lay down what counts as an intelligible description of reality, establish internal relations between concepts (“black” and “white”) and license transformations of empirical propositions (from “Coal is black and snow is white” to “Coal is darker than snow”). While empirical propositions can be said to describe possible states of affairs, necessary propositions cannot be said to

² For a discussion of VII and VIII and their import for contemporary theories of concepts see Glock (2009b). For II see Glock (1996a, 203-8), and on VII see Hacker (1986, ch. VII) and Forster (2004).

describe necessary states of affairs. They are not moves within a language-game, but constitutive of these language-games. Their role is *normative* rather than *descriptive*.

This holds not just for mathematical propositions and definitional truths like “Black is darker than white”, but also for the aforementioned propositions of descriptive metaphysics. Thus Wittgenstein suggests

(2) Every event has a cause

is not synthetic, as Hume and Kant would have it, but expresses a ‘rule of language’ that is partly constitutive of what we mean by an event and excludes as nonsensical an utterance like “My breakdown had no cause” (AWL 16). Such a straightforward ‘grammatical’ treatment of this particular metaphysical claim is problematic. Our conceptual scheme does not simply rule out as nonsensical the expression “uncaused event”. Let’s assume that one morning we find dinosaur footprints on the ceiling. Let’s also assume that we have a reason to abandon the search for an explanation of the footprints, e.g. because the laws of nature not only fail to provide one, but suggest that none is to be had—the example of quantum mechanics shows that this is at any rate a possibility. Even in that case, we would not cease to call the appearance of the footprints an event. A physical change would be an event, even if a causal explanation of it could be ruled out *ab initio*. Nor does the possibility of an uncaused event arise exclusively out of a change to the concept of an event brought about by quantum mechanics. Even in the eighteenth century, being caused was *not* part of the *explanation* of what an event is, and any physical change would have *counted as an event*, irrespective of whether a cause for it is in the offing (this is why both Hume and Kant, substantive differences notwithstanding, regarded (2) as synthetic). In short, being caused is not part of our explanation of the term “event”, or of the linguistic rules governing its use. At the same time, *Remarks on Colour* feature more promising reasons for holding that the allegedly synthetic a priori statements of colour geometry such as (1) in fact express rules which are constitutive of our colour concepts.

Grammar and Conceptual Schemes

There are obvious parallels between what the later Wittgenstein calls a ‘grammar’ and what contemporaries call a conceptual scheme. According to Quine (1981, 41) the term “conceptual scheme” derives from Pareto. Quine himself has used it intermittently. For example, he speaks of the “conceptual scheme of science as a tool for predicting future experience” (1953, 42; see also 1969, 1, 24). In a similar vein, Strawson describes “our conceptual scheme”, as “the way we think of the world”, and he sets descriptive metaphysics the task of elucidating “the actual structure of our thought about the world” (1959, 15, 9). In the wake of Quine and Strawson, numerous philosophers have employed the terms “conceptual scheme” and “conceptual framework” to refer to the web of fundamental notions and principles which it is the business of philosophy to investigate or articulate.

The proximity of this conceptual scheme/empirical content distinction to Wittgenstein’s position is even more striking when we consider claim V from our list above.

“The limits of the empirical—is *concept-formation*” (RFM 237). A mathematical proof, which amounts to a particular kind of concept-formation, “conducts our

experience into particular channels, so to speak” (RFM 238). This metaphor anticipates the riverbed analogy of OC (on which more below). And it obviously echoes Kant’s distinction between empirical intuitions on the one hand, the a priori forms of intuition and of understanding (categories) on the other.

At the same time, it will set alarm bells ringing among Davidsonians. They regard the dichotomy between conceptual scheme and empirical content as a ‘third dogma of empiricism’, to be consigned to the dustbin of history along with the dogmas of the analytic/synthetic distinction and of reductionism allegedly unmasked by Quine. Elsewhere (1996b) I have argued that Wittgenstein’s distinction between grammatical and empirical propositions does not fall prey to Quine’s attacks, but helps to undermine the latter’s position. In this essay I shall only tackle a *sui generis* Davidsonian criticism of the more specific distinction between conceptual framework and empirical content.

According to Davidson, there cannot be a plurality of conceptual schemes, and therefore the very idea of a conceptual scheme is vacuous. “For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one” (1984, 197–8).³ This last step is a non-sequitur. To speak meaningfully of a conceptual scheme, that scheme must be distinguishable from something else. But that something need not be an *alternative* conceptual scheme, it could also be the *content* of the one and only scheme. According to conceptual absolutists like Kant or Strawson, there could not be alternatives or changes to our conceptual scheme. But for that very reason the unique and immutable scheme can be distinguished from the *body of empirical beliefs*, which are varied and constantly subject to change.

Admittedly, Davidson also challenges the dichotomy between scheme and content. He distinguishes two versions that it might take. The first, which he associates with Strawson, trades on a distinction between analytic and synthetic truths.

Using a fixed system of concepts (words with fixed meanings) we describe alternative universes. Some sentences will be true simply because of the concepts or meanings involved, others because of the way of the world. In describing possible worlds, we play with sentences of the second kind only (1984, 187).

Davidson repudiates this version on the grounds that the analytic-synthetic distinction is untenable. Concepts or meaning cannot be kept apart from theories about the world or content, since meaning is ‘contaminated by theory’. This view has been advocated not just by Quine, but also by Feyerabend and Kuhn. To Davidson’s regret, however, their attack on the version of the scheme/content distinction has encouraged them to adhere to a second version. Instead of “a distinction within language of concept and content”, they adopt “a dualism of total scheme (or language) and uninterpreted content” (1984, 187). Accordingly, I shall speak of an *internal* and an *external* version of the scheme/content distinction.

Davidson rejects downright the Kantian attempt to explain a conceptual scheme as ‘a way of organising’ a content consisting of experience, data, or the world. Davidson condemns these notions as metaphorical, and so they often are, though not

³ Davidson’s ulterior aim in repudiating the scheme/content distinction is to deny the intelligibility of conceptual diversity and thereby to pull the rug from underneath the threat of conceptual relativism. For a discussion of that wider debate, including the conceptual relativism of Wittgenstein’s claim that grammar is autonomous, see Glock (2007b).

uniformly. In Kant, the idea that the understanding—the faculty of concepts—organises experience—the manifold of empirical intuitions—is part of an elaborate doctrine. The trouble is rather that this doctrine amounts to a dubious transcendental psychology, a set of quasi-empirical speculations about how the mind creates the order of nature by imposing its structure on postulated raw data (see Strawson 1966; Rorty 1970).

Davidson's critique of the idea of a scheme that operates on a pre-conceptual given (whether it be the world or experience) is well taken. The same cannot be said, however, of his animosity towards the internal scheme/content distinction. That internal version gives sense to the notion of a conceptual scheme without invoking mentalist metaphors, psychologistic doctrines or the empiricist myth of the given. Instead of postulating an organising psychic mechanism—the scheme—and a conceptually ineffable input on which it operates, it distinguishes between sentences which we use to make statements of fact and sentences which we use to explain concepts and conceptual relations.

Such an intra-linguistic contrast between propositions that constitute our concepts and propositions which employ concepts to make factual statements is drawn not just through the various analytic/synthetic distinctions, but also through Wittgenstein's grammatical/empirical distinction. By contrast to Kant, Wittgenstein does not postulate an organising psychic mechanism—the understanding—which imposes order on a chaotic pre-conceptual input. Instead, Wittgenstein's distinction between conceptual scheme and experience operates at a linguistic level, as he makes clear in *Remarks on Colour*: “For it is not after all a psychic accompaniment ... but rather the employment which distinguishes logical from empirical propositions (I §32)”. Wittgenstein contrasts two kinds of statements which feature in our linguistic practice, and ultimately two ways of employing sentences—descriptively, to make factual claims, and normatively, to articulate our concepts. In the final analysis, it is diverse ways of acting that underlie the differences between types of propositions: “The limits of the empirical are not assumptions that are unwarranted or intuitively recognized as correct; but rather modes of comparing and acting” (RFM 387).

Is the Conceptual/Factual Distinction Abandoned in *On Certainty*?

The import of this last passage is: our system of thinking and speaking may be articulated through propositions but is ultimately constituted by a set of practices. That message clearly anticipates *On Certainty*. Nevertheless several commentators have indicated that Wittgenstein abandoned or substantially weakened the dichotomy of empirical and grammatical propositions in *On Certainty* (e.g. von Wright 1982, 173–4; Grayling 2001, 306). There is some *prima facie* evidence for this suggestion.

On Certainty explicitly raises the question of whether “rule and empirical proposition merge into one another?” (§309). Three *possible* grounds for a positive answer can be detected. The first arises from the propositions that Moore claimed to know for certain, e.g.

- (3) The earth has existed for many years before my birth
- (4) Right now I am awake and sitting at my computer

(5) Here is a hand

These propositions have the *form* of empirical propositions, yet at the same time they are among the ‘hinges’ on which our language-games turn, just like grammatical propositions (see §§ 94-5, 136, 211, 308, 401-3, 341-43, 614, 655). The second possible ground is that we can imagine circumstances in which certain sentences turn from grammatical propositions into moves of the language-game. Finally, according to §§318-9, “there is no sharp boundary” “between methodological propositions and propositions within a method” or “between propositions of logic and empirical propositions”.

On the other hand, Wittgenstein immediately adds that this “lack of sharpness *is* that of the boundary between *rule* and empirical proposition” (§319) and is due to the fact that the concept of a proposition is itself vague (§320). But that a boundary or division is not “sharp” does not mean that it is spurious or unworkable. Moreover, the first two potential grounds are accommodated in Wittgenstein’s *functional* conception of grammatical rules: the logical status of a sentence is due not to its linguistic form, but to the way it is used, and for this reason it can *change*: “any empirical proposition can be transformed into a postulate, and then becomes a norm of description” (§321). Admittedly, Wittgenstein suspects this statement to be reminiscent of the *Tractatus* (in fact it recalls PR 59). But this does not amount to assimilating empirical and grammatical propositions; it rather seems to point in the opposite direction. It would be dogmatic to insist that *any* proposition could change its role from grammatical to empirical or vice versa, since the revisability of our form of representation is restricted. Thus the famous metaphor of the “river-bed of thoughts” distinguishes between “the movement of the water on the river-bed” (changes in empirical beliefs), “the shift of the bed itself” (conceptual changes brought about by adopting new grammatical rules), and the “hard rock” of the river-bank which is not subject to alteration (OC §§95-9, see also §144). The latter includes e.g. propositions of logic which partly define what we mean by thinking, inferring, language, while the shifting sand consists of propositions which have been used normatively at one stage and descriptively at another.

The evidence that *On Certainty* abandons the distinction between the empirical and the grammatical, the factual and the conceptual, is far from conclusive, therefore. At the same time there is compelling evidence for the persistence of the distinction. §51 acknowledges a difference between empirical propositions and “logical” descriptions of the “conceptual (linguistic) situation”. Furthermore, in the river-bed analogy itself Wittgenstein explicitly rejects the assimilation of logic or grammar to experience.

If someone were to say: ‘So logic too is an empirical science’ he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same sentence (*Satz*) can be treated at one time as something to be tested by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (§98)

Finally, any lingering doubts can be dispelled by realising that *Remarks on Colour*, which hail from the same manuscript sources, clearly and persistently acknowledge a difference between the grammatical/conceptual and the empirical/factual.

What is correct, according to *On Certainty*, is that

- a) what we call ‘empirical propositions’ does not form a homogenous group (§213)
- b) the distinction between grammatical, empirical and hinge propositions is not hard and fast (§§52, 97, 318)

- c) classifying a proposition can only be done by looking at the function it has in a particular context (§§5, 57).
- d) some propositions change their status, and not just diachronically, in a conceptual change. Even when the use of a term within a linguistic community is relatively stable, a sentence can be used either normatively or descriptively by different groups or by one and the same person in different contexts.

(a) indicates that Wittgenstein came to recognize that the grammatical/empirical dichotomy is not exhaustive. Rather than reducing the types of propositions to *one*, as the empiricist assimilation would have it, Wittgenstein expands them to *three*.

There is an alternative interpretation, according to which he regarded hinge propositions as a type of grammatical propositions (Moyal-Sharrock 2004a, b). This reading has a *fundamentum in rebus*. Wittgenstein seems to have toyed with this idea (e.g. OC §§51-2, 57)

Yet other passages clearly imply the opposite. Thus he maintains of Moore's propositions that they "play a *similar* role in our system of empirical judgements" (OC §137). If these propositions were not themselves meant to be part of our system of empirical judgements, Wittgenstein would have used "for" rather than "in". Similarly, "I want to say: propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and *not only propositions of logic*, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language)" (OC §401, my emphasis). Since "propositions of logic" is Wittgenstein's preferred terminology for grammatical propositions in his last writings (e.g. OC §§56-7, 68, 447, 628) this commits him to distinguishing between the conceptual (logical, grammatical) framework and hinge propositions, which unlike grammatical propositions have at least the 'form' of empirical propositions. Admittedly, he distances himself from the terminology used in this remark, but apparently on the grounds that the real foundations are practices rather than their propositional manifestations (OC §§400-2).

In any event, treating hinge propositions as grammatical propositions does not comport with Wittgenstein's overall characterization of their peculiar role. Hinge propositions like (3)-(5) are empirical in that their negation makes sense. At the same time the possibility of their being false is restricted by the fact that our whole system of beliefs depends on them. Doubts concerning them is infectious: it does not fit with anything else I believe and thereby undermines my system of beliefs. "There seem to be propositions that have the character of experiential propositions, but whose truth is for me unassailable. That is to say, if I assume that they are false, I must mistrust all my judgements" (RC III §348).

Consider (5). Doubting it would throw my belief-system into disarray. At the same time, there is absolutely no problem in using *our concepts* to coherently describe the following scenario: I have been drugged during sleep, my hand has been amputated and replaced by an artificial limb, and on waking up I mistakenly utter (5). The very phrasing of the passage just quoted manifests appreciation of this point. If the denial of the 'experiential propositions' that provide hinges for our judgement were nonsensical, there would be no such thing as assuming that they are false. But other passages suggest that Wittgenstein queried the intelligibility of negating hinge-propositions.

He clearly maintained that the denial of hinge-propositions is standardly a sign of 'dementia' (e.g. OC §§155, 257); but equally clearly, that is not the same as

linguistic incompetence. Then again, for better or worse he maintained that ‘ontological’ statements like ‘There are physical objects’ are nonsense (OC §32). Yet these are neither negations of hinge propositions nor themselves hinge propositions, but rather philosophical extrapolations from such propositions, extrapolations which use what the *Tractatus* called formal concepts. More troubling is the fact that he is inclined to call

(6) This thing that looks like a hand isn’t just a superb imitation—it really is a hand nonsense, on the grounds that it does not convey information (OC §461). But these grounds are feeble. As argued above, there is a perfectly intelligible state of affairs which is being excluded by (6), without any need for altering the rules of English. Indeed, just now I described a context in which it even conveys information. Finally, there are passages in which Wittgenstein queries whether we ‘understand’ the denial of a hinge-proposition (e.g. OC §§32, 157). And in the next section I shall concede that such a denial can transgress the bounds of intelligibility, namely in contexts in which the standard contrast between a statement making sense and it being true vanishes.

Is the Conceptual/Factual Distinction Undermined by *On Certainty*?

Whether or not the last writings treat hinge propositions as grammatical, it is clear that they continue to draw a line between our conceptual scheme—aka grammar, logic, method—on the one hand, and the empirical input—aka empirical propositions, moves within a method or language-game—on the other. The question can, and has been raised, however, whether this distinction is actually compatible with the position Wittgenstein adopts in his last writings.

That question has little bite in so far as it concerns points (b), (c) and (d). Regarding (b), anyone who applies semantic categories to the actual practice of a natural language—Quineans included—will have to accept that there can be borderline cases.⁴ That much Wittgensteinianism is mere common sense, and ought to be *consensus omnia*. For instance,

(7) Orders are issued by someone in a position of authority

is a conceptual truth about our concept of an order (as opposed to, e.g., a wish or request). Contrast

(8) In a majority of cases, orders are obeyed

A competent speaker can hesitate on whether to regard (8) as an empirical generalization or as a claim that is partly constitutive of her concept of an order, e.g. on the grounds that this is part and parcel of the concept of authority and hence of the concept of an order.

It is important to note that (c) raises an independent point. One and the same sentence can be used *very definitely* to make a factual claim on one occasion and

⁴ For instance, as Grice and Strawson (1956) pointed out, it is just as much a matter of contestable judgement whether “All coloured things are extended” is true as whether it is analytic.

equally definitely to articulate a conceptual connection on another. Thus (8) could be used deliberately to express a sociological generalisation, yet it might equally deliberately be used to make a claim which the speaker regards as constitutive of the concept of an order. Accordingly, the conceptual/factual classification applies to the use of sentences in a particular context.

Sentences are often used at the border of logic and the empirical, such that their sense changes back and forth across the border, and they count as the expression of a norm on one occasion, the expression of an experience on another. (RC I §32)⁵

That line of reasoning immediately extends to (d). The need to acknowledge that sentences can change their status arises from the indisputable fact that some propositions that used to be regarded as necessary (analytic, a priori, conceptual, etc.) are now regarded as empirical, while others are now regarded as necessary. That need does not threaten the empirical/grammatical distinction, provided that it remains possible to distinguish between a change in empirical beliefs on the one hand, a change of meaning or concepts on the other (see Glock 1996b, 209–17).

Wittgenstein's last writings are particularly alive to various kinds of conceptual diversity and change. He rightly takes for granted that concepts *can* be shared between different subjects.⁶ At the same time he is interested in conceptual variance and change—not just across different forms of life (a major theme in *On Certainty*), but also *within* a single linguistic community. Thus *Remarks on Colour* points out that different speakers of the same language can have *somewhat* different, e.g. more or less refined, colour concepts, and that more or less distinct colour concepts will hamper communication between speakers to a greater or lesser degree (III §§32, 36, 160).

However, the recognition of conceptual change and variance dates back to the 1930s and is equally prominent in *Remarks on Foundations of Mathematics*. Empirical propositions are “hardened” into rules, while rules lose their privileged status and are abandoned (RFM 325). For example the sentence “An acid is a substance which, in solution, turns litmus-paper red” lost its normative status—acids now being defined as proton-donors—and turned into an empirical statement which holds true of most, but not all acids. Conversely the statement “Gold has 79 protons” was originally an empirical discovery but is now partly constitutive of what we mean by “gold”.

An independent challenge to the distinction arises solely from (a), the recognition of the fundamental status of hinge propositions, provided that the latter are not themselves grammatical, as I argued in the previous section. Thus Glüer (2001) maintains that there is an irresolvable tension between two features of Wittgenstein's position, namely the grammatical/empirical distinction on the one hand, and the concession that some empirical propositions, i.e. the hinge propositions, have a

⁵ This does not mean that the sense of a sentence can remain constant through such a change in logical status, since that status partly determines the meaning of its constituent terms, but rather that it has a different sense according to whether it is used normatively or descriptively.

⁶ This may be on account of Frege's discussion of the shareability of concepts and senses. Unfortunately, the anti-subjectivist force of Frege's arguments continues to be lost on Fodor and his followers. See Glock (2009a).

semantic or conceptual rather than merely pragmatic significance in that they are constitutive of meaning.

In my view, by contrast, the apparent tension can be resolved by looking at the precise relation between different kinds of hinge propositions on the one hand, meaning and concepts on the other. As explained above, Wittgenstein did not think of hinge propositions like (3)–(5) as grammatical or semantically constitutive. They are foundations of “our thinking (our language)”, to be sure; yet only in the sense that error or doubt about them removes the *framework* for operating with certain terms or employing certain concepts. This is an important point. But it does not cast doubt on the possibility of distinguishing between a sentence having a grammatical (normative) and its having an empirical (descriptive) role in a particular context. It casts doubt instead on the idea that speakers could use sentences normatively (as grammatical propositions), *independently of empirical facts* or of themselves *knowing* certain empirical facts.

This may undermine rationalist distinctions between the a priori and the a posteriori, or between the analytic and the synthetic. It definitely undermines an idea in the *Tractatus*, which I have called the “autonomy of sense” (Glock 1996a, b, 135–9, 269–74, 155). Whether or not an expression makes sense need not, and indeed cannot, be entirely independent of contingent matters of fact. Nor can it be independent of speakers knowing those facts with which they need to be acquainted in order to be able to use the expression in a rule-governed manner, such as facts concerning the basics of human communication.⁷ Nonetheless, explaining or articulating the sense an expression has, courtesy of such empirical facts, does not therefore turn into an employment of that expression for the sake of stating an empirical fact. Least of all does it turn into a statement of the indefinitely many and varied empirical facts on which the expression having sense depends. That the game of tennis can be played presupposes a variety of empirical facts, ranging from the gravitational constant to the physical capacities of human beings and their acquaintance with the rules. But of course this in no way implies that the rules of tennis cannot be distinguished from empirical statements about these framework conditions.

Without any whiff of inconsistency, therefore, Wittgenstein’s last writings distinguish three elements (see PI II. xii; RPP I §48; Z §§350, 387–8):

- the grammatical rules which *constitute* a language-game like that of measurement, notably by laying down the meaning of certain terms.
- the *application* of these rules in *empirical propositions* (specific measurements).
- the *framework* or “scaffolding” which allows us to operate the language-game.

⁷ The facts which constitute the framework of our language-game are not uniformly certain or truisitic in the way in which hinge-propositions are, but can be fairly *recherché* facts of nature (both human and non-human). But presumably the facts which speakers must know in order to be able to adopt and operate linguistic rules may be predominantly hinge-propositions. Now, *On Certainty* famously rejects Moore’s claim to know hinge-propositions, and this implies that some of the facts presupposed in communication cannot be known either. As I have argued (Glock 2004), however, Wittgenstein’s critique of Moore is fuelled by an unduly narrow conception of knowledge, and one which is at odds with another strand in his final writings, one which recognizes that knowledge requires not the possibility of doubt but simply the ability to say how things are: ‘I know how it is = I *can* say how it is, and it is as I say it is’ (LW II 58).

These three elements correspond to grammatical, empirical and a certain type of hinge proposition, respectively.

Grammatical Propositions, Framework Propositions and the Role of Agreement

There is a difference between laying down a rule for the use of an expression and stating facts which are causally prerequisite if such a laying down is to be possible or useful. Once this is appreciated, passages that seem to threaten the empirical/grammatical distinction can straightforwardly be accommodated.

If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either. ... I am no more certain of the meaning of my words than of certain judgements. Can I doubt that this colour is called 'blue'? (OC §§114, 126)

If I could not be certain of what this colour is called in English, I would not know what "blue" *means in English* (though I might be certain what I mean by it). And that this ⇨ colour is called "blue" is an empirical fact, but one about which I can be certain, one of the hinges of my thinking and speaking. By the same token, philosophical doubt about this kind of hinge throws into disarray my confidence about what my utterances mean. "Doubt gradually loses its sense. This language—game just is like that" (§56, see §494, 498).

Nevertheless, there remains a difference between using e.g.

(9) That colour ⇨ is called "blue"

to state an empirical fact about the Anglophone community (what von Wright (1963) calls a norm proposition) and to use it in order to express a norm by reference to which the members of that community can justify or criticize their employment of "blue".

Next consider another potentially troublesome passage:

'I cannot doubt this proposition, without abandoning all judgement'. But what sort of proposition is that? (It is reminiscent of what Frege said about the law of identity.) It is certainly not an empirical proposition. It doesn't belong to psychology. It has rather the character of a rule. (OC §494)

At first blush, this might suggest that a hinge proposition has the character of a rule. In fact, however, no hinge proposition is specified either in §494 or its surroundings. So the proposition the status of which is being pondered is not a hinge proposition. Nor can it be the sentence quoted at the outset, since for lack of anaphoric reference of "this proposition" we are dealing with a schema rather than a proposition. The parenthetical reference to Frege strongly suggests that the proposition being scrutinized is something like

(10) Casting doubt on certain propositions can undermine one's capacity to judge

Unlike the hinge propositions to which it alludes, (10) can be regarded as a (non-trivial) grammatical remark, and within a philosophical debate such grammatical reminders can have the force of invoking a rule (see Glock 1991).

Keeping the trichotomy grammatical/empirical/framework in mind also helps to appreciate why Wittgenstein's remarks about the role of agreement do not undermine the empirical/grammatical distinction.

Disputes do not break out ... over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not... That is part of the scaffolding from which our language operates... (Human beings) agree in the *language* they use. That is not an agreement in opinions but in form of life. If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also ... in judgements. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call 'measuring' is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement. (PI §240-2)⁸

The idea that language requires agreement in judgements as well as definitions *would* abolish logic if the rules of measurement included the results of particular measurements. Wittgenstein specifically denies this, and he is obviously right. Now consider the statement

- (11) There is agreement not only in our definitions of words, but also in judgements employing them

If (11) were wrong, not only would one of our framework certainties collapse, our linguistic rules (concepts) in their entirety would "lose their point" (PI §142; RFM 200). But that by itself does not render (11) part of the rules for the use of English words or of the concepts expressed by them. There is, however, a snag concerning the *specific concept of measuring*, and this snag gives license to the final sentence of our passage. It is at least arguable that a technique which did not produce such consensus would not *count* as measuring. In that case the rules for that term are not exhausted by those specifying the *methods* of measurement. Yet this is in line with Wittgenstein's very catholic (some would say excessively holistic) view of what belongs to grammar, i.e. is constitutive of our concepts.

The following passage varies the theme of agreement in an interestingly different direction.

We say: human beings, in order to communicate, must agree with one another about the meaning 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 judgement. It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgements. (RFM 343)

Here agreement is treated not as a framework condition for using words, but linked to the meaning of words at a semantic level. But the nature of this link is

⁸ Baker and Hacker (1985, 256-8) note an apparent inconsistency in this passage, namely between the idea that the agreement required for communication is "not an agreement in opinion but in form of life" and insisting that there must be agreement in judgements. There are two ways of rendering the passage consistent: either by reading the former sentence as allowing that "agreement in form of life" includes yet is not *exhausted* by agreement in opinions/judgements or by imputing to Wittgenstein a distinction between opinions on the one hand and judgements on the other. There is support for both options, and no need to decide the matter in the current context.

completely in line with Wittgenstein's mature philosophy of language and once more does not undermine the grammatical/empirical contrast. Wittgenstein acknowledges two criteria on the basis of which we credit an individual speaker with understanding an expression *e*: the capacity to explain *e*—or at least to recognize a correct explanation—and the capacity to apply *e* (see PI §§137–84). At the communal level, this straightforwardly translates into agreement with reference to the definition of *e* and agreement in judgements involving *e*. Accordingly, that (11*) There is agreement not only in our definition of *e*, but also in judgements employing *e* holds is a criterion for members of a linguistic community agreeing on the meaning of *e*, though not the only one. But of course this in no way suggests that (11*) is among the grammatical propositions which are constitutive of the meaning of *e*. Rather,

(12) Agreement in judgement is a criterion for agreement in meaning

is a grammatical proposition which expresses a constitutive conceptual connection between the notions of agreement in judgement and agreement in meaning and indirectly between application and understanding. No threat lurks here for distinguishing between grammatical propositions and empirical judgements involving *e*.

There is, however, a final complication. And it may constitute an important kernel of truth in the apparently contrary proposals discussed, respectively, in the last two sections, namely that hinge propositions are grammatical rather than empirical and that they undermine the grammatical/empirical distinction. It is central to that distinction that sense antecedes truth: the question of whether a use of words expresses something true can only arise when that use makes sense; but one can use words meaningfully—even in assertoric sentences—without saying something true. At the same time, one cannot apply a word meaningfully to an object to which it *cannot* apply truth-fully.

For a similar reason, there are situations in which the contrast between sense and truth and between understanding and knowledge disappears. One can meaningfully but falsely maintain of a football (e.g. the one of the 1966 World Cup Final) that it is red. But if a normally sighted person, in propitious circumstances, maintains of a white football directly visible to her that it is red, then that utterance (in so far as it is sincere) shows that she has misunderstood the colour-word “red”. This is yet another way in which doubt gradually loses its sense (in the words of OC §56). There are situations in which it betokens lack of semantic understanding rather than factual ignorance or irrationality. This is because a meaningful yet false statement must be the result of ignorance, and it is one of the messages of *On Certainty* that ignorance is not always an option. But these limiting cases are the exception. In most cases the divergence between sense and truth, understanding and knowledge operates smoothly, pretty much as Wittgenstein had it. What is more, by scrutinizing both the ordinary and the extraordinary cases he brings out one important feature of the distinction between sense and truth, concepts and facts. It is intimately tied to the contrast between two kinds of mistakes evincing, respectively, lack of understanding and factual ignorance. That contrast in turn is linked to another Wittgensteinian idea—exaggerated by some, unduly disparaged by others—namely that meaning has an essential normative dimension. But discussion of that idea must be left for another occasion.

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